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READING A BENGALI DALIT WOMAN'S LIFE-NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Caste in West Bengal has overt and covert aspects. The caste hegemony has been challenged by the Dalit movement in Bengal, especially the Dalit literature movement. This paper will study the first published Dalit women life-narrative in Bengal by Kalyani Thakur.¹ My primary research question would be whether we can read Kalyani Thakur's life-narrative as Testimonio.² This paper is based on Sharmila Rege's argument that Dalit life narratives are testimonios, which speaks for and beyond individual.

Index Terms- Caste, Bengal, Dalit, Women, Testimonio

Introduction

Silence on casteism does not erase the issue. Caste in West Bengal has overt and covert aspects. Caste is more acute in Bengal because it is believed to be absent in Bengal. It is so hegemonic that as if there is no need to discuss it at all. Everyone is assimilated under the category of 'bhadralok', although it is dominated by the quintessential Bengali upper-caste middle-class men. The Dalits, therefore, do not feel completely excluded.³ Manohar Mouli Biswas once stated that the difference between caste in Bengal and other parts of India is that caste discrimination and marginalization are very subtle.⁴ On the one hand, there is the obvious issue of upper-caste dominance in the domain of formal politics despite the sway of communism for more than three decades. On the other hand, there are hidden ways in which a modern caste society has flourished since colonial times and shaped academic, journalistic and popular understandings of Bengali society, culture, history, and politics.

Given this broader context, in this paper, I propose to study the first-ever published Dalit women life-narrative in Bengal by Kalyani Thakur. I will follow the basic conceptual framework used by Rege (2006) in her book "Wring Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios" in which she asks why it is important to recover Dalit women's narratives which are lost in history. My primary research question would be whether we can read Kalyani Thakur's life-narrative as Testimonio. I draw here from the very important argument made by Rege (2006) that Dalit life narratives are testimonios, which speaks for and beyond the individual. It contests

¹ Kalyani Thakur is one of the most prominent and translated Dalit women writer from Bengal.

² Sharmila Rege has argued that Dalit life-narratives must be read as testimonios because it is not an individual narrative. It goes beyond the individual and narrates the collective history of the oppressed caste.

³ Sourced from Gopal Guru's lecture on "Does acute caste consciousness lead to intensification of sexual violence?" in Mukta Salve Lecture Series in Memory of Sharmila Rege (2018) in KSP Women's Studies Centre, Savitribai Phule Pune University.

⁴ Manohar Mouli Biswas, Valedictory lecture of Sangiti 2016, Organized by Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha.

the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppressions, struggles, and resistance. Dalit life narratives become the testimonies that summoned the truth from the past.

This research paper is part of my ongoing Ph.D. work on "Caste and Gender in Bengal: Reading Contemporary Dalit Women's Writing in Bengal". As my topic suggest, my research endeavor is about trying to understand the intersections between caste and gender in the context of Bengal, through the reading of Dalit women's writing in Bengal. One of the main objectives of my doctoral research is to explore the Dalit women's perspective on caste in Bengal. I am doing it through mapping Dalit women's voices in Bengal, with special focus on writings by Kalyani Thakur and Manju Bala. By doing so I am focusing on their perspective on caste and gender in Bengal. Reading Kalyani Thakur's life narrative is part of that larger research endeavour.

In the next section of the paper, I will try to locate caste in Bengal by challenging the nationalist/bhadralok myth that caste was marginal to Bengal politics. Drawing from Bandyopadhyay (2011) I will briefly trace the anti-caste movement in colonial Bengal before moving on to discussing caste in contemporary Bengal. I follow it up by introducing the contemporary Dalit literature movement in Bengal. The remaining sections are about Dalit women writing in Bengal with focus on life and writings of Kalyani Thakur, who eventually went on to publish the first life-narrative by a Dalit woman in contemporary Bengal.

Locating Caste in Bengal

It will be incomplete to study the social history of Bengal only in terms of upper caste bhadralok hegemony. This hegemony has been time and again challenged by the Namashudra Movement in Bengal. As decades of research by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay have shown, the history of colonial West Bengal from the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century is also the history of the lower caste protest movement, namely the Namashudra Movement. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay goes to the extent of arguing that the history of the Namashudra Movement is equal to the history of Scheduled Caste politics in Bengal. Namashudra Movement, its identity formation, enabled them to lead other Scheduled Caste movements in Bengal and provide its support base.

