

Ambedkar and Contemporary Dalit Literature in Bangla: Notes on a Few Poems and Two Short Stories

Sayantana Dasgupta

Is there a Dalit literature in Bangla? The question has confounded many. The consensus has generally been that there exists no such body of literature. Neither the media nor the academia seems to have taken cognizance of any such body. On one hand, mainstream media and literary publications have been conspicuously silent on this question, thus accentuating the collective amnesia on this subaltern literary tradition. And, on the other, the near total absence of translations of Bangla Dalit literature in English (and other Indian languages) has had the same effect. In fact, apart from the occasional translation that appeared from time to time in *Dalit Mirror*, a specialized little magazine, and the very rare volume in English translation published mostly at the initiative of individual authors, one can discern few sustained efforts to showcase Bangla Dalit writing and to disseminate it to the world outside Bengal in translation. This is ironic, of course, for the English language was always posited as a tool of empowerment for the Dalit community by BR Ambedkar, the doyen and icon of Dalits all over India.

This, of course, is changing. There are at least two volumes of Bangla Dalit literature in English translation in press at this very moment, both being published by publishing houses with impressive distribution prowess. *Survival and Other Stories*,¹ a collection of Bangla Dalit short stories in English translation emerging

out of a DRS workshop held some time ago at the Department of English, Vidyasagar University, is being published by Orient Blackswan, while Oxford University Press is about to come out with its much-awaited *The Oxford Anthology of Dalit Writing from Eastern India*,² featuring short stories, poetry, essays, extracts from novels and other genres from Bangla as well as other languages from eastern India. Together, these two volumes have the potential to reformulate the popular notion of the absence of a Bangla Dalit literature.

The fact is that literary historians and scholars in Bengal have not taken Bangla Dalit writing seriously till now in any sustained way. The collective amnesia both emerges from and sustains a collective complacency—by refusing to acknowledge Bangla Dalit writing, we seem to subscribe to the thesis that atrocities on Dalits, which may be present elsewhere in India, are absent in Bengal. This is not only untrue, but a very dangerous thesis to subscribe to. If this contention is to be taken at face value, then the Chuni Kotals and their lives of misery and suffering, discrimination and deprivation, will be condemned to erasure and the fate of Chuni Kotal³ will be mirrored in the lives of many more. That is why challenging the contention that there is no Bangla Dalit literature is an important political imperative. It is not just a question of making a body of literature visible, it has to do with rendering visible the social realities this body of literature bear testimony to.⁴ Not only does recognising Bangla Dalit writing as a distinct literary have the potential of reinscribing the narrative of Bangla literary culture, it also throws up the possibility of reiterating and reformulating our notions of Dalit aesthetics and politics through a comparative study with other bodies of marginalised literatures. And, finally, as literary studies and cultural studies engage in a relationship fraught with both collusion and collision in today's interdisciplinary academic climate, it seems to hold the potential of refurbishing the notion of 'literature as document' in our efforts to use literature as a means of understanding our social realities better and in a more nuanced manner.

Ganesh Devy has quite effectively noted the revolutionary potential of Dalit literature—

A movement strikes the heart of a social issue in such a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. A movement goes much beyond a mere style-shift and

spearheads a greater social change too...The Dalit literary movement that has been flourishing in Marathi—as in several other Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Gujarati—during the last four decades will probably be recognised by the future historians of Indian literature as another such movement.⁵

Notably, Devy does not mention a Bangla Dalit literary movement. This is, of course, understandable, thanks to the almost total absence of translations of this body of work. Nevertheless, what is important to note is the fact that while there may or may not have been a Dalit literary ‘movement’ as such in Bangla, there is a substantial body of Dalit writing in Bangla, much of which is politically charged and bears testimony to our contemporary social realities. This was, of course, amply brought out by Manoranjan Byapari in his recent essay published in *Economic and Political Weekly*;⁶ the essay, in fact, was instrumental in suddenly making Bangla Dalit literature substantially more visible than it had been so far.

