

A Subaltern Shri! in Protest: *The Wheel Will Turn*

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Abstract: Cluster of Varna configuration, social hierarchy, traditional norms and caste tautness worked as positive catalyst in the chemical reaction and formation of dalit literature. 'The term 'Dalit' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on grounds of their lowly birth.

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste system, Indian society.

*At the end of Kalyuga a Shudra would be raja
The country would be filled with tyranny
A Shudra would be interested in a Brahmin girl,
Would you people be able to accept all this?
(The Wheel Will Turn, pg. 41)*

Cluster of Varna configuration, social hierarchy, traditional norms and caste tautness worked as positive catalyst in the chemical reaction and formation of Dalit literature. 'The term 'Dalit' thus describes a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights and refers to people who are suppressed on grounds of their lowly birth. The word 'Dalit' is descriptive word evocative of bondage and agony, the anguish and frustrated aspirations of a vast victimised section of the Indian Population right down the ages.' (S.M. Michael pg- 99) Translation of vernacular dalit literature into English provides it an elevated platform with a splendid rostrum. Marathi, Tamil, Hindi and Bangla dalit literature peep into a global window via its English translation. Eminent Marathi dalit writer Sharan Kumar Limbale very rightly remarks that, "Bangla Dalit Literature is always a treat to read. There were not many translations available." Congratulating Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi on his commendable attempt to render Manohar Mauli Biswas' poems into English, he further writes, "Manohar Mauli Biswas' collection of poems will be a pioneering attempt for global readers. It's a stamp on a longstanding writer from Bengal." Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi edited collection of translated poems of Manohar Mauli Biswas is the incarnation of burly protest of Dalit psyche with a bang. As per B.T. Seetha, "Dalit expression of collective anger, rage and response is clearly discernible in the works of Dalit writers whose concern is a result of prolonged pain and suffering." Contemporary poetry of protest is multifarious in approach as it aims at different problems of Indian society. Nature of contemporary protest is both direct and indirect. A poet sometimes directly attacks on some social, political and cultural problems, but sometimes he fights with something within himself. *The Wheel Will Turn* is a strong evidence of the shrill of a subaltern. Defining the term subaltern, Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak in her interview says that "...subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie...." In Indian context the term subaltern implies, 'dalits'/ women/ tribals/ and immigrant laborers.

The protest against cultural, economic and social hegemony forms the crux portion of Indian Dalit literature. As per Foucault power or knowledge 'excludes... represses... censors... abstracts... masks... conceals...'. Power's tendency to exclude, repress, censor, and conceal inspires its victims to raise their voice against it. Dalit literature is the resultant component of such struggle. Manohar Mauli Biswas is the President and founder – member of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha [Bengali Dalit Literary Association]. In an interview answering to the question of Jaydeep Sarangi and Mohini Gurav he says: "...the marginalization of the larger section of the people has in India been religiously institutionalized, and they can get rid of the bondage through the organizational movement: through challenge and protest; through creating a new domain of culture and literature only. For that purpose we had set up the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1992 after the sad demise of Chuni Kotal, a tribal girl student of post graduation level in Vidyasagar University, and thence launched our literary and cultural activities to reform the society, very purposefully in the direction to eliminate disparity amongst human beings." He believes that an 'institutional system' can be successfully challenged by the counter institutional operations. For him dalit literature and cultural movement is nothing but the counter institutional operation'. *The Wheel Will Turn* is a collection of Forty Nine poems by Biswas. Efforts of ten translators effectively made this Bengali gesture of protest an open English expression of anger. In this collection last seven poems are translated by the poet himself. In a poem entitled 'Comrade, I Pay A Red Salute', the poet pays his reverence to various dalit fighters who fought against imperialists, industrialists, caste hatred, and for their rights as well. He mentions the names of Chuni Kotal, Bharabari, Ramjhora, Padmaja Mandi, Badrinath, Madan Mandal, Birbhanpur, Ramjibanpur, and Karandighir – Bhanagapara. 'The mass conversion to Buddhism bought about a revolutionary change in the consciousness of Dalit society. ...Dalits found a new cultural dimension in Buddhism, and it had an energizing impact on the development of Dalit literature.' (Limbale, Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature. pg . 41) In 'I'm In Sole Sadness' he seems to find comfort in Buddhism and its philosophy when he writes:

Your wonderful face Oh Buddha! I do find spaded out | From Kashmir
to Kanyakumari , Afghan to Mynmar | All the whole world even the
new generation is blessed | By putting Buddha you underground we've
missed lot. (pg. 65)

