

Contextualizing Bengali Dalit Identity: Reflection on Jatin Bala's "On Firm Ground"

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Although Dalit identity has been a topic of much deliberation over time and place, such an issue in the context of Bengal is rarely spoken up. It is partly due to the prevalent myth that caste is not an influential aspect of the socio-political landscape of Bengal. Such a myth was purposefully nourished and propagated so as to mark the Dalit intellectual tradition and history of Bengal as absent, thereby sidelining the caste discourse. Due to the monopoly of class-centric and Brahmanical scholarship, the incredible archive of Dalit literature from colonial Bengal failed to draw its due recognition. Even in the post-partition period, there remained the near total absence of translations of Bengali Dalit literature, as a result of which the voice of the Bengali Dalits never reached the outside world. However, there have been a few small-scale initiatives in recent years to translate Bengali Dalit writings, which are important for disseminating the conditions and experiences of Bengali Dalits to a wider audience. In fact, the substantial body of Dalit writings in Bengal not only signifies the strong presence of Dalit aesthetics and identity politics in Bengal but also vindicates the fact that the Dalit literary tradition of Bengal has become the victim of the politics of recognition. While referring to Jatin Bala's story "On Firm Ground", the present article attempts to situate Bengali Dalit identity against the backdrop of dominance and resistance.

Key Words: Dalit identity, Bengali Dalit, Dalit literature, Identity politics, Jatin Bala

Introduction:

Identity has been studied extensively from a variety of perspectives, including sociological, anthropological, political, cultural, and literary. Because of its breadth and depth, the identity discourse is complex and multifaceted. The term "identity" itself remains something of an enigma precisely because it entails diverse configurations, thereby paving the way for the germination of numerous identity theories and concepts. In a broad sense, identity implies a label attributed to any attempt to recognize, distinguish, and identify the self against diverse socio-personal and cultural dimensions. As a result of which, identities can be differentiated as well as claimed on the basis of varying socio-cultural categories, including gender, age, race, occupation, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory. Such variations in identity construction aptly suggest that identity is formed, maintained, and transformed by social interactions and cultural processes. It is precisely the confluence of processes at different levels that determines the dynamics of identity.

Unlike the essentialist notion of identity, wherein identity is viewed as fixed and stable, contemporary cultural theory maintains that it is always in the process of "becoming." In this regard, Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" stands significant as Hall deconstructs the essentialist concept of a stable identity by saying that cultural identity is prone to a continuous process of change under the determinants of history, culture, and power (225). Hall conceptualizes the postmodern subject as having

"no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. ... The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy" (277).

Hall views identity as a "production" that is never complete. The cultural politics of the pluralist world make identity a fluid one in which contestation and negotiation continue to be an endless process, and in this context, Hall considers cultural identity not as "an essence but a positioning" (226). Even Hegel, in his "master-slave dialectics,"

vindicates the framing of identity through individual positions of dependency. Hegel demonstrates the dependent and antagonistic relationship through this dichotomy, where the master's position ends up providing the slave with identity. Unlike colonial identity, based upon hegemony and the politics of power, postcolonial identity, according to Homi K. Bhabha, becomes an "in-between reality" (The Location 13-28). He sees identity as a liminal reality in which people are constantly shifting positions, displacing others and being displaced in turn. His contention is that identity is never a fixed construct, but rather hybrid in nature. Such a concept epitomizes the postcolonial reality wherein identity formation gets influenced by globalization, migration, and transnational movement, leading to dislocation and relocation. The hegemonic representation of identity in the colonial era is challenged by the postcolonial thinking, which celebrates multiplicity in the realm of identity formation. While highlighting and celebrating marginalized and minority identities, including subaltern groups, females, Dalits, and identities of sexual minorities, the postcolonial mind remains open to larger space and freedom that contest colonial subjugation, a hegemonic outlook, and the essentialist concept of margin-centre relations.

The issue of identity becomes the linchpin of Dalit discourse. Such a discourse is fundamentally based on power dynamics and caste politics, against which Dalit identity is conceptualized. Due to the oppressive caste system, which is based on the notions of purity and pollution, hierarchy and difference, the Shudras and the outcastes suffer the stigma of ritual impurity and are forced to live a life bereft of political power, cultural recognition, and financial stability. In fact, the problematization of the Dalit identity cannot be thought of without considering the ancient caste system (jati pratha) of India. In this connection, Partha Chatterjee in "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" highlights the fact that the voices of the outcastes like chandalas, doms, hadis, namasudras, widows, fakirs etc. have been left out as 'unheard' and that caste constitutes a moot point in subaltern consciousness (169-209). Caste-based stratification appears almost as an innate feature of the Hindu consciousness, and it is aptly highlighted by S. V. Ketkar in his *History of Caste in India* (2015), according to whom, "These social differences of caste have become so firm in the mind of the

Hindu that he regards it as a very natural institution" (26). As a result of which, the Dalits are forced to be the pathetic victims to the oppressive caste hegemony. They have been ruthlessly exploited and inhumanly subjugated by the upper castes for centuries. They are pushed to the periphery of eternal servitude wherein they remain bereft of human dignity and voice. Needless to say that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was deeply concerned about the emancipation of the Dalits from the bondage of slavery and it was aptly vindicated by his Mahar speech in which he unfolded the worst conditions of the Dalits in Hindu society. He raised strong voice against the disastrous framework of four-caste system and galvanized the movement for Dalit emancipation. Although several movements took place with the aim to liberate the Dalits from societal oppression and cultural hegemony, casteism remains a continuous affair in Indian society precisely because it becomes a part of the collective consciousness.