Dalit writing in Bangla is not just about bearing testimony to a given social reality or about inscribing a grammar of victimhood; it concerns itself not just with depicting the material but often with portraying the possibility of change. Very often, it is seen to draw directly from and even refer directly to the struggle waged under the leadership of BR Ambedkar, father of the Indian Constitution, against caste atrocities. That the point is to change the very social realities that engender this corpus is an agenda that comes out very strongly in much of contemporary Dalit writing in Bangla. While there are many different political inspirations behind these writings—Kanshi Ram, Mayawati and Marx among them—Ambedkar stands out perhaps as the most visible icon here. The call to arms is very clear in the most powerful of the writers we are talking about. This comes out so very clearly, for instance, in the short stories of Manoranjan Byapari; Byapari is evidently not content with merely a ‘realistic’ depiction that would evoke sympathy from the reader—Ambedkar’s philosophy of ‘Educate, Organise, Agitate’ seems to be deeply ingrained in his works. Even in the poetry of a writer like Manju Bala, who is far less overt than the sometimes militant (and therefore all the more powerful) Byapari, the call for revolution is palpable even in her characteristic style replete with understatement.

The figure of Ambedkar is often taken to be a point of entry for both

recapitulating the history of the struggle against the caste system and relocating the struggle in the context of the here and now, thereby highlighting the relevance of Ambedkar as ideologue, inspiration and icon. Fifty-five years after Ambedkar's death, his ideas and protest continue to be relevant—something that Ambedkar himself would probably not have wanted them to be, perhaps! Thus, a poet like Samar Ray begins his poem, "Amra Chai" with

We want—

That Brahminism,

More ancient and more dreadful than imperialism,

Be banished

From the soil of India!

(unpublished translation—translated from Bangla by Seemantini Gupta)

The strategy of juxtaposing imperialism with Brahminism, positing one against the other and finally judging the latter as 'more ancient and more dreadful' than imperialism will, of course, immediately remind readers of Ambedkar and his stance vis-a-vis the more 'mainstream', Gandhian Congress discourse on independence. This, incidentally, is something that also happens in Marathi Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal's poetry,⁷ most evidently in "Equality for All, or Death to India."⁸ Ambedkar does seem to be the subtext that is implied in the opening lines of this Samar Ray poem. And as the poem runs on envisioning a new more equitable age for the oppressed, the reference to Ambedkar and his politics becomes clearer and clearer until it finally refers to him by name—

We want—

That the real separatists step back in retreat,

...

And

That, standing under a sky as eternal and limitless as love,

All Indians can match Babasaheb word for word, note for note,

And say with the ring of truth—

Our only identity is—

We are Indians.

(unpublished translation—translated from Bangla by Seemantini Gupta)

Nor is Samar Ray the sole such voice. Anil Sarkar's long poem, "Why Dalits are Born," (*Dalitra Keno Janmay*) too, is a powerful indictment of the caste system and caste-based oppression, and it, too, evokes Ambedkar in an apparent attempt to stir up a social revolution.

It was for these slaves,

These social outcastes,

That one Black man called Babasaheb Ambedkar

Fought single-handedly;

He stood by them like a rock

And raised his voice in protest

And immortal resistance

Against the injustices of the age.

He wrote for them

A Constitution.

A testimony to human rights.

It declared:

Equality for all.

Untouchability, a crime.

The state, freed of religion.

That man used to say,

The oppressed must stand up for their rights

The suppressed must wake up

You must count yourself as an equal

Reach up and touch the skies.

Now, that very man is under attack
 The decrees of human rights burn
 The spirit of the Constitution is under threat
 As is the spirit of poetry
 Casteism pollutes the air everywhere.

(unpublished translation—translated by Seemantini Gupta)

Yet another example that comes to mind of Bangla Dalit poetry that directly refers to Ambedkar while commenting on present-day Indian realities is Kalyani Thakur's "Let us Light a New Flame" (*Natun Mashal Jaali*):

We move on,
 Hand in hand with this new India.
 The real picture is unveiled the moment you draw the string;
 Ambedkar is decked in a garland of slippers.

