

Contrapuntal Study of Bengali Dalit Literature: Matua Literature and Its Representations

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Abstract:

"Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about a change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people." (Dangle, 1992, p. iii)

In modern India, "Dalit literature" has seen myriad fresh dawns since the latter decade of the 20th century. The works of Dalits have added to our understanding of their ancestry and convey the existential crises that permeate Dalit awareness. The politics of marginalization similarly impact Dalits in Bengal in the meta-narratives of social and historical discourse as they are in Punjab, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Gujrat. Writings by Dalits who asserted their grounds in addition to the mainstream literature supported movements advancing the cause of the Dalit people. This study aims to comprehend the novel narratives produced by the activities of the Matua group, who are seen as the forerunners of the Dalit rebellion in Bengal. It also investigates the questions - Who are namasudras? Who are the 'channels' or 'scandals'? Do any works of Matua literature still exist today? Is there a distinction between the Bengali Dalit Movement and the Namasudra Movement? - to understand their representations in literature.

Keywords: Matuas, Dalit, Namasudras, Representation, Identity,

Introduction:

In Bengal, the namasudras were formerly referred to as 'channels' or 'channels.' They started searching among themselves for a new identity at the end part of the 19th century. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay wrote the first detailed account of the history of the Kamasutra movement in Caste, Protest, and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872- 1947 (2011). It provides never-before-seen information on the Namasudras' mass mobilization and community-building efforts in the 19th century and their absorption into mainstream politics up until 1947. A new chapter on the namasudras' post-partition history is concentrated on their political existence in West Bengal. The institutionalization of the Matua organization played a significant influence in the political evolution of the Gamasutra following partition, as described in some academic studies. (Carola Erika Lorea, 2020) Sekhar Bandyopadhyay claims that because their identity was recognized as a scandal at the time, the name Gamasutra entered the public domain in the middle of the 19th century. They were categorized as namasudras in the census.

Of 1911 as a result of a social reform initiative. They face challenges regarding their origins, histories, and identity, which the other lower castes in Bengal do not. The movement that emerged in Bengal at the beginning of the 19th century was led by the

Matua community. This movement is considered the first organized Dalit activity in undivided Bengal. (Bandyopadhyay, 2011)

The Matuas are assumed to be members of the Namasudra community and were earlier residents of East Bengal. The founder of this sect was Harichand Thakur, a Gamasutra who was labeled a 'Chandal' or 'Chanral' by the upper caste society during the British Raj. This community's economic, social, and political scenarios are deplorable, cornering them in the fourth world. In the article, *Is There Dalit writing In Bengal?* (2007) Manoranjan Byapari quotes an excerpt from Rabindranath Tagore's essay *Dharmer Adhikar (The Right to Religion)* to understand the deplorable condition of the Kamasutra, I saw in the villages that no other caste would plow the land owned by the Kamasutra, no one would harvest their crop, and no one would build their houses. In other words, the namasudras are not considered fit to receive even the minimum cooperation needed for living in human society. We have made their life difficult at every step for no fault. From birth to death, they are made to serve a sentence of punishment. (Byapari 4118)

Matua people articulate their view "in three ways: 'Kathakata' (story-telling in large gatherings), 'Jatra'(folk plays), and 'Kobigain(rhymed couplets), composed in traditional 'payar' rhythm and orally presented in public." (Byapari, p. 4118) Danis Walker asserts in his article (1999) that

The quality of the sect's early leaders assured that it would spread widely in Bengal and last. By 1867 Tarak Chandra Sarkar was winning fame in 'koban,' a kind of popular song in the form of question and answer between two professional folk-versifiers,

which he made a vehicle for praising Harichand. (Walker 568)

Most compositions combine history, popular philosophy, and poetry to increase people's consciousness and are written in simple language. The creativity of Matua people raises awareness among themselves and other Bengali marginalized communities. Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur, who emphasized the value of education for the betterment of the Matua community, opened up new possibilities and made the appreciation possible. The Kamasutra movement inspired the literary output of Dalit people other than the Matua community. Those works are widely published in journals like *Ajker Eklavya*, *Jagaran*, *Gram Bangla*, *Adal Badal*, *Dalit Kontho*, *Neel Akash*, *Chhiyanobboi (Ninety-six)*, and *Chaturtha Duniya (The Fourth World)*, etc. The Dalit writers have weaved their textures of toils with the pangs they received from the oppressive society in their daily lives. Much frequently, the writings of the Matua community are put into oblivion beside the mainstream literature, which enjoys a broader readership.

Methodology:

To achieve these findings, I studied the archival survey of the Matua community's literature and the literature of other Dalit communities in different journals and various national and international libraries. I have attempted to make a comparative analysis to unearth the growing shifts in Bengali Dalit literature over the last decade in Bengal.