It is in the context of the Namashudra Movement that we have to understand the contemporary Dalit movement in Bengal. It was not till 1908, when Guruchand Thakur opened a high school for Dalits, did education become available for Dalits in Bengal. Guruchand's role was pivotal in spreading women's education, widow remarriage, preventing child marriage and reform in the Census of 1911 to use the term Namashudra instead of Chandal. Guruchand's efforts to educate women are very similar to Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule in Maharashtra.

Harichand Thakur was the founder of Matua philosophy in Bengal. Matua philosophy is a mixture of idealism and materialism, where materialism triumphs over idealism. Humanism is at the core of Matua philosophy. Matua Dharmo came up as a protest against the religion which promotes social inequality and exploitation of certain castes. Harichand and his son Guruchand led the exploited caste to freedom and enlightenment. Through education, they charted the path of economic, social and political progress for the exploited caste. They taught them to have self-respect. The Dalit writers in Bengal believe that by following the path shown by Guruchand, education would lead the Matuas to claim their self-respect.

This historical background leads us to understand the contemporary nature of caste discrimination in Bengal.

Redefining Caste Discrimination in Contemporary Bengal

In post-colonial Bengal, it is a given fact that caste and class are conflated in West Bengal. Undoubtedly the State also endorses this idea in its August 1980 report of the committee on caste backwardness stressed on poverty as a major criterion for it. Being a primordial system, caste was in stark contrast to the modernist reform ideas of the left. Yet caste discriminations like redefining the practice of untouchability under the garb of hygiene. Consequently, caste-based atrocities and massacres are also not uncommon for the lower castes in Bengal, be it the Marichjhapi massacre in 1978 or the mass Dalit killing in 2007 Nandigram.

It does not come as a surprise then that the violence of the everyday lives of Dalits in Bengal is completely invisibilized in the Bengali public sphere. A study by Amartya Sen's Pratichi (India) Trust in 2001 has found that in schools, students from the Scheduled Caste category were forced to sit separately. To date, at ceremonial feasts, the Dalits are given the leftovers. If at all the upper castes admit to the persistence of untouchability, they justify the displacement by citing reasons related to filth spread by the lower castes and the need for maintaining hygiene. According to Ghosh (2001), the bhadralok hegemony remained undisputed partly because the dominant peasant middle castes were dispersed in terms of area. Their localized presence, lack of English education and professional advancement left them behind the upper caste bhadraloks.

In this context, I will now move on to Dalit assertions in Bengal to understand how the Dalits have challenged the upper-caste bhadralok hegemony.

Re-asserting Presence of Caste in the Public Sphere: Dalit Literature Movement in Bengal

In this context, it is interesting to note how Bengali Dalit writers, through their sustained organized efforts, reclaimed caste in the Bengali bhadralok public sphere. Although the first Dalit literary text was published in the early twentieth century,⁵ Bengali Dalit Literary Movement, as Manohar Mouli Biswas puts it in his Introduction to the book *100 years of Bengali Dalit Literature*:

“....Although late, the Dalit writers of Bengal carried on the legacy of Marathi, Gujrati, Kannad Dalit literature.....The Bengali Dalit Literature Organization was born after the heart-wrenching incident of suicide by Chuni Kotal, a tribal girl from Jhargram. ⁶The incident brought forth the issue of discrimination of a student on the basis of caste identity at the university level, which was hitherto unheard of. In the history of Bengal, 16th August 1992 will remain the darkest day- the day when Chuni Kotal **was forced to** commit suicide.⁷ This was the result of the pain inflicted by systemic caste discrimination which was like a fire burning in the cotton stack. But this crime of the perpetrators was not proved in the court to become a benchmark. In this strange world, reality gets distorted to take an entirely different creative form. Since then, Chuni Kotal has lived among the Bengali Dalits, and will remain as the multifaceted dimensions of Dalit lifeworld. 2 years after her death, the Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture was organized by Bengali Dalit Literature Organization in a famous hall of College Square Kolkata.”⁸

This memorial lecture marked the beginning of the long journey of the Bengali Dalit Literature Organization. Through their bi-weekly magazine *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World) and several other publications under their banner, they have consistently staked their claim to Bengali literary sphere by narrating their sufferings and creating their own counter-public sphere through academic essays, autobiographies, poems, short stories, novels, and one-act plays. *Chaturtha Duniya* remains the only forum that represents the interests of Dalits in Bengal.

