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## Echoes of the Unheard: Exploring Dalit Identity and Struggles in Manohar Mouli Biswas's Memoir *Surviving in My World*

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### ABSTRACT

Manohar Mouli Biswas's memoir *Surviving in My World* is a powerful autobiographical work that sheds light on the lives of impoverished Namasudras, a marginalized Dalit community in Bengal. The narrative captures the dual burden faced by the Namasudras—systemic caste-based discrimination and the trauma of displacement caused by the Partition of India. Biswas through vivid accounts of material deprivation, illiteracy and societal exclusion portrays the island-like isolation of his community marked by their poverty, superstitions and struggles for identity and dignity. Biswas writes with the intent to challenge and deconstruct the hegemonic caste structures that have historically oppressed Dalits. He articulates his personal and collective pain and offering a testimony not only of his own life but also of generations of Namasudras who have suffered under cultural hegemony. The work is rich in ethnographic details which capturing facets of Namasudra life such as their occupations, food habits and traditions, which have long been suppressed or stigmatized by conservative upper-caste Hindus. More than a memoir, this work stands as a collective autobiography of a community which voicing their struggles and aspirations for liberation. Biswas's empathetic portrayal of the Namasudras transforms their overlooked and belittled lives into narratives of dignity and resilience. Besides, asserting their rightful place in the larger discourse on caste, identity and cultural

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justice. The autobiography is both a lament for the historical injustices endured and a hopeful call for empowerment and equality.

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Dalit literature occupies a significant place in Indian writing which representing the lived experiences, struggles and aspirations of historically marginalized communities. Its roots lie in the centuries-long fight against caste oppression and systemic exclusion and drawing attention to the pervasive inequality faced by Dalits in India. Although expressions of resistance and social critique existed within various forms of oral and folk traditions. But Dalit literature as a modern genre began to emerge more prominently in the 20th century. Besides, the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was instrumental in shaping this literary movement. Ambedkar's ideas about equality, education and justice became a cornerstone for Dalit writers, who used their narratives to critique the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy and envision a more egalitarian society.

The term "Dalit literature" gained formal recognition during the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha conference in 1958. This marked a pivotal moment in the organized articulation of Dalit experiences and resistance and the genre began to explore the intersections of identity, oppression, and agency. As well-known scholar, Dr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questioned in the essay, titled *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Dalit literature provides an emphatic answer through its narratives and challenging the silences imposed by dominant historiography and reclaiming voices that had long been excluded.

Dalit literature in Bengal has a unique trajectory shaped by regional history, culture and politics. The literary traditions of the region including the medieval *Charjapadas*—a collection of esoteric Buddhist verses—and the reformist movements led by figures like Harichand Thakur have significantly influenced Bengali Dalit writers. However, the contemporary movement for Dalit literature in Bengal gained momentum in the 1990s with the formation of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1992. Among the leading figures in this movement is Manohar Mouli Biswas whose writings exemplify the rich tapestry of Dalit narratives in Bengal. In the view of Manohar Mouli Biswas, “It is a counter cultural movement that has been aiming to undo the age-old caste ridden oppressions against the Dalits by representing their lives, deprivations, struggles, histories and promoting their culture and liberation through literature” (Biswas).

Manohar Mouli Biswas is one of the most prominent figures in Bengali Dalit literature and has been instrumental in articulating the struggles and aspirations of the Namasudra community, a Dalit group with a significant presence in Bengal. Biswas's Personal narrative, *Surviving in My World (Amar Bhubane Ami Benche Thaki)*, is a landmark text in Dalit literature which offering a profound insight into his life and the socio-political challenges faced by his community. Reflecting on his childhood in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), Biswas describes growing up in abject poverty and compounded by the systemic discrimination of the caste system. He writes, "I grew up amidst not only economic deprivation but also within a social framework that constantly reminded us of our inferiority." (Biswas)

Manohar Mouli Biswas, in the preface to his autobiography *Surviving in My World*, reflects on the essence of his journey and the significance of his title. He describes his world as one filled with profound pain and pity, asserting that the narrative reveals a reality distinct from others. Initially, he titled the work *Prisnika*, a rare Bengali term meaning "water hyacinth," later changing it to *Life and Death of Prisnika*. However, the idea of associating himself with a water hyacinth, a plant often regarded as insignificant, conflicted with his evolving sense of self-worth and dignity. This shift in perception symbolizes the satisfaction he derives from affirming his humanity and his ability to assert himself as an individual with identity and value, marking a journey from being pitied to claiming pride in his existence. And therefore, once he said, "It is satisfaction of being able to establish myself as a human being. That I'm being able to think myself as a human that is the pleasure" (Biswas XVII).

