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## From Chandal To Namasudra: Caste, Refugeehood, And The Struggle Of Identity In Bengali Dalit Literature

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**Abstract:** The article attempts to investigate how Bengali Dalit literature reflects the historical journey of the Namahsudra community who were stigmatised as Chandals and their struggle for dignity and recognition. Through the study it also highlighted that how they were doubly displaced, firstly as a low caste which pushed to the margins of the society, and secondly as refugees uprooted during the partition of Bengal. Besides, it also discussed that how the Bengali Dalit literature resist caste-based discrimination and rewrites the overlooked or distorted history of the Namasudra people, particularly through Namasudra authors. The Bengal Namasudra community, earlier referred to as ‘Chandals’, are a socially, politically and economically marginalized caste from East Bengal who were commonly known as “untouchables.” Most of them turned into refugees in India at the time of partition and experiencing double marginalization, initially as Dalits, and subsequently as displaced individuals. Mainstream literature and history have most frequently failed or neglected to project their actual hardships, agony, experience and culture. Authors such as Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, Jatin Bala, Kalyani Thakur Charal, and many more employed the literature as an effective tool to voice their community’s words, experiences, and resistances. The research brings to the fore the significance of Dalit literature in the recovery of histories, advancing social justice, and transforming the way we look at caste, identity, and literature in Bengal.

**Keywords:** Namasudra, caste oppression, identity, refugee experience, subaltern voices.

**Introduction:**

“A refugee child growing up in a tent, the struggle for a life of dignity doubly hard when marked by a Dalit identity. It’s an adolescent journey seeking education, dignity selfhood all which are denied because of the stigma of being low born.”

- Malashri Lal

Dalit writers from Bengal, especially those from the Namasudra community have been able to learn the art of writing through education by facing extreme struggle for this institutional education, even many of them could not get the opportunity to get institutional education and use literature as a way to express themselves through their own real-life struggles and experiences. Many of their books have been translated into English and received wide appreciation. The Namasudras which are previously known as ‘Chandal’, a non-Aryan Dalit caste from eastern-Bengal, have a history and life experience that is very different from what mainstream historians and writers have shown. The term ‘Chandal’ or ‘Chandala’ is usually regard as a slur. The community was traditionally engaged in fishing and as boatmen in their own native land. After that when the land became very fruitful for agriculture, they turn their occupation as farmers as their main occupation. But their economic condition did not change and left poor. Their real struggles such as poverty, suffering, and exclusion, were often ignored or misrepresented in traditional history and literature. Therefore, Isabel Wilkerson said in her book, *Caste: The International Bestseller*; “Caste is more than rank, it is a state of mind that holds everyone captive, the dominant imprisoned in all illusion of their own entitlements, the subordinate trapped in the purgatory of someone else’s definition of who they are and who they should be.” (Wilkerson, 2020; 290)

In Bengal the Namasudras are mostly worked as farmers or did low-paid, hard labour. Because of their social position, they have been labeled as ‘Dalits’ or ‘untouchables’. After the Partition of India, many Namasudras left East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and moved to India. Even today, some are still migrating. In every area of life such as social, political, economic, and cultural-they have faced exclusion and discrimination. For many years, historians and writers in power have changed or ignored the true history of the Namasudras. Their poverty, suffering, and experiences of injustice were not shown properly in mainstream literature. In recent times, Indian caste identity has become an important topic of study for scholars. Social scientists and historians have looked closely at how caste worked in South Asian society, especially during British rule and after independence. They have focused on caste-based movements, politics, and violence.

The Namasudras of Bengal have now drawn the attention of researchers from across India. Some scholars have even developed theories to better understand how the ‘Namasudras’ position in the caste system has changed over time. The Namasudras are a caste that has been pushed to the margins of society- socially, economically, and politically. Because of this, their struggles, achievements, and life stories have not been properly shared in mainstream literature or history. However, writers such as Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, Shyamal Kumar Paramanik, Jatin Bala, Kalyani Thakur Charal and many more have

stood out from this community. Through their powerful writings, they have shared the real and often hidden history of the Namasudras, a history they know well because it is their own.