⁵ Namasudura Darpan (4 volumes) by Rashbehari Roy Pandit: 1909

⁶ This is first reported case of, as Anoop Kumar puts it, “Death of Merit” in Bengal.

⁷ Emphasis mine.

⁸ Translation from the original Bengali text is mine.

Dalit Women: Absent or Invisible in Bengal?

In his iconic article, published in Economic and Political Weekly, Gopal Guru (1995) argued that social location determines the perception of reality. That is why the representation of Dalit women's issues by Non-Dalit women is less valid and less authentic. According to him, the post-Ambedkar Dalit Movement subordinated independent political expressions of Dalit women. He extends this argument to the cultural field of the Dalit Literary Movement. The Dalit literary scene is again dominated by male writers. Dalit women have resisted both. His core argument is about Dalit women talking differently. According to him, their marginalized position puts them at an advantage to a better understanding of social reality. He calls this the epistemic privilege.

In response to Guru's argument on Dalit women talking differently, Rege (1998) historicizes the difference and details on the participation of women in the non-Brahman movement in colonial India. She argues for a Dalit Feminist standpoint that emerges from practices and struggles of Dalit women. She therefore argued that subjectivities can transform from "their cause" to "our cause". This did not mean that non-Dalit feminists could speak for Dalit women. Such a standpoint is emancipatory for non-Dalit feminists as they recognize and reject their own earlier brahminical middle-class biases.

Using this methodological framework in the remaining article, I will try to read Bengali Dalit women writing. For the purpose of this paper I will specifically focus on the writings of Kalyani Thakur and her life-narrative.

Dalit Women Writers in Bengal

However, before moving on to focus on Kalyani Thakur's testimonios, it is important to trace the history of Dalit women writing in Bengal. Manohar Mouli Biswas recognizes the double discrimination faced by Dalit women. He confesses that there are very few women Dalit writers. In his 1992 essay, he has discussed the interlinkages between the role of women in the Dalit Movement and their literary pursuit. He grants credit to Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for opening up doors of education for Dalit women.

In Bengal, women Dalit authors like Manju Bala (2009) define Dalit Literature as the Literature which voices the pains and sufferings of Dalits. She differentiates Dalit Literature from mainstream literature in terms of equality as its very essence. She rejects the conventional literature for either marginalizing Dalits or the 'unreal' sympathy it shows for Dalits. Most Dalit women authors agree on the grounds that Dalit Literature is not about the aesthetics of the language or high level of creativity it could portray. Their understanding of Literature implies a social document that reflects the discriminations that Dalits suffer from. In this sense, they argue, Dalit women's writing would represent their double oppression as women and as Dalits.

In the post-1990s Bengal, when the Bengali Dalit Literature Organization was established, many Dalit women writers actively began to contribute in their bi-monthly journal Chaturtha Duniya (The Fourth World). More Dalit women were writing short stories, poems, and essays. Kalyani Thakur and Manju Bala are prominent names in the Bengali Dalit Literature Movement. In this paper, I will explore the life and writings of Kalyani Thakur, one such contemporary Dalit women writers from Bengal.

Life and Writings of Kalyani Thakur⁹

One of the reasons why I chose to study Kalyani Thakur Charal is because she is one of the most leading Dalit woman voice from West Bengal. Kalyani Thakur identifies herself as a Dalit activist who voices pains of suffering and oppression in her writings. She has been anthologized widely. She writes as she wants to create a space for herself and her disadvantageous community.¹⁰ She has been anthologized and translated widely in both Hindi and English.

Kalyani Thakur Charal (b.1965) is the leading Dalit voice from West Bengal. She has been an activist of the Dalit Movement all her life. From her student life, she has been writing. The journal she edits Neer (The Home) started as wall magazine in her hostel. Her writings are drawn from ideologies of Ambedkarism, Matua philosophy, and Buddhism.

Being born in a poor Dalit family, she had experienced casteism and poverty since her childhood. As a result, her poems are a critique of Marxism and Manuvad. In her own words:

“Some of my poems represent my childhood appropriately. I was born in a Dalit family. I had seen oppression and exploitation in the name of caste. I had seen the cruel face of poverty; its bitter taste.”¹¹

Being a Dalit woman, she is using a specific caste identity, that of the Chandal. This is so because she says unless you have that identity, you don't know what is racism and casteism. Generalizations on secularism and feminism suppress the issue of casteism. According to her, all those related productions are Dalits. She also talks about the caste-based occupation. However, she identifies as Dalit first and then as Chandalini.