One of the central themes of Biswas's autobiography is the transformative power of education. While recounting his early life, Biswas details the resistance he faced within his family regarding his pursuit of education. Similar to his grandfather, Biswas's father strongly believed in the transformative power of education, not just for improving their lives but also for altering their traditional occupations. He wholeheartedly supported Biswas's enthusiasm for learning, recognizing that education was the key to attaining dignity and self-respect in a society dominated by caste hierarchies. Biswas recounts, "Baba believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives—there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation" (*Surviving in My World*, 4). Harchand Thakur, the eminent social reformer of the Namasudra community, shared a similar conviction. He asserted that for the oppressed, education and basic sustenance were prerequisites for meaningful participation in the struggle for freedom. Thakur famously remarked, "We who do not get to fill our stomachs, who do not get the scope of education in schools; to us, the meaning of independence and slavery are the same. You first arrange for our education, take care that we get to eat two full meals, and then we will join you in the struggle for

independence.” This perspective highlights the essential role of education in empowering marginalized communities to break free from cycles of oppression and poverty. However, Biswas persevered, recognizing that education was a vital tool for challenging caste-based oppression and breaking free from the cycle of poverty. His narrative echoes Ambedkar’s famous declaration that “education is the milk of a lioness; whoever drinks it will roar.” For Biswas, education was not merely a means of personal advancement but a collective struggle for dignity and empowerment.

The Namasudras led an austere and modest life, removed from the chaos of urban existence. Their daily sustenance often relied on just two handfuls of rice, and they found solace in the natural world around them. Nature, however, was a double-edged sword—sometimes offering them its beauty and bounty, while at other times, unleashing harsh challenges that they were forced to endure. They adapted to a life of scarcity and accepted hardships as an inevitable part of existence. As Biswas reflects, “This pattern was not of one life, but that of generations” (*Surviving in My World*, 39). Tragically, the conditions he described decades ago still resonate with the lives of Dalit Namasudras in the twenty-first century. Even now, they struggle at the edge of survival, likened to water hyacinths floating precariously between life and death, without access to basic necessities. Biswas recalls moments of dire crisis where medical care was nonexistent: “Even in the time of such grave danger, not a single doctor was found nearby. We had to do our treatment ourselves in order to remain alive” (*Surviving in My World*, 3). Despite these adversities, their resilience shines through as they navigate the fragile balance of joy and sorrow, smiles and tears, in their enduring struggle for existence.

Despite their illiteracy and poverty, the Namasudras did not succumb to bitterness or despair. They remained deeply rooted in their world, building their lives in their unique way, insulated from the outer world. They neither ventured out of their sphere nor allowed external influences to penetrate it. However, their challenging circumstances did not strip them of their fundamental human emotions. Their love, care, and affection flourished even amidst numerous hardships and neglect from the central authorities. As Biswas reflects, “parents cuddled their children, while children shared the physical labour of their parents from an early age. This was the natural way of our lives” (*Surviving in My World*, 12). From a young age, members of this community learned to embrace life as a series of adjustments, developing tolerance in the face of relentless hardships. They never allowed themselves to feel unwelcome in the world. Biswas offers a poignant example of their resilience, describing their resourcefulness and dignity even in times of scarcity. He notes how they handled the inadequacy of clothing, where torn garments were met not with ridicule but with quiet understanding. If exposed

clothing caused embarrassment, others discreetly advised caution, embodying a shared sense of empathy and solidarity (*Surviving in My World*, 12). This way of life underscores their enduring ability to navigate adversity with dignity and grace.

Biswas was born into an impoverished Namasudra Dalit family in an isolated village with restricted educational access but got up to significant professional heights. He held a great position in Government post and served for a long time. Although, Biswas was unable to shed the negative attached to his identity as a member of the Dalit community—a reality he neither denied nor sought to distance himself from. Instead, he confronted the pain of being treated unequally despite his qualifications. Reflecting on this discrimination, he states, "There is caste discrimination in this country: some castes are considered high and some low. In spite of being an equal or even a little higher in educational qualifications, I failed to become the equal of Rushita. The words with which Rushita's mother had bid farewell remained alive as a deep wound and time could not heal it" (*Surviving in My World*, 85). These closing lines of his autobiography leave readers questioning how long society must endure the pain of caste-based discrimination, highlighting a persistent injustice that refuses to fade with time.

