

Namasudra Literature and the Politics of Caste in West Bengal

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There have been many changes in the last decade in the politics of West Bengal. One of the crucial changes has been the decline of the left parties and the rise of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in power in 2011 state assembly elections. There has been another change with regard to caste, which attracted many scholars' attention. Compared to other states, West Bengal politics was described as 'unique' both by academicians and political leaders; and this uniqueness lies in the absence of a visible electoral mobilization along caste lines. However, in present times, electoral mobilization in Bengal is quite frequently seeing caste as a 'visible' idiom in politics. Scholars like Praskanva Sinharay reads this assertion as a 'new' idiom of politics shaped with the TMC leader and the present Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's active participation in the 'Matua Mahasangha' (the foremost Matua religious organization) (Sinharay 26). Moreover, this caste-based political activism seems to be multiplied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) becoming the main opposition to the TMC. It is the BJP, in the present period, which successfully bifurcated the Matua vote by its decisive stand on the refugee question and its appropriative politics on the issue of caste (Bagchi), (X).¹ Whereas, scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Uday Chandra and Kenneth Bo Nielsen etc., argued that there has been a continuous relevance of caste as an idiom of political and social organization at the 'local' level in Bengal. It is worth noting that most of the scholars consider the reason behind the dearth of successful caste-based mobilizations to be rooted in the history of partition of Bengal. The 'unique' nature of politics in West Bengal lies in the fact that politics (as 'party structure') is dominant vis-à-vis the question of the social (structure) (Chatterjee, *Historicising Caste in Bengal politics*). As Ranabir Samaddar argues, the focus of the governmental practices on developmental and anti-poverty programs, cemented the party structures at the local level which were nonetheless dominated by upper caste leaders (Samaddar 79). Thus, continuous functioning of caste discrimination could never get translated into political mobilization at the formal domain of politics in Bengal. Therefore, these second set of scholars are skeptical about the 'new' nature of electoral politics as claimed by scholars like Sinharay. Even if TMC as the ruling party did polarize the Matua support in West Bengal in the 2011 state assembly election, as Partha Chatterjee argued, it had not "... as yet— meant a reassertion of the autonomy of local social institutions. Rather, the Trinamool Congress, in the districts of Southern Bengal where it is now dominant, appears to be keen to adopt the Left Front model of the dominance of the political over the social and exclude the Communist Party of India— CPI(M) from local power" (Chatterjee, *Historicising Caste in Bengal politics* 69).

Within these seemingly oppositional positions on whether there has been a successful assertion of low caste in politics of West Bengal or not, this paper argues that while caste oppression has been a continuous phenomenon in Bengal (Sarbani Bandyopadhyay 71), assertions against it are also not new. While party politics seemed impenetrable to assert social identity, it is through literature, the low castes of West Bengal expressed their resistance. Thus, Bengali Dalit literature has become the medium to create a vision for social equality for the socially and politically marginalized caste population. This paper identifies several social visions of some of the low caste *Namasudra* activists and Matua devotees in West Bengal. It seeks to read the images of 'utopia' portrayed in the literatures produced by the low caste population in the period of last three decades. The visions of the utopia are not only critical of upper-caste Hindu dominated Bengali social and cultural worlds shaped by modernity, but they also attack Vedic scriptures as the source of all oppression. As Gail Omvedt observes, anti-caste intellectuals in India were always guided by a sense of 'utopia'. She sees utopias as "projected visions, sometimes imagined in the past, sometimes located in a different world, and sometimes inscribed in the future possibility" (Omvedt *Seeking Begumpura*, 15). One can no longer deny

that caste oppression has never found a voice in the dominant language of politics in West Bengal, especially after partition. But the failure to recognize the low-caste literature, which started getting written and distributed in a major way since 1990s, is nothing but reflective of ‘upper-caste culture’ dominance in education and in academia. As observed by many scholars, in pre-Mandal period caste was majorly overlooked by Indian academia. Vivek Dhareshwar argues that “before Mandal ‘caste had no place in the narrative milieu of the secular self’ of modern Indian intellectuals” (Deshpande 5).

It is only after the 1990s, caste becomes an available (and seldom primary) category for social analysis. One cannot ignore the similar trend in theorization on Bengali culture and society. Both in politics and also in academic literatures on West Bengal while the concept of class found an expression, the conceptual category of caste and caste experience was not recognized. Scholars have identified several reasons behind it— the nature of Renaissance that emerged in Bengal in colonial period and led by English-educated upper caste, middle class intelligentsia in Calcutta. What is crucial to mark here is the nature of this Renaissance—while it created a vehement critique against the traditional religious rituals performed by the conservative Hindus, it also strengthened Hindu identity by late nineteenth century in Bengal. It is because this ‘renaissance’ movement (as for instance, in the thinking of Rammohan Roy or Ishwarchandra Bandyopadhyay) did not abandon the earlier form of Hindu religion and its social structures, rather it was more keen on reforming it (Omvedt *Seeking Begumpura*, 148-150) This inability to abandon religion and reformation of religion was carried forward even in late colonial nationalist thinking in India (for instance in Gandhi, Nehru, etc.) (Omvedt *Understanding Caste*). Secondly, the partition of Bengal led to the silencing of caste idiom through the appropriation of other identities— nation, religion, etc. These idioms became more prevalent in West Bengal politics immediately after independence (Sarvani Bandyopadhyay). Lastly, the dominance of party structure hardly gave any scope for social idioms like caste or gender to emerge as a significant force to influence party structure and play role in political mobilization (Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal*).