In some of her writings, she writes her name as Kalyani Thakur Charal. The word Charal is used by upper castes 'educated' as abuse to chandals. (Similarly the Chamar, Chuwar/Bawri is a community but is used as an abusive word.) So by using it in her name, she is taking a position, boldly stating her identity. Her surname Thakur made her face questions like “Which Thakur you are? Are you related to the Tagore family?” She explains the reason behind her surname Thakur as her father and grandfather taking up the upper caste surname after coming to India post-partition. They used it to protect from casteism. Previously their surname was Mandal.

This was similar to the Matua gurus Harichand and Guruchand, who used the surname Thakur but their earlier surname was Biswas. Because they were Gurus, they didn't use their caste name, Biswas. Their followers also started using the surname Thakur. The reason was the same for all, to guard against casteism.

After she published as Kalyani Thakur Charal, she again set aside this identity to identify herself as Chandalini. That's when she wrote Chandalinir Bibritti. (Collection of essays about Dalit issues, Matuas, about Ambedkar and Dalit women) She took the title Chandalinir Bibritti from the Dalit journal Chetana Lahar. She talks about the story behind the title. When Chandalinir Kobita (collection of poems) was published, Ananta Acharya¹² gave the book to Sabyasachi Deb (an upper-caste man, associated with Naxal movement) from Presidency College to write about the book. At the end of his critique, he had commented that these were not poetry but lectures. He said it was no Chandalinir Kobita but it was Chandalinir Bibittri (Statement). So the second book title is her way of protest.¹³

⁹ This section is partly derived from my own work “Dalit Women Writing in Bengal: Focus on Life and Writings of Kalyani Thakur”, a paper presented in the XV National Conference organized by Indian Association for Women's Studies.

¹⁰ Sourced from Muse India. Accessed on 12th November 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Another notable name in Dalit Literature Movement of Bengal

¹³ Sourced from her interview to Dalit Camera in 2014, accessed from Youtube on 9th September 2016.

As she notes in one of her interviews, her writings are the poetics of age-old oppression against the Dalits. As an activist, she played a key role in organizing women hostel boarders regarding their problems. In fact Neer Ritupatro, the bi-monthly magazine started and edited by her started as wall magazine in a hostel. More recently she is involved in non-violent activism on issues like the right to the reservation and other rights for the Dalits.

In one of her poems, she brings together issues of labourers and Dalits. In the same poem, she is cynical of opportunists who fake to be Dalit sympathizers. Other poems in the same collection are equally critical of Marxism and Manuvad. She skeptically writes how Marxism and Manuvad hand in gloves with each other to continue oppressing, which was beneficial for both. She is critical of political leaders who forget their ideologies once they rise to power.

She continues her criticism of political party based Marxism in another essay where she argues that in recent years, instead of being agricultural labor, Dalits are becoming industrial labor. They are still barred from even dreaming about being the owner. They will remain slaves of upper castes and class. Yet they will vote for their oppressors because they are allured to become the leader of the labourers. They will be continued to be used as vote banks. She calls for the Dalit working class to rise and claim their share of power. She strongly argues against some Dalits working as intermediates of the upper caste dominated political parties and working for the Matua community, when they should claim education, economic and political power.

Her poems also address various forms of casteism including newer forms of untouchability. Her essays deal with Dalit issues, Matuas, about Ambedkar and Dalit women. She edited a book Matua Dharmo where she wrote in her introduction that Matua philosophy is a mixture of idealism and materialism, where materialism triumphs over idealism. But humanism is at the core of Matua philosophy. Matua Dharmo came up as a protest against the religion which promotes social inequality and exploitation of certain castes. Harichand and Guruchand led the exploited caste to freedom and enlightenment. Through education, they charted the path of economic, social and political progress for the exploited caste. They taught them to have self-respect. In her editorial comments she asserted her belief that by following the path shown by Guruchand, education would lead the Matuas to claim their self-respect and their space in the arena of political power.

Time and again she goes back to the history of the Namashudra Movement, the contribution of Guruchand and Harichand in women's progress. She goes back to the history of Colonial India when in 1819, first attempts were made in Bengal to educate women. However, it was not till 1908, when Guruchand opened a high school for Dalits, did education become available for Dalits. She also details on Guruchand's role in spreading women's education, widow remarriage, preventing child marriage and reform in the Census of 1911 to use the term Namashudra instead of Chandal. Guruchand's efforts to educate women are very similar to Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule in Maharashtra.