Yet it seems equally important not just to acknowledge the way the figure of Ambedkar has permeated the body of Bangla Dalit literature as an icon but also to read how the spirit of protest, specifically protest against caste discrimination and oppression, embodied in Ambedkar's politics has been textualised in Bangla Dalit literature. Manoranjan Byapari is one of the most powerful and visible of the contemporary Dalit writers writing in Bangla.

Manoranjan Byapari is one of the most important contemporary writers of Bangla Dalit literature. Byapari has worked as a rickshawalla in Kolkata and has taught himself to read and write. It was Mahasweta Devi who noted his talent and published his first story in her periodical, *Bartika*. Even after that, it has been a protracted struggle for him to establish himself as a writer. He works as a cook at a school for the deaf-mute and writes stories and novels in Bangla.

Interestingly, not all of Byapari's works deal with caste. In fact, his chief concern seems to be the workings of class rather than the politics of caste. This makes it important for us to look at "Ribaj (Rewaj)," the seventh story of his short-story collection called *Jjibishar Galpa*. This is one of the stories that take up caste discrimination as its *stoff*.

“Ribaj” is set in ‘Banrajya’ (literally, The Forest Kingdom). Mountains surround it on three sides, and a river on the other. This region is almost totally cut-off from civilisation. Only the rich Brahmins of the village are allowed to transgress the boundaries of the village to trade with the outside world. There is a series of myths that enjoin the non-Brahmin populace not to ever leave the village to trade or interact with the world outside and warn them of the dire consequences of such an act.

The story begins by invoking precisely such an act of transgression. It begins with Maniram’s return to the village:

Maniram has returned to the village after a gap of five years. He had hopped on to a truck that used to transport loads of *segun* wood and had disappeared without saying a word to anybody. There had been no news of him since then; now, he has come back and brought with him a beautiful wife. One would expect the father, Dholkuram, to be intoxicated with joy at the return of his son with his new bride. But a terrible fear had driven all his intoxication away. His heart was racing. Maniram has flouted the traditions and customs of *Banrajya*, this forest kingdom. He has not taken his wife to pay obeisance at the Linganathan temple. He has not sent his bride for purification at the hands of the Brahmin god. Instead, he has brought her straight home. That is what lies behind Dholkuram’s fears and worries. (Byapari: 29; translation mine)

This introductory paragraph also explains the title of the story. ‘Ribaj’, close to the word, ‘rewaj’, means ‘custom’; in this context, it refers to the custom of every woman married into the village having to be left at the Linganathan temple for the first few nights so that she can be ‘purified’ by the Brahmin priest and his cohorts, all apparently under the instructions of Linganathan himself (this divine instruction having been revealed exclusively to the Brahmins of course) before she can be taken home by her husband. Divine intervention is used by the rich and powerful Brahmins of the village to legitimise their gangrape of the ‘lower’-caste women. The legend is that the evil goddess Matangi lies forever in wait for beautiful virgins, whose vaginas she can infect with the poison of disbelief and disobedience as a first step to taking over all of human society. The only way of combating Matangi’s notorious plans is to have women lose their virginity to Brahmins before they can sleep with their husbands. That way, the ‘brahmatej’, or the semi-divine

powers possessed by would Brahmins would purify them and make it impossible for Matangi to use them. Apparently, this is a story whose truth claim everyone seems to accept without any questions in the village. Thus, when Maniram comes back after seeing the world and refuses to send his wife for the rites, the villagers think of him as a man who has been corrupted by evil spirits from foreign lands. Even his father, who had had his own wife, Shukli, purified at the Linganathan temple, urges him to give in.