The 'pain of a dalit women' peeps through 'Broken Bangles'. 'The Winter Wind' pierces 'into the bone of skeleton' of these poor people. He writes that dry leaves are 'not available anywhere/ cruelty hammers down the nail on / Everywhere emptiness chews our soul/ we cannot forget everything, not at all.' The phenomenon of caste is an indivisible part of Indian society G.N. Devy commenting on caste convention in India

writes:

"Yet it cannot be denied that for a variety of very complex reasons Indian society has kept the caste- convention alive; and despite the massive changes brought in by industrialization, urbanization and migrations, the caste – convention is showing no signs of decline or slackening. Besides, the policy of positive discrimination enriched in the Indian Constitution has led to a further crystallization of caste identities even if the goal of that policy was to eliminate inequality arising out of the marginalization of certain castes." (Introduction, Akkarmashi pg xv)

Five poems in this anthology are translated by the editor of this collection, Jaydeep Sarangi. All these five poems belong to the 'Protest' genre. Biswas admits that he tries 'to write and writing beguiles him.' He speaks what he can't yet so many things remain under the cover. "I destroy and preserve my heart| Day and night| With a little palpation of the untouchable dust.". 'Rebellion' is again a protest poem. The spirit of agitation struggles to come out in this poem. The title of the poem is also suggestive of resentment and revolt. Red flag is thirst for blood;| A rose of revolt.| All my decaying cells| Restore the spirit I have...| To live as rails of protest. Jaydeep Sarangi translated third important protest poem is 'Phoolan Devi'. Phoolan Devi the famous dacoit queen also belonged to the marginal classes of our society. A Dalit lady is thrice exploited in the name of her gender, class and social order. The poem turns into a warning to the oppressors of women:

Oh! Phoolan , you have come from| The lowest caste|From a marginalised village.|Oppressors of women, be aware of it---|She resists at some points; |Every woman is a Phoolan in spirit.

'Long Live Revolution' is again translated by the editor of this anthology. Prithvi Nandy writes; 'For those who cannot protest, acquiesce. And in such/ acquiescence lies their ritual death.' Biswas portrays the picture of the dalit revolutionaries as people in 'ragged and tattered clothes/ Barefooted or wearing slippers/ A flag on left shoulder and from right side/ Clenched palm of the hand addressed to the sky.' Following lines blow vitality and enthusiasm in the hearts of the revolutionaries/ fighters: "You can be pierced to death by the kissing of a bullet. | My comrades, will you do this?" Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar's influence on Dalit literature is immense. Sharan Kumar Limbale rightly remarks that: "The entire Dalit society felt the impact of Babasaheb's work. How could Dalit writers be exceptions to this influence? ...The writings that took place during this phase propagated the message of revolution." Dalit writers like Biswas expressed their 'aversion for and anger against the established unequal social system in their writing.' G. N. Devy in the introduction of Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi) expresses his views about the sense of protest in Dalit literature in following words: "A blend of pathos and protest has by now become the defining feature of Dalit literature. Dalit Poetry combines the rebellion against social injustice with dreams of a life of dignity for the oppressed." Remember you all, never utter these three words| Brahminism, Dalit and Ambedkar |

Do inscribe these words in mind | These are not acceptable by
the high caste.

He calls it the 'communalism of the untouchable classes'. In 'I Am A Communist', he calls himself a communist, 'by birth', 'a dalit' and 'a proletariat' by his humble origin. Jai Prakash Kardam, an eminent Hindi dalit writer finds dalit literature as a 'volcano of protest'. As per Dr. Arvind M. Nawale: 'Through socioeconomic, political and cultural institutions, they (high caste people) controlled power and used it to exploit, humiliate and dehumanise them (dalits)... This inequality made dalit's life uncompromisingly miserable.' These dalits are now ready to 'knock at the door of equality',

I am against Police if they exercise power; | Exploitation, and the wheel
of terrorism. | With angst I dream of breaking the rigid codes of
authority. (pg. 46)

This craving for humanity and human treatment becomes the spirit of Biswas' poems. The protest is not just to 'uproot the agony and throw it into the water' but 'it shall float/ in the / Immense sea and let there grow little plants of humanity.' Joyjit Ghosh translated poem, 'In The Temple of God', anger and restlessness of a believer gets voice in following lines: "Yet one day I revolted | against the eternal law | and raved : God is fake. | I deluded myself in defying Him | and made fun." 'As I saw' is another protest poem translated by Bhaswati Ghosh. Here the picture of workers at strike has been portrayed with extreme simplicity:

After hanging a flag on the factory's closed gates, | The workers squat
out side with single-minded | dedication, waiting to get paid.