She has also written an essay on the status of Namashudra women.¹⁴ The essay starts by tracing the declining status of women in the era when patrilocality replaced matrilocal practices. She talks about the origin of naming Namashudras in the 1911 census, when the term came to replace 'Chandals', owing to the efforts of their then leader Guruchand Thakur.

Talking about their present, she talks about the illiterate yet self-taught Dalit women, whose lives are mostly spent in biological and social reproduction. She celebrates their creativity in drawing alpana¹⁵, making a variety of homemade dry foods, stitching cotton blankets and the range of women's ritual songs. Here she dwells on the various rituals that these women follow. She moves on to the educational status of Namashudra women and says that in the early twentieth century, Guruchand Thakur had established the first girl's school for them. She

¹⁴ I draw from my own work "More than just 'Making Visible': Exploring Dalit Women's Writing in Bengal" which I presented in XIV National Conference organized by Indian Association for Women's Studies.

¹⁵ Something like rangoli, drawn with a paste of chalk powder (khari maati in Bengali) or zinc oxide

names a few of the educated and well known established women of Namashudras, including the current Matua¹⁶ leader Binapani Thakur (more popularly known as Boro Ma).

The first Women Matua Sangh was established in 1980, where the Namashudra women came together to read religious texts of the Vaishnava tradition and sing Matua songs with the musical instruments which they were previously not allowed to play publicly. Speaking on the social and economic security of these women, they are very vulnerable. A large part of them works as domestic maids in the city and its outskirts, after being deserted by their husbands. Some others earn their living by vending vegetables. These women, while traveling to work in local trains, preserve the Matua culture by singing songs composed by popular poets of their caste. The social security of these women was endangered with the infiltration of practices like dowry. Many Namashudra girls are sold off to other states for prostitution and others as second wives in unknown states.

Considering this status of Namashudra women, only a few could transgress it and enter the field of literature and resisting through their writings. In her essay, the author lists a few of them and their contributions. She also names Namashudra women who are excelling in other fields like politics, theatre, social work, etc. By highlighting the participation of Namashudra women in the All India Dalit Mahila Conference in 1996 Punjab, she asserts that although the number of Namashudra women writers was few, they played important role in the Dalit Literature Movement.¹⁷

She ends by critiquing those who tried to prove their liberalism by arguing for Marxist class struggle but were themselves were caught in casteism. Even in the class struggle, women consist of a large part of the marginalized proletariats. So consciousness about caste and patriarchy should be parallel to class consciousness. Unless there are major structural changes, the women, especially from Dalit castes would remain violated and subordinated. One of her most significant essays is on the role of Buddha and Babasaheb Ambedkar in establishing women's rights.

She talks about this kind of untouchability in one of her essays too where she comments how despite his role in spreading women's education and education for Dalits, Guruchand Thakur does not find mention in "liberal" "progressive" history and literature of Bengal. This deliberate erasure in history is countered by Dalit women writers like Kalyani Thakur who write their own history of Matuas and thus rewrite the history of Bengal.

As she mentions in one of her interviews, she has completed the first part of her autobiography. But there is no publisher for it. She had already invested her own money for publishing her books. No publisher was ready to publish her books. This is untouchability in Bengal. No media will use the phrase Dalit writing, no publisher will publish Dalit writing. Research scholars visit her for the interview; universities call her for special lectures but she is yet to find a publisher for herself.¹⁸

In this section, I have taken an overview of her writings. By simultaneously reading her video interview and her writings, for I argue that life and writings of Dalit women writers are intricately linked with each other. Being born in a poor Dalit family, she had experienced casteism and poverty since her childhood. As a result, her poems are a critique of Marxism and Manuvad.

In order to expand my argument, in the next section, we are going to discuss Kalyani Thakur's life narrative, the first published Dalit women testimonio from Bengal. The importance of such a testimonio lies in the fact that it will open up avenues for understanding caste and gender in Bengal from a Dalit feminist perspective.

¹⁶ Another name for the Namashudras. They follow Vaishanava tradition

¹⁷ This is my overall reading of the article.

¹⁸ This was drawn from an interview before her life-narrative was ultimately published from her own money.

“Ami Keno Charal Likhi”¹⁹

In her brief introduction, she starts by saying that I had a childhood and adolescence but I didn't even feel when my youth came and went away. This statement makes sense in the latter part of the narrative where she details on her professional and personal struggles as a Dalit woman. Another notable observation in her introduction is that she felt indirect pressures from different political spheres for not publishing this book as they feared turmoils which the book might create. This is interesting in the light of the fact that for the most part of her life she has been an activist, fighting for Dalit rights.