Matuas and Its representation in literature:

The existing literature inspires this study on Dalit consciousness, articulated here. Books like *A River Called Titash (1993)*; *In the Darkness of Jungles (2001)*; *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in*

Bengal (2015); *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018) analyze the journey of the Dalit literature in Bengal, especially the journey of the Matua literature. In his work from 1993, Mallabarman critically investigates the affections, concerns, and struggles of the Malo fishing community and their ongoing quest for survival. To preserve the songs, dialect, rituals, rhythms, and culture destroyed by natural disasters, modernity, and political struggle, he points to a Malo fishing community at the turn of the century. Sudhir Ranjan Halder, in his book, presents the horrible condition of a Dalit refugee family which migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal and showed their daily tortured life during the partition of India. It describes the Matua community's religion as the weapon to survive and combat the Vedic culture. He also critically historicizes the struggle of Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua Community, and shows how Thakur and his son, Guruchand Thakur strove to bring unity among the Matua people by increasing education in the middle of the 19th century. In his 2018 book, Manoranjan Byapari describes the path of a poor, miserable, caste-ridden man whose life turned tragic due to sociopolitical unrest. Byapari, a member of the lowest caste, Namashudra or Chandal society, frequently expresses the extreme suffering brought on by poverty and Dalit identity. His tragic fate is determined at every stage of his life by caste and poverty. "I have lived my life as the ill-fated Dalit son of an ill-fated Dalit father, condemned to a life of bitterness" (Byapari 4). In his autobiography (2015), Biswas explores the story of the deprecation of a Dalit community who belong to the lowest rank of the social ladder. He reflects on the memories of hunger, dire deprivation, and relentless survival of the peripheral districts.

Kulanand Yadav describes Biswas and his contributions being a *namasudras* in his article (2021)

Biswas recalls his experiences as a *Namasudra* in his book *Amar Bhubane Aami Benche Thaki* (2013), translated as *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* (2015). A link was formed between him and the other members of his community. The fight for the survival of the *Namasudras* in the face of caste prejudice is recounted to refute the idea that caste discrimination does not exist in Bengal. He has undoubtedly made invaluable contributions to Bengali Dalit literature and is a literary Titan in that field. His achievements are far more extensive than his work as a creative and analytical writer. He is also a Dalit activist.

Who works with the *Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha* to achieve Dalit emancipation. (Yadav 231-232)

The works mentioned above deal with Dalit people, especially the *Kamasutra*. *Matua* community, an essential entity in the whole gamut of Dalit output, is often less represented vis-à-vis their significant contribution to the ignition of Dalit writings. Through this study, I intend to investigate the relevance of the *Matua* community as a flagbearer of Bengali Dalit writings.

The name "*Matua*" is also used to describe a movement, a religion, and a community. This name is frequently brought up in discussions of dissident and egalitarian religious movements, Dalit politics, and untouchability. It is difficult to think about the fight against untouchability without considering the nearly 200-year-old *Matua* low-caste religious and social phenomenon in Bengal history. It is feasible to consider the year 1812 as the community's symbolic founding year because it was then that Harichand Thakur, the sect's founder saint,

was born in the village of Safaldanga, Faridpur district, which was then a part of undivided Bengal under British colonial administration. Numerous followers were drawn to him by his healing abilities and miracle works. His son Guruchand Thakur (1847-1937), who succeeded him after his death in 1878, cemented the society. The two founding saints are revered as both divine manifestations and societal reformers. (Lorea, 2020)

The group successfully established its own distinctive religious identity by drawing from and expanding upon an earlier foundation of Vaishnava devotional. Its connection with mainstream Hinduism is convoluted and contentious. (Lorea, 2020) The guidelines for leading a disciplined and peaceful marriage within the conventional family dynamic are juxtaposed and contrasted in Matua literature and oral histories to the practices of the Hindu renouncer, which avoids domestic duties and responsibilities, including caring for women, therefore disrespecting mothers and spouses. Contemporary Matua writers have reinterpreted this position in the context of gender equality, and they present Harichand Thakur's ideology as feminism pre-literate. In contrast to their pitiful state in traditional Hinduism and Islam, they underscore the significance of women's roles in Matua practices and culture. (Lorea, 2020)

The Swadeshi era (1905–1911) saw the collective identity of the Gamasutra achieve its pinnacle of cohesion, which later broke down as it assimilated into democratic politics in the 1930s. By emphasizing unity, political clout, and education as the primary tools to ascend the social ladder, Guruchand Thakur played a central role in promoting the integration of the lower castes into mainstream politics. The renowned instructions of Guruchand Thakur advised his

followers to establish daytime schools in their cowsheds and educate all of their infants, including girls, to school. Guruchand Thakur is attributed by the Matuas with founding 1,836 schools throughout his lifetime. (Lorea, 2020)

Conclusion:

This study focuses on the uprising of the Matua literature, which is nowadays entitled Bengali Dalit literature. Matua literature, considered a primitive source of the Bengali Dalit movement, is suppressed socially and culturally because of its less representation in Bengal. But its activity left a profound influence on present-day Bengali Dalit writers. Kalyani Thakur Charal is one of them. She wrote a book called Matua Dharma Prasange ('About Matua Religion'). (Lorea, 2020) Dalit artists have repeatedly contested dalit writers' dominance in the literary world. A parallel structure was created to compete with writers from higher castes and provide Dalits a platform to express their anger, pain, and suffering. They have made a position for themselves by citing literature to justify their behavior. English translations of these authors' works have received promising reviews on a global scale. (Das & Yadav, 2021) The uprising of the Matua literature and its ubiquitous nature profoundly impacted caste consciousness in recent times. This alternative Dalit literary sphere nowadays has been discussing West Bengal's political ground and trying to establish a Bahujan Samaj. (Roy, 2019) Like many other literary movements, Gamasutra writers and their works always ignite the sense of self-consciousness to hold a political prospect to manifest their identity and political space in the public realm.

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