A defining feature of Biswas's work is his emphasis on reclaiming Dalit identity and culture. In his writings, he often critiques the cultural erasure perpetrated by dominant caste narratives, which have historically marginalized and dehumanized Dalit communities. Biswas underscores the richness of Namasudra traditions, challenging what Antonio Gramsci described as "cultural hegemony." By celebrating Dalit heritage, he transforms it into a source of pride and resistance, countering the narratives of shame imposed by the caste system. For instance, Biswas often highlights the rituals, festivals, and oral traditions of the Namasudras, presenting them as an integral part of Bengal's cultural mosaic. This reclamation of cultural identity is not merely symbolic but deeply political. As Biswas asserts, recognizing and valuing Dalit culture is essential for dismantling the hierarchical structures that have long marginalized these communities. His works serve as a reminder that cultural resistance is a powerful form of political action.

While Biswas is a prominent voice, he is part of a broader movement of Bengali Dalit literature that has gained visibility over the past few decades. Writers such as Kalyani Thakur Charal and Manoranjan Byapari have also made significant contributions to the genre. The autobiography of Manoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life (Itibritte Chandal Jiban)*, shares thematic similarities with Biswas's work, as both texts explore the intersection of caste, poverty, and identity.

The emergence of Bengali Dalit literature has challenged the dominance of upper-caste narratives in the region's literary canon. Historically, mainstream Bengali literature often ignored or romanticized the lives of marginalized communities, failing to engage with the harsh realities of caste oppression. By contrast, Dalit literature offers an unflinching portrayal of these realities, providing a counter-narrative that demands recognition and justice. Dalit literature is not merely a literary movement but also a political and social one. It seeks to expose the structural inequalities of the caste system and advocate for a more equitable society. Biswas's narratives, along with those of other Dalit writers, serve as a form of activism, using storytelling as a means to challenge entrenched systems of oppression. As Ambedkar emphasized, social and political change must be rooted in the recognition of human dignity and equality. Dalit literature embodies this vision, offering a platform for voices that have long been silenced.

One of the key contributions of Dalit literature is its ability to transform personal stories into collective narratives. Biswas's autobiography, for example, is not just his individual story but a reflection of the shared experiences of the Namasudra community. By weaving personal and collective struggles into his narrative, Biswas underscores the interconnectedness of individual agency and communal resistance. This approach aligns with the broader goals of Dalit literature, which seeks to challenge the status quo and envision a more just and inclusive society. Dalit literature, with its emphasis on authenticity and resistance, has emerged as a vital force in Indian writing. In Bengal, this genre has gained prominence through the works of writers like Manohar Mouli Biswas, who have used their narratives to highlight the struggles and aspirations of Dalit communities. Biswas's autobiography, *Surviving in My World*, stands as a testament to the resilience and agency of the Namasudra community, offering a powerful critique of caste oppression while celebrating the richness of Dalit culture.

This autobiography is not just the personal narrative of Manohar Mouli Biswas but also reflects the lives of his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and countless impoverished Dalits like him. It is infused with painful memories, recounting the struggles of his family and community under the burden of historical oppression. Biswas confronts this suffering with a profound realization of the subaltern's silence. Echoing Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" he acknowledges that even if marginalized voices manage to articulate their experiences, they often remain unheard. To challenge this, Biswas emphasizes the need for Dalits to speak and demand recognition. He argues that the Dalit community must fight a dual battle—against economic and social exploitation—and create literature that authentically portrays their aspirations and struggles. As he states, such literature should not only inspire

the oppressed but also serve as a powerful tool to awaken consciousness and embolden resistance (Surviving in My World, 97).

As Dalit literature continues to grow, it challenges the dominance of upper-caste narratives in Indian literature, providing a platform for marginalized voices. Its significance lies not only in its literary merit but also in its ability to foster social and political change. By reclaiming their narratives and asserting their identity, Dalit writers like Biswas remind us of the transformative power of storytelling in the fight for justice and equality.

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