Yet, Byapari does not depict the villagers as mere passive victims, as I have argued elsewhere. Their apparent docility and naivete is a camouflage one needs to read further into. Nor is Maniram the first rebel. We learn of Budhram, who had disappeared; the Mishras had then spread the word that the gods had spirited him away because he had dared to challenge the authority of the Brahmins who were themselves representatives of the gods. Yet, Dholkuram, Maniram's father, knew all along what had really happened to Budhram—he had been butchered by Mishra's men. Dholkuram then is seen to play the role of the collaborator not out of an unquestioning acceptance of hegemonic Brahminical discourse, but perhaps out of a fear of the material power that goes hand in hand with that discourse along with, of course, a partial acceptance fuelled by the demands of survival. Thus, when Maniram, armed with a logic gleaned from his exposure to the outside world, asks, "Why does this god only tell them everything? Why is it that everything he tells them goes against us?", and Dholkuram replies: "Listen, son, we are a low caste. We are untouchables for the Brahmin gods. If they ever touch us, they go and rub earth all over their body and have a bath to cleanse themselves. Do you think they find it palatable to conduct the purification rites? They have to do it because God has commanded them to do so," it is because he is resigned to his fate and sees no way of challenging the age-old custom, without realising that with every repetition of this discourse, it gets stronger and assumes a truth claim that can only continue to oppress them for ages to come. Thus, Maniram is, in a way, no outsider; his exposure to the city, where caste apparently matters less for Byapari, merely allows him to mouth the questions that Dholkuram and so many others in the village can only nurture silently in their breasts. He is still very much a part of this milieu—and that is why his rebellion is more than an individual act of resistance.

We also note that the village chief comes and warns Maniram. He tells him that the entire village would suffer because of his defiance and holds him responsible

for the suffering of all the villagers. Thus, the spectre of communal destruction and the prospect of individual sacrifice for the greater common good are invoked as incentives to make him submit.

The same strategy appears in Manju Bala's short story called "Dain". When Swapna, who is from Kolkata and is visiting a village, is identified as the source of a possible threat to the caste-based power structure in the village, it is *Ghanar Ma* (Ghana's Mother), whom she has been trying to educate who is targeted by the Brahmins. *Ghanar Ma* is suddenly portrayed as the innocent bystander who is being incited by the outsider Swapna and who would suffer the deprivations of hell due to no fault of hers. In this way, she is made to turn against Swapna and ends up not only cursing the very Swapna who was trying to help her protest against the injustice but also paying the Brahmins a huge sum of money for rites ('*shudhdhu korar jagni*'). And Swapna herself is identified as a '*dain*' (witch) by the Brahmins and an '*akshashi*' (rakshashi, or she-demon) by *Ghanar Ma* and is tied up for sacrifice.

There is a difference between Manoranjan Byapari's story, "Ribaj", and Manju Bala's "Dain" that needs to be noted, though. As in Byapari's story, here too, the city seems to have a redemptive role to play. It is Swapna, the girl from the city, who explains to *Ghanar Ma* that she is being exploited by the Brahmins who have conjured tall tales about the-world-after to legitimise their power. If exposure to the world outside Banrajya gave Maniram the voice to protest and to raise the questions that had lain dormant in the minds of so many of his villagers, it is the city that is seen to be empowering and propelling the discourse of Swapna: 'One thing you must know before you leave; these gurudevs are not right. They lie to you; they lead you to dream false dreams. You accumulate no virtue by practicing charity towards them. You should take that rice back home. At least you won't have to go to bed on a half-empty stomach.' Yet, Manju Bala's characters are etched much more simply than are Byapari's. When *Ghanar Ma* says, 'All the misery we face in this birth is the fruit of sins committed in our previous birth, girl. So, if we practice charity towards Brahmins in this life, we won't have to suffer in our next birth. We will know a little bit of happiness then. We won't have to take birth again as a low-caste person', she says it with the conviction of one who has been well and truly indoctrinated. There seems none of the doubt, the ambiguity (and therefore, none of the elements of incipient resistance and dissent) that we find in the characters

of Dholkuram, Shukli and the village chief. This is where Manju Bala's text differs significantly from Byapari's. Byapari's story ends with the family leaving the village under cover of darkness—this is not an act of escapism, however. The act of transgressing the village boundary is itself a taboo as defined by Brahminical discourse, and, therefore, by leaving the village, the family challenges the Brahmin rulers of *Banrajya*. Moreover, before leaving the village, Maniram reaches the Linganathan temple and kills Deonandan Mishra.