The Namasudras were also known as 'Chandal' or 'Chanral' in past time in Bengal. In the late 1800s, they began to looking for a new and more respectful and dignified identity for themselves, and they started calling themselves Namasudras. Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay says that the term 'Namasudra' was not used in public until the mid-19th century. In the 1911 census, they were officially listed as Namasudras after a social reform movement. One of the biggest challenges they face unlike some other lower-caste groups is figuring out their real history and identity, which has been unclear or erased for a long time in the mainstream literature and history. The Namasudras are a community that has been treated unfairly in society. They have been kept out of social, economic, and political life for a long time. As a result, their pain, struggles, and achievements are rarely seen in regular history books or literature. But some writers from this group- like Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari, and Jatin Bala etc. have spoken out through their writing. They tell the real stories of the Namasudras because they belong to this community and know its truth from personal lived experience. The Namasudras are a non-Aryan caste from eastern Bengal. Bipul Mandal explains that the word "Namasudra" means "respected Shudra," where "Nama" means respected and "Sudra" refers to the lowest group in the caste system. In Bengal's caste system, both Namah and Sudra are linked to the fourth varna (or social class). To avoid the anger of King Ballal Sen, a group called Nama-brahmans changed their name to Namah-Brahmanas and later became known as Namah Sudras. Over time it evolved into the term "Namasudra."

There isn't a strong group of critics or scholars focusing on Namasudra writers. Most of the writing and research on authors like Manoranjan Byapari and Manohar Mouli Biswas has been done by non-Dalit scholars and even that is still very limited. However, some important efforts have been made. Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, one of the well-known writers of Bengali Dalit literature, is working to bring Bangli Dalit literature into spotlight. He recently edited a book called *Bangla Dalit Writer Writes Back*, which examines the contribution of Manohar Mouli Biswas and his life. Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay has also made a major contribution by writing a detailed past of the Namasudras. He used Bengali pamphlets, newspapers, booklets, and other official documents to track their journey from being listed in the census to their struggles and changes after the Partition in 1947. Although there are only a few major books in this area of study, some research papers on this subject have recently been published in well reputed journals.

Manohar Mouli Biswas is one of the most important voices in Bengali Dalit literature. His creative work is wide-ranging, but his contribution doesn't stop at poetry or storytelling. He also has played an important role in developing the way Bengali Dalit literature is studied and understood. As an important author of the Dalit struggle in Bengal, he has built a rich archive of work that is essential for anyone doing research in this field. His writing uplifts those who have been ignored or silenced. The Dalit movement in Bengal has grown under his influence. Biswas has written a great deal of critical work on Dalit history and aesthetics. His theories go against the traditional views of literature and are known for their bold, counter-cultural approach. His recent English book, *An Interpretation of Dalit Literary Theory and Movements: Through*

*the Lens of Ambedkarism*, brings together many of his powerful ideas on Dalit literature and movements. In the autobiography *Amar Bhubane Aami Benche Thaki* (2013), which was later on translated into English as *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* (2015), he shares his personal journey as a Namasudra. Through his life story, he connects with the pain and strength of his community, and shows clearly that caste discrimination is still a reality in Bengal challenging the false belief that Bengal is caste-free. More than just a writer or critic, Biswas is also one of the committed activists. He works with the 'Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha' to fight for the rights and dignity of Dalits. His influence on Bengali Dalit literature is truly deep and far-reaching, making him a towering figure in this field.

Manoranjan Byapari is a powerful Dalit voice in Bengali literature who started life as a cook and rickshaw puller. Coming from a Dalit background, his life and writing are shaped by the search for identity, dignity, and a place to call home in an often, hostile world. His literary journey began when his one of the first stories, "Riksha Chalai", was published in a magazine edited by the legendary Mahasweta Devi, "Bartika". Byapari's major works include *Britter Shesh Parba* (2001), *Jijibishar Golpo* (2005), and *Golpo Samagra* (2006), which are collections of stories. But his most well-known book is his autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*, published in 2012 (translated in to English as *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, published in 2018), where he narrates his life honestly and powerfully. These important works tell the story of a young Dalit refugee boy and gives readers a clear picture of post-Partition Bengal and the unrest during the Naxalite movement. This book goes beyond just personal memories, it explores the painful reality faced by Dalits and refugees from East Pakistan, including the humiliation and discrimination they endured. *Chonna Chhara* (also from 2019) gives voice to people struggling daily for survival, often with very little.