In the first chapter, while describing how being the youngest sibling, she used to cry a lot, she makes a passing statement that for the most of her life, the tears have not dried up. As a researcher, how does one read this statement? Do we only sympathize and feel sorry for her? No. Along with empathetic reading, we need to understand that it is this life experience that has shaped her life as a Dalit woman activist and writer.

In her memoir of childhood, her lived experience of caste is vividly described as strict separate settlements for Namashudras and the kind of discrimination she faced in her school. Caste and class experiences get entangled when she talks about the struggles against poverty. Her family's emphasis on the importance of getting educated despite all obstacles was inspired by the teachings of Guruchand Thakur, whose ideology the Matua families like hers follow. Her father was a great influence in instilling the anti-caste Matua ideology of equality and rejecting oppressive Hindu traditional practices, which she lives by all her life.

The importance of education for Dalit family like hers is also reflected in her biographical short story “Writing”. The story is about a first-generation learner young graduate girl who has just joined the primary school in her native place. The day before her joining, her grandmother asks her the number of children in her school. She estimates that the number of students would be around 100. Her grandmother then instructs her to buy 100 pens. Next day before she leaves for school, her grandmother explains:

“Give one to each child. For thousands of years, our people have not known how to write. Even when they had eyes, they were blind. What other people wrote had been the truth for them. Give the pens to all the students, my child, so that they can write to mask a thousand years of those writings. Tell them that.”²⁰

That day the girl has a utopian dream after school. She dreams that all the pages of religious texts were being washed by the rainfall of black ink from the sky. The story ends with the phrase, “...begin to write a new history.” The analogy of raining black ink symbolizes the power of education for the Dalits to fight the religion that has outcaste them and exploited them for generations.

Coming back to her life-narrative, her entire chapters on her childhood were not just a personal narrative but provide a social history of her native place in Nadia district where her family had shifted post-partition. She dedicates an entire paragraph towards the beginning to state that this was not her individual life story but the story of the people's struggle. She has documented the lives and struggles of people she knew in her childhood. She names her childhood friends, most of whom either did not get the opportunity for education or were school drop-outs and had a far more harsh life than she had. She considers herself lucky to be among the few who have known the power of pen and thus has access to writing.

The memories of her family's emphasis on education, which is also reflected in the biographical short story and her writing social history through her chapters on childhood, all these combined is what Rege (2006) had defined as a Testimonio. Dalit testimonios have underscored caste as oppressive and the anguish of Dalit literature is not that of the individual but of the entire outcast society.

¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, *Charal* is a casteist abuse in Bengali as well as the name of untouchable caste. The title of the book roughly translates as “Why I use Charal as a surname”

²⁰ Quoted from the translated short story, published in the collection “Women's Writings from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: The Worlds of Bangla and Urdu”, edited by Rakhshanda Jalil and Debjani Sengupta.

She has also given the history behind taking up the upper caste surname of Thakur. Her father's family adopted the upper caste surname to avoid the social stigma of their caste. However, she laments that using upper-caste surname did little to change their lower caste status. Therefore she argues that using the term Dalit instead of Harijan or untouchables was not useful in alleviating their status. According to her the consciousness for political and economic rights was not very clear even to the educated people within the Dalit Movement. Many times they are unaware of how despite affirmative action policies, resources are kept confined within the brahminical hegemonic forces. Here she refers to the lack of proper implementation of reservation policies in most government service departments. She sharply comments that if the Dalits did not fight for their reservation rights, in the near future, government offices will have zero Dalit employees. She takes her own example to explain that she came under tremendous threat and pressure because in her own office she was fighting for proper implementation of reservation policies. The trade union did not support her in this. She feared that like Chuni Kotal, she would be forced to commit suicide by the casteist society. This section of her life-narrative points out to the interlinkages between her caste experience and her activism which is shaped by it. Critique of Marxism and Manuvad in her writings are born out of her experience as a Dalit woman in a caste society, who has spent a large part of her life fighting the oppression.