Yet this does not mean that the possibility of change in Manju Bala's story is predicated upon outside, from-above intervention. "Dain" may feature the city-bred Swapna initially as the instrument of change, but it ends not with her rescue by Prasenjit or any of her city friends. The ritual is stopped, and Swapna rescued, by two young men *from the village itself*—Kamal and Pabitra. The challenge to Brahminical hegemony, then, for Manju Bala, may rise from within and from below, though it may be facilitated by a catalyst—and education is what plays the role of the catalyst here. What sets Pabitra and Kamal apart from the other villagers is the fact that they are college students. Had it not been for that, they would perhaps have been merely one of the spectators. It is this very college education that gives them immunity from the punishment anybody else would have been doled out for their dissent. What is again striking is the uncanny similarity in the ways Brahminical hegemony is shown to perpetuate itself in both the texts. This is how Malati responds when *Ghanar Ma* tells her of Swapna's suggestions: 'What do you mean—take it back home? Won't the whole village be struck by famine then? You are not the only one who will suffer; the entire village will be decimated.' The comment almost seems to echo the village chief's comments in "Ribaj". Perhaps these texts approximate each other so much in the depiction of such arguments and strategies because both authors try, directly or indirectly, to document their experiences, and because such strategies are integral, even defining characteristics of the exercise of caste-based power dynamics that their works bear testimony to.

Works Cited

Devy, GN. "Introduction". Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi). Tr. Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Byapari, Manoranjan. "Ribaj (Rewaj)". *Jijibishar Galpo*. Bardhaman: Atul Batul Prakashani, 2006. Pp. 29-40.

Bala, Manju. "Dain". *Chorabali*. Kolkata: Chaturtha Duniya, 2005. Pp. 27-33.

Ray, Samar, "Amra Chai." *Chouddai April*. Nadiya: Rani Ray, 1999. Pp 3-4.

Anil Sarkar, "Dalitra Keno Janmay." *Dalitra Keno Janmay*. Publication details not available.

Kalyani Thakur, "Natun Mashal Jaali." *Dhorlei Juddho Sunischit*. Kolkata: Royal Publishers, 2006. P.14.

Notes and References

1. Sankar Prasad Singha and Indranil Acharya eds., *Survival and Other Stories: Bangla Dalit Fiction in Translation*. New Delhi : Orient Blackswan, 2012.
2. Tutun Mukherjee et al eds., *The Oxford Anthology of Dalit Writing from Eastern India*. New Delhi : Orient Blackswan, 2012.
3. Chuni Kotal was born to a Lodha Shabar family in Gohaldihi village, Medinipur, West Bengal, in 1965. Braving massive odds, she started doing an MSc but could not complete her studies; she committed suicide in 1992 allegedly because of caste discrimination. Her suicide became the rallying point for a mass movement in Bengal and outside it as well.
4. Many have, in fact, spoken of the affinity between Dalit literature and the *testimonio*. See, for instance, Kavita Panjabi ed., *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature 48*. Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2008.
5. Devy, GN. "Introduction". Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*. Tr. Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. P.xiii.
6. See Manoranjan Byapari's "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla?" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, Number 41. Mumbai: October 13-19, 2007.
7. Namdeo Dhasal (b. 1949) is one of the most prominent and political Marathi Dalit poets. He founded the Dalit Panther movement. Again, many of his poems are addressed to Ambedkar or invoke him either directly or indirectly.
8. Namdeo Dhasal, *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld, Poems 1972-2006*. Selected, introduced and translated by Dilip Chitre. New Delhi: Navayana, 2007, pp. 81-86.