'Remembering You' is a poem translated by Sangitha Sanyal. Here the pen becomes 'dynamite'. These victims of inhuman society do not believe in God and Temples since 'these temples give birth to ignorance. Biswas writes that 'In this country the bell tolls to wake the god, but not the man / The hymns are chanted to wake the god, but not the man.' He declares that 'We do not fight a battle to build a temple, we fight for the human. (pg. 32) Rasa is the very soul of poetry. Bharatmuni's formulation of 'rasa-nispattih' as 'Vibhavanubhava vyabhichari Sanyoadrasnispattih'; has been further explained by four major acharyas: Bhatlollota, Shankuka, Bhattnayaka and Abhinavgupta respectively. A list of nine rasas has been given by all these Acharyas. But as far as dalit literature is concerned, Limbale asks a witty question, 'how will the taste of the pain, anger, rejection, rebellion, problems, struggles, injustices and ill treatment contained in Dalit literature be known through slow sipping and relishing.' (Limbale, TADL pg. 115-116). Therefore Yadunath Tatte and Acharya Jawdekar suggested 'revolt' as tenth and 'cry' as the eleventh rasa. Biswas 'The Wheel Will Turn' is the specimen of these two rasas on the whole, although it also exhibits other rasas like 'veera', 'shanta', and 'karuna' etc. The tenth rasa named as revolt is clearly evident in following lines:

With invincible courage if we are to break any barricade | Breaking this
wall, will go forward. (pg 45)

The predominant rasa, in Biswas' poems is 'cry'. But this cry is the source of strength and hope for these dalits. 'Cry' is often followed by a sense of

repentance:

My mother, an illiterate Shudra mother | Would cry in solitude and tell
| “We did not do good being born in this country | Khoka, the country
would be saved if I were infertile.”

In 'Give Water', he writes that 'sobs icy-cold choke me quite'. 'Spectral shadows of kites/ Only make' him cry. These oppressed classes of society are in search of light: Innocents know not how humans cry | For a shaft of light. Mythical figures also appear at times in Biswas' poetry. Kalyan Das writes; “Biswas' poetry remains in line with the larger dalit literary discourse when he deconstructs mythical tales of Ghatotkach, Valmiki'. 'Inconsumable Smell' presents the picture of crying Ravana:

The human soul of Ravana wails | In the Earth's insolent vanity | From
the casteist schedules of his birth | Ravana, the Rakshasa, gathers scorn
– (Pg 27)

In 'A Different Diary' he makes a reference to 'Brihaspati', 'Bhargava' and 'Shukracharya'. Madhumita Majumdar translated ' Black Soil' and 'Stench' again refer to mythical characters. Shambuka is a figure in Valmiki Ramayana. 'Shambuka meditated , and was therefore killed.' (Limbale pg.21). 'Some critics interpret this event, as injustice met on Shambuka, and are of the opinion that Rama had slayed Shambuka because of his birth as a Shudra. Dravidian movements hold the position that Lord Rama murdered shambuka to reinstate the apartheid varna system, which is an important feature of Hindu Dharma. E.V.Ramasami used this episode to argue that Rama as depicted in the Ramayana was clearly not the benevolent king devotees claimed him to be.[6] Ambedkar, in contrast, said that to condemn Rama based on this incident was to miss the point. The true point of the story of Shambuka was that it demonstrated the unsustainability of the varna system, and the extent to which its existence depended on the harsh punishment of those who sought to transgress it.'([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shambuka#Story) Shambuka became the inspiration of many dalit poets including Limbale: That very dark soil is in me, it too is in you| It had been in Shambuk, it had been in Balmiki too. 'Ulupi', 'Hidimba', and 'Surpanakha' have been shown as 'victims of patriarchal treachery of the heroes' of the famous Sanskrit epic Ramayana. 'Jhilimili Field' expresses the pain of these three figures. Colors appear as symbols in *The Wheel Will Turn*. The two frequently occurring colours are Red and black. Words like 'rubicund hue', 'red rose', 'red flag', 'black soil', 'dark soil', and 'rosy sun', contain a deep symbolic significance into them. Green colour has also been used as a symbol in this anthology. The discourse of dalit literature is formed by the agony, anguish, humiliation, frustration, anger, and revolt. Unequal caste system in India hurts its victims. These so called untouchables, revolt against such order. As per Darshana Trivedi:

“Dalit literature is a journey from main stream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative , from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiritual literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation. This is the celebration of difference.” (Dialogue, pg. 91)

A display of self-search in order to acquire self-respect is clearly visible in

Biswas' poetry. The opening poem entitled 'Reverence' reflects the same feelings when he writes 'If I am called an untouchable (Shudra) / The fractured veena within/ spreads fire instead of tears/ ... Reverence just continues clapping its hands and declares" this as " an insult to mankind". Limbale very rightly remarks that, "Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery...". They are conscious of their Kashyap race, they believe that their 'body emanates the smell of untouchability': In the body of the unwanted outcaste humans | Grayed and ashen with dust | There exists still | The inconsumable smell of caste. *The Wheel Will Turn* dextrously portrays the 'sufferings', social alienation and rejection; yearning and aspiration; protest, rage and revolt' of dalits. (Tutun Mukherjee). Biswas appears at the scene as a towering figure of dalit consciousness. Harish Manglam, an eminent Gujrati dalit writer is of the view that, " Manohar Mouli Biswas is one of the pioneers of Dalit voice. His poems are simple but authentic voice of Dalits." Even after centuries the situation is the same since nothing has changed for a low-born person. In Sutapa Chaudhuri translated poem 'Human Creation' Biswas writes:

The last sun of the twentieth century | Still wan and jaded | It's lustre dims in the shadow of the clouds. | A sooty blackness lies smeared on all white purity | The love of the ocean gets expanded— | Humans and their low-born mean hearts | Still hide their faces in the dissolute emptiness of their own creation. (pg. 26)

In his poem 'Perception' he calls himself a *sonar chaand*. Sangitha Sanyal defines sonar chaand in these lines; 'It is a sarcastic phrase used by the Bengali elites to address the Scheduled Castes- the historically deprived castes of India. It is made up of the first two initial letters of the two words in the phrase "Scheduled Castes." The phrase is used to refer to the various privileges the Scheduled Castes enjoy from the government. These privileges are given so as to help them get out of their age old situation of underdevelopment.'

Then it's to feel as if it happens | Because I was born a *sonar chaand* | Through it's not true all the time | Yet happens with obvious evidence | And then it becomes clear to me | That some human bites me like a bitch. (pg. 31)

Shudras represent the lowest caste in the Indian social hierarchy. The touch of these people or 'even the mere shadow of them was regarded as pollution by the upper caste people. Being treated as outcastes or marginals the untouchables were not only denied the basic rights of living which the communities of upper - castes enjoyed but were also made to lead dehumanized and degraded life.' (Joseph. Pg. 90). This exploitation of shudras continued to exist for centuries. 'The socio-cultural specificities of the caste system in Bagla never miss Biswas's creative mind. For him, class, caste, gender, religion, ethnicity-all remain important factors of a marginalized 'dalit' predicament.' (Kalyan Das pg.11). Saints poets and Bhakti movement stepped forward in order to reform the Indian society but all their efforts ended in fiasco. Abolition of such inequality requires the strong protest of these untouchables. Limbale in his autobiography *The Outcaste* puts following lines in the

mouth of a character named Rambaap:

We are low castes. What you have seen is a long tradition that has come down to us from our forefathers. What can we do about it? How can we go against the village customs? But some day we ought to rebel. How long can we mutely suffer all this? How many times are we going to be born and live thus against our wish? Sometimes we ought to reject all this. (pg. 76)

The Wheel Will Turn proves to be a substantial document of a significant voice of dalit's protest; anger and revolt. As per S John Peter Joseph: "Though several social and religious reformers have strongly protested against the cruelty perpetrated on the oppressed communities they could never succeed in bringing about a social change in the caste-based Indian society." But in Biswas' poetry there is a note of hope when he suggests to 'give water to the backward race', when he wishes to 'stand as an equal', when he dreams to 'build self-esteem', and when he wants to fly with his 'wings spread in the light breeze'. B. R. Ambedkar in *Bahishkrit Bharat* says that: 'If Lenin had been born in Hindustan, he would have first destroyed caste discrimination and untouchability completely; and he would not even have imagined a revolution without this.' The same views are expressed by Biswas when he writes 'without the establishment of a casteless and aracial society/ Swaraj will have no meaning'. The *Wheel Will Turn* reflects the awareness of dalits and their courage to fight back in a brawny tone of protest.

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