The socio-economic history of her native place Bogula (near Nadia district) majorly constitutes her life-narrative. As she repeatedly asserts throughout her narrative, her life-story is not separate from the history of the people and the region she comes from. Her narrative is thus also the socio-economic history of her native place. Among other things, she describes in detail the caste occupations, the various employment opportunities available for the people, the social evils of polygamy, child marriage and the sexual exploitation of women. She attacks the superficiality of those who campaigned for agricultural lands because they had no knowledge of the basics of agriculture. She juxtaposes it to the people who have real agricultural knowledge, have spent their lives in agriculture, and yet they are not leading the movement for agricultural land rights.

The narrative leads the reader to witness the evolution of Kalyani Thakur from a hyper-sensitive young girl to an angry, strong, rough and tough woman. As she herself states, her tears find expression only in her writings. The continuous struggles of her life taught her to stay strong to fight the injustices of the casteist society.

Throughout the book, her narrative is intertwined with her observations of contemporary society. She is critical of political party based communism in Bengal for the difference between their ideology of equality at the theoretical level and the lack of it at the practical level. She is also skeptical of the so-called highly educated casteist bhadraloks who have no idea about Matua philosophy and literature. Similarly, there is an unofficial ban on discussing Ambedkar's ideas in Bengal. Even today volumes of his writings and speeches are not available in Bengali.

She makes a sharp analysis of the differences between rural and urban poverty. She argues that in comparison to the rural poor, the urban poor women were more pro-active and continuously making efforts to earn money.

A significant section of her narrative is her experience as a dark-complexioned Dalit woman in her office. Upper caste men in her office used to 'advise' her not to wear certain colors as it did not suit her complexion. She elaborates on how her lesser educated upper caste boss was always finding ways to obstruct her work. She also points out through many incidences how as a Dalit woman who did not follow Hindu traditions, she was different even from the upper caste Hindu women in her office. Once again as a Dalit woman her caste experience was not separate from her gender experience.

She then moves on to narrate how *Neer*²¹, the Dalit feminist journal that she founded and still edits, came to be born as wall magazine in the hostel where she lived. Her journey into activism and writing was simultaneous. I, therefore, argue that there are linkages between the life of Kalyani Thakur, her politics, activism, and writings. Her personal pains, her losses, her ideological beliefs, all these are not de-linked from her writings some which I mentioned in the previous section.

²¹ Literally meaning house, a safe abode.

Another theme that is repeated throughout the narrative, especially towards the later part, is how she is continuously fighting with mental health issues and depression. Apart from other depression-related medicines, she is forced to depend on sleeping pills. Otherwise, as she said multiple times, she would not be able to sleep. Her nonstop life struggles as a Dalit woman, personal loss and pains, made depression inevitable.

As an activist, she was part of the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Bill of 2003 which turned into 2005 law. Overnight it left several Dalits and minorities stripped off any citizenship rights as they were deemed illegal. The 2003 Bill was the precursor to the current Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The roots of CAA and National Register of Citizens (NRC) lay in the history of the partition of Bengal. It was a ploy to destroy the rise of Namashudras who were becoming a threat to brahminical hegemony. Similarly, the NRC is targeted to break the unity of the Dalit Movement. For the Dalits, CAA and NRC are about the issue of citizenship. Their fight is for being recognized as citizens without any conditions.²² It had begun with the Citizenship Amendment Bill of 2003.

She briefly touches upon the history of how she came to be associated with Chaturtha Duniya. Before that, she had already started publishing her Dalit feminist journal *Neer*. She was a writer and editor in her own right before she formally joined the Bengali Dalit Literature Movement. The life-history of Kalyani Thakur as a Dalit woman writer is also the history of Dalit movement in Bengal, the turbulent journey of Chaturtha Duniya and the Bengali Dalit Literature Movement.

She ends her narrative by going back to her life as an activist fighting against the various experiences of caste violence. Her critique is of the duplicity of the so-called liberal progressive Bengali bhadralok, who in reality reasserted caste in new ways. This was evident in many incidences where the upper caste bhadraloks severely opposed the reservation laws and did not let it implemented in reality. She argues thus how in subtle yet violent ways caste continued to operate in Bengal.

One of the defining features of her life-narrative is her use of conversational language. Reading the book is like hearing her speak to us through the text. She also consciously uses the dialect-specific to people of her native place whenever any person from her native place speaks in the book. This brings us to the argument that Dalit literature is defined by Dalit aesthetic as a separate aesthetic. As Limbale (2004) has argued, the aesthetic of Dalit literature is realistic and life-affirming. Kalyani Thakur's use of language and the way she chooses to write her life-narrative ascertains the Dalit aesthetics of Dalit Literature.