Byapari sees strong connections between Ambedkar's and Marx's ideas, especially when it comes to justice and equality. He draws a sharp line between 'caste' and 'class' and says many Dalits are not even seen as part of mainstream society because they're too focused on meeting their basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. He argues that those who've managed to meet these needs form a different group with their own way of life. These themes are central to his writing. His work is now gaining well-deserved attention for its honesty, power, and deep insight into the lives of Dalits.

Jatin Bala stands out as a significant voice in Bengali Dalit literature and is recognized for developing a distinctive method of resistance through his literary works. Residing in West Bengal, he candidly addresses the challenges and aspirations of Dalits, particularly emphasizing their right to dignity and autonomy. His literary contributions have garnered him numerous accolades, and he is particularly esteemed for his poignant short stories. These narratives embody a profound sense of realism, often described as documentary realism, and reveal the stark realities of life as a Dalit, a refugee, and an orphan in Bengal in post-Partition. As noted by Antonia Navarro-Tejero, Bala's stories- elegantly translated into English- capture not only the anguish of being Dalit but also the additional hardships faced by a displaced orphan in the aftermath of India's partition. His short stories are compiled in a compelling collection titled *Stories of Social Awakening: Reflections of Dalit Refugee Lives in Bengal*. Through his writings, Bala envisions a society devoid of caste discrimination, where power is not monopolized by Brahmins but is equitably

distributed. Jatin Bala said, “The caste segregation of East Bengal refugees was present even before the Partition... This politics of segregation was carried forward post-Partition.” (Bala, 2022; XVI)

Although Bengal’s organised Dalit literary movement only took off after the tragic death of Chuni Kotal on 16 August, 1992, Dalit writing had been steadily growing since India’s independence. Many significant Dalit writers emerged, including Kapil Krishna Thakur, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Shyamal Kumar Paramanik, and Jatin Bala and many more. These writers created an alternative literary space to challenge the dominance of upper-caste voices. Through their work, they expressed their anger, pain, and resistance. Dalit writers, especially from the Namasudra community, have entered the intellectual world once controlled by upper-caste (savarna) writers and have created a space for themselves using literature as a tool for change. Their works have been translated into English and are now gaining international recognition. However, in Bengal itself, these important voices are still often ignored. Bengali Dalit literature is rarely included in university syllabuses, and academic attention remains limited.

The Namasudras identified as the second-largest Scheduled caste in Assam, Tripura, and Jharkhand. Despite their large presence, their stories and struggles have been mostly erased from historical records and dominant literary tradition. The purpose of this research is to highlight these missing voices and offer fresh insights into the growing field of Bengali Dalit literature. Most edited books and magazine articles that talk about Bengali Dalits don’t really give us a clear or complete picture of the Namasudras’ past from the viewpoint of Dalit thought and creativity. Traditional literary theories especially those based on classical or Sanskrit texts don’t connect with the real experiences or artistic style of Dalit literature. Dalit life is often wrongly seen only through images of poverty, dirt, or roughness. But the aesthetics of Dalit writing actually show the strength and dignity of people, and highlight deep human values even in the face of suffering. This literature gives beauty a new meaning one that is rooted in truth, struggle, and survival. At the same time, what’s known as counter-memory or alternative history plays an important role. It allows those who have been left out or silenced like the Dalits to tell their own stories and reclaim their past.

In this paper tried explain that how Bengali Dalit literature traces the journey of the Namasudras from the stigma of Chandal to the assertion of dignity as Namasudra, revealing how caste oppression and refugeehood together shape their struggles for identity, through various autobiographies and narratives by the Bengali Dalit authors tried to recover these silenced histories and transform literature in to a space of memory, resistance, and selfhood. Besides, to look at how their stories form an alternative version of history what some call a history, or “other history” that challenges the dominant mainstream narratives and speak out to the lives and struggles of Namasudra community.

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