There is no denying the fact that marginalization is also the site of resistance. In this regard, bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1999) rightly maintains that the marginal space is the space of liberation (152). As the politics of power impresses upon domination, the oppressive institution produces counter conducts so as to reverse the situation. The domination of the elite, power structure and politics remain the background against which the margin develops gradual resistance. Dalit consciousness, which is at the heart of Dalit literature, is shaped by the experience of dominance as well as resistance. Further, Dalit literature serves as a repository for Dalit experience. It is essentially the narrative of Dalit agony, assertion, resistance, anger, protest, and mobilization. Dalit literature encompasses diverse literary forms, including poetry, autobiography, and prose. Unlike the other regional Dalit literatures, Dalit writings from Bengal have received only late recognition, although Bengali Dalit aesthetics and politics have a long tradition. The various religious sects of colonial Bengal played an active role in shaping such a tradition. In this regard, the Matua sahitya movement stands significant, as it was an early precursor of the grassroots Dalit scholarship in Bengal, which emerged in the 19th century under the leadership of Harichand Thakur, a Namasudra from East Bengal. Most of the Matua literary creativity

expressed itself through story-telling, folk plays, and rhymed couplets. The devotional songs and kirtans performed collectively by the followers of the sect reflected the ego of the depressed community and also the hope for their social empowerment. All of these sects expose the oppressed groups' mentalities to open confrontation with the power constellation. However, a sincere endeavour to promote Dalit causes and Dalit literature in Bengal in an organised way started with the establishment of the Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha immediately after the sad demise of a Dalit adivasi girl named Chuni Kotal, who committed suicide in the year 1992 due to casteist harassment. With the primary objective of working for the prosperity of Dalit literature and culture, Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha started publishing a quarterly entitled *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World). Several established Bengali Dalit writers, like Manohar Mouli Biswas, Jatin Bala, Nakul Mallick, Amar Biswas, Kalyani Tagore Charal, Manju Bala, Dhurjati Naskar, and Smritikana Hawladar remained associated with the Bengali Dalit Sahitya Sanstha and wrote with a determined mind to protest against the caste-based exploitation.

Marginal Life of Jatin Bala:

Jatin Bala (born 1949) is a prominent Dalit writer from West Bengal who was born in the Jessore district of modern-day Bangladesh. Born as a Namasudra, Bala's life is an illustration of inexplicable pain, humiliation, and poverty. He even did not have a blissful childhood, as God had snatched away his parents at a very tender age. His struggle for survival started at an age when children generally remain under parental care. Instead of going to school and playing with his companions, he needed to work as a daily labourer in a paddy field and was even beaten by the owner. The traumatic experience of excruciating pain and humiliation shaped the course of Bala's life, who was ruthlessly victimized by his low caste as well as his class. Further, the politics of partition and the ritual of torture had a disastrous impact on his body and mind as forced displacement made him a homeless refugee in an alien land. His life explicates the unending saga of pain and suffering that shapes the trajectory of a Bengali Dalit refugee in post-partition West Bengal. Unlike the upper-caste gentleman (*bhadralok*) refugee, Bengali Dalit refugee was forced to lead a miserable life at

various refugee camps like captive birds in cages. Here it is pertinent to mention that caste remained an influential factor in the resettlement of the Bengali refugees, as a result of which the Namasudra refugees became the real victims, who were forcibly transported to far-flung and marginal lands for resettlement, such as the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya. Due to the lack of socio-cultural capital, they found no other alternative except to bear the wretched condition of life in which they found neither voice nor dignity. In this regard, Bala's own statements, given at an interview, need to be highlighted so as to understand the wretched conditions of Bengali Dalit life: "We, the uprooted Dalits, were the worst victims of Partition. The violence of Partition has left an indelible impression on me" (Bala Interview). These piercing memories, encompassing the entire trajectory of the partition and its deadly aftermath, still nest in Bala's mind. His autobiographical narrative, *Shikor Chhera Jibon (My Uprooted Life)* brings to the fore such traumatic episodes of his life with a renewed sense of pain and agony.