Conclusion: A Life Less Ordinary²³

Coming from a poor Dalit family, Kalyani Thakur has charted her own life with her own struggles. She has been living on her own since the age of 15. Her life as an activist started when she organized hostel boarders to address problems faced by women hostelites. Since then she has been involved in activism around issues like Citizenship Amendment Bill 2003 and reservation. She even went into a hunger strike against Citizenship Amendment Bill 2003 because the Bill had affected mostly the Dalits.

She has also protested alone in railways (where she works) about reservation issues. This began when she came to know that all reserved posts were taken by people from the unreserved category. Since then in 2011 till 2013, she has written many applications to National Commission for SC/ST/OBC, both at the national and state levels. She came under a lot of pressure as the railway was not ready to reveal the employee list. She was even suspended from her job on a silly pretext. Investigations against her are going on. She rejoined the office only after taking major penalty charge-sheet. She believes that this type of consequence for asking the right to the reservation is not unique to Bengal. Everywhere the upper castes don't allow the Dalits to have their right to reservation. Her commitment to issues like Dalit rights as an activist reflects in her writings where she is a sharp

²² Sourced from Manoranjan Byapari's lecture and Sukriti Ranjan Biswas's talk in International Seminar on "Contemporary Caste Gender and Minority questions in West Bengal and Bangladesh: Some Explorations", jointly organized by Department of Sociology St Xavier's College, Kolkata and Nagarik Uddyog, Dhaka, held in October 2019.

²³ I borrow this section name from Baby Halder's memoir.

critique of inequalities and exploitation against the Dalit laboring class. As in her essay on the status of Namashudra women, some of her poems criticize casteism within Marxism.

To conclude the analysis of Kalyani Thakur's life-narrative, it would be interesting to link it with her recently published biographical novel "Aandhar Beel O Kichhu Manush". As Shewli Hira observes in her review of the novel:

"Aandhar Beel is not only a life story of Kalyani Thakur, it is also a document of Namashudra life. A 72 page tale of Namashudra life will take you through the mud roads, cowsheds, and fishing in the water catchments. The humans of Aadhaar Beel are a mix of people touched by displacement and development, social harmony and Brahminical exploitation. Lost land, lost livelihood seems to be gnawing at their minimalist existence. The narrative of a displaced population that survived on natural resources and continues to fight for survival.

It is not an angry Brahminical outpour on nature of poet Sukanta who finds the soft moon akin to "burning bread". In spite of struggle, rejection, and pain Chandal Kalyani does not miss the beauty of nature, the softness of moon, the peaceful co-existence of the Dalits and venomous cobra amidst floods. Like the newly sprouted leaves after floods, her writing gushes with love, light and humour.A fascinating read, tight storyline, humour, pain and love intertwined in Dalit lives amidst cruelty of poverty, caste alienation and deprivation."²⁴

If we combine the reading of this biographical novel with her life-narrative, the linkages and similarities between the two are stark and obvious. Even in fictionalized form, she has written the social history of her people just like she has done in her life-narrative. Her writing is Dalit Testimonio because her writing is never personal but always social.

She has talked about forms of untouchability in her essays too where she comments how despite his role in spreading women's education and education for Dalits, Guruchand Thakur does not find mention in "liberal" "progressive" history and literature of Bengal. This deliberate erasure in history is countered by Dalit women writers like Kalyani Thakur who write their own history of Matuas and thus rewrite the history of Bengal.

Dalit Feminist writings counter the power relations of both gender and caste. This accounts for the unique feature of Dalit feminist writings. While attacking the caste structures she also writes against Dalit patriarchy. Despite her obstacles and struggles as a Dalit woman, literature is Kalyani Thakur's primary weapon of resistance now. As a Dalit woman writer, she contests the hegemony of the public sphere dominated by upper-caste bhadraloks. As her life-narrative testifies, she has simultaneously fought against patriarchy within the Dalit movement. Her assertions through are activism and writing chart the path for Dalit Feminist Standpoint in Bengal.²⁵ In this sense, Kalyani Thakur's life-narrative can be read as the literature of dissent.

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²⁴ Quoted from facebook book review post of Shewli Hira.

²⁵ Here I draw from Praskanva Sinharoy's argument in his article "Chandalinir Bibriti: Interrogating caste and gender in contemporary Bengali Dalit Literature", published in the volume "Caste and Gender in Contemporary India: Power, Privilege and Politics." edited by Supurna Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh. I extend his argument for larger analysis of Kalyani Thakur's life-narrative.

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