"On Firm Ground": Analysis and Findings

Bala's story "On Firm Ground" is a firm exposure of the power politics of the upper caste people who maintain and sustain their supremacy through casteist hegemony. Since the low-born Namasudra is constantly repressed and subjugated by casteist politics, he is also expected to tolerate such subjugation in order to respect Brahmins' supremacy. The story is all about the tragic tale of suffering and humiliation of a Namashudra named Haladhar Halder, who usually starts his day with a bath in the Bhairavi river. The so-called upper-class Hindus frequently refers to Haladhar as Hala to convey a sense of disregard and neglect. Being a Dalit, Haladhar is forced to lead a life of socio-cultural exclusions, and such exclusions are deeply embedded in social practices. As the Brahmanical social order is based on the established cultural inequalities, Haladhar, due to his low-birth, becomes the so-called "other". He is expected to bear the tragic burden of untouchability, which requires him to act and behave only in accordance with culturally established norms. Needless to mention, these norms are the cultural as well as political constructs to glorify the power, privilege, and interests of the Brahmins. Such norms are

mostly internalized by the Namasudra community, which knows that to challenge them is to invite disaster into one's life. But Haladhar's act of mimicking the rituals of offering prayer (tarpan) to the ancestors, which are generally performed only by a Brahmin, infuriated the Brahmins of the village so much so that it became a traumatic episode in Haladhar's life. As per the narrative, on one October morning, when other Brahmins of the village were offering ritual libation to their deceased forefathers in the nearby Bhairavi river, Gokul Chakraborty was shocked to see the audacity of an untouchable who openly confronted the Brahminical order. Although Haladhar did the act with no intention to hurt the sentiments of the Brahmins, soon all the affluent upper-caste Brahmins of the village got united and threatened Haladhar: "Untouchable Shudra, base-born piece of muck, dare you talk back to us Brahmins! Do you know the consequence of such defiance?" (73) Even other upper-caste Hindus like Haren Mukherjee, Haru Roy, Samir Roy, and Harish Dash Sharma strongly voiced their opposition to Haladhar and resolved to protect the long-cherished traditions of the caste-ridden society. They too threatened Haladhar by saying, "Listen, Hala...It will take us only a moment to remove the ground beneath your feet" (Bala 73). Even their admonitions failed to restrain the indomitable spirit of Haladhar, who inexhaustibly voiced his demand for social equality and justice: "But do you have the right to act as you wish, masters? Nature allows us equal opportunity; you cannot deny me what nature has given me, can you?" (74)

A little later in the story we find, Bhabanicharan Roy, the headman of the nearby Anandapur village, who chose the skilled mason Haladhar for the renovation of a decaying house constructed by Bhabani's father. Accordingly, Haladhar started his job with sincerity, but his dedication did not lead to any credit; instead, it earned him the stigma of a thief. When the jewelry of Bhabani's temple deity went missing, the Brahmins immediately gathered and seized the chance to exact revenge on Haladhar. They persuaded Bhanicharan that Haladhar was the true criminal who deserved harsh punishment. Although Haladhar vehemently denied his role in the wrongdoing, but the Brahmins' plot cruelly turned him into their victim. Assuming the Brahmin's statements to be true, even Bhabanicharan commanded a heavy pun-

ishment: "Tie this rogue to a tree. Give him a hundred lashes. If he doesn't return the jewelry even after this, shave his head, tar and feather him, march him through the streets and banish him from the village" (Bala 75). Haladhar, out of extreme agony, realized how the Brahmins used him as a scapegoat in their vengeful plot. Needless to say, such a malicious plot was deliberately made to threaten the identity of the Dalits, thereby sustaining the supremacy of the Brahmins. The heartbreaking image of the heinous atrocity committed against the lower-caste gets further touching narration when the helpless Haladhar was driven to a nearby mango grove and was brutally beaten. The brutality of the local Brahmins remained too intense to spare Haladhar's wife and his modest cottage in the village: "The weak walls of the small house were kicked in, the roof-tiles smashed and a bonfire made of their meagre possessions. Sarala and her children were driven out like stray dogs and cats" (Bala 76). Further, the lustful approach of the despotic Brahmin towards Haladhar's wife also exposes the devilish intentions of the so-called upper-caste people who found no hesitation in committing such a barbaric act. Such ritual of torture becomes the systematic strategy on the part of the upper-class people to suppress the Dalits.

Conclusion:

The story "On Firm Ground" is not simply a narrative of pain and agony of the subjugated Dalits and their crisis of identity, it equally proclaims that marginal space ignites counter hegemonic practices. After being severely assaulted, when Haladhar returned home in the early morning with his aching and wounded body, he found his wife and children missing and his home completely wrecked. Although he was devastated, he emerged like a phoenix bird with the zeal to protest the hegemonic culture and the politics of exclusion. The tormented experience of prolonged subjugation and ostracization made him realize the need to subvert the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by the Brahminical scholarship. Instead of meek and docile, Haladhar became confident and assertive as if he "felt the firm earth beneath his feet" (76). As a result of which, he started looking with equal scorn at the upper-caste Hindus' shadowy homes: "What ignominy, to live among men who can stoop so low as to hate me only

because I'm low-born (Bala 76)!" Haladhar self-introspection reveals his tormented psyche as well as his passionate zest for freedom from imposed cultural stigma and societal exclusion. While situating the gruesome reality of Dalit life and their persistent struggle for identity formation, the story maintains a powerful stand against the sustained Brahminical domination together with cultural hegemony and the politics of difference. It pertinently hinges upon the Dalit consciousness which is essentially shaped by the unyielding human spirit that refuses to submit to the oppressive and hegemonic forces.

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