In this context of social practices of caste-based discriminations and political silencing of it, Bengali Dalit writings bear the signature in creating a new social vision, a new language based on their lived experience through literature. These visions often take the form of a utopia— a mythical time against the present oppressive caste structure. It is worth noting that not only these Dalit authors are marginal due to their low-caste status, but their literature also remains marginal within the context of upper caste cultural domination in Bengal. This paper will unfold the utopic ‘social vision’ portrayed by authors like Manindranath Biswas. It is based on this production of anti-caste literatures (like Biswas’s), that the *Namasudras* in recent past have been successful in creating an ‘ideological community’² conscious of caste oppression.

Contested Names: Making of the *Namasudra* caste-community

There is no certainty on the etymological root of the term *Namasudra*, and literatures produced in the early colonial period are mostly silent about the name’s existence. However, several colonial ethnographers in their writings had explored the meaning of the name. One among them was Herbert Risley, who described that the name *Namasudra* may have come from either of these two words—*namas*, a Sanskrit word, means admiration or adoration, and the other one is *namate*— a Bengali word, meaning below or underneath. Both the terms denote a certain negative attribution to the name; as in the first case it means the group of people who show admiration to the *sudras* and the second one would mean a lower grade among the *sudras* (Risley 183 n3). However, it is worth noting that even in Risley’s account on the *Chandal* we find contested meanings and positions *Chandals* attributed to them in late nineteenth century. For example, *Chandals* of Bengal preferred calling themselves *Namasudras* and described the *Dom*

as the *Chandal* with lower ritual status. Moreover, *Chandals* of Dacca called themselves descendants of Brahman *jati* and by inter-dining with the Sudras they lost their earlier glorious position. (Risley 184) However, it is with the colonial ethnographic homogenization of several *jatis* like— *Namasudra*, *Nama*, *Chandal* into one group that the caste category *Namasudra* comes into existence. In Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's famous work on *Namasudra* caste and their culture of protests, we find that before early nineteenth century (especially before the first census), the name *Namasudra* did not exist in public imagery as they were usually known as *Chandal* (Bandyopadhyay 11-15). Since its inception, this group of population started forming a sense of collective. Despite the fact that *Namasudras* were divided into several occupational groups (though majority among them were agriculture based), as argued by Bandyopadhyay, the formation of collective consciousness among them did not face any obstruction. Moreover, socially shared representation of history and commonality of experience was very important in creating and sustaining the socio-cultural identity of *Namasudras* (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay 30). Mostly inhabiting six western districts of undivided Bengal— Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, this *antyaja* or low-born people constituted the largest agricultural community in undivided Bengal in the late nineteenth century. It is only after their transformation from a fishing community into peasantry, as pointed out by Bandyopadhyay, they became conscious of their caste status. This led to the formation of an 'ideological community' among them (Bandyopadhyay 7). Circumventing economic differences, their caste-consciousness constructed an *ideology* of protest among both economically well off and landless labourers of the *Namasudra* population, against upper-caste dominance. A strong sense of solidarity and cohesiveness was provided to this community from the newly formed *Vaishnavite* religious sect called *Matua* in the late 19th century. Devotion, love and self-respect became the primary principles of this sect to fight against Brahmanical hierarchy. This ideology of protests against caste hierarchy which began in 1872, remained visible even till mid-twentieth century— thereby creating a "hyper-visibility" of caste-based mobilizations and movements against social, economic and political oppression in colonial undivided Bengal (Sarbani Bandyopadhyay 71).

In 1926, the formation of the All Bengal Depressed Classes Association (ABDCA) and its support for separate electorate identifies the entry of lower castes into the domain of formal politics opposing higher-caste political associations (especially, like Hindu Mahasabha (HM) or Indian National Congress) (Sekhar Bandyopadhyay 165-166). In such context, figures like Jogendranath Mandal and his party Bengal Provincial Scheduled Caste Federation (BPSCF) posed considerable threat to the hegemony of *bhadraloks* of Bengal.

In this complex set of relations, we need to place nationalist parties like Indian National Congress's implicit support for second partition, as opposed to the struggle led by the political parties of the lower castes (Sarbani Bandyopadhyay 72-73). The importance of second partition lies in the fact that it is only after this historical event, caste based political mobilization (at the formal domain) starts disappearing from the scenario. This implies that the colonial government's decision for partition did not only change the language of politics, i.e. from caste to religion and nationalism, it made the idiom of caste almost disappears. On the other hand, the modest success of the *Namasudras* since independence and their sanskritized forms of cultural practices and their claim for higher ritual status makes one sceptic about the future of *Namasudra* politics and their leading role in raising caste question in Bengal politics. As Bandyopadhyay argues that the shift from fishermen to agricultural landless labourers and to settled peasantries made this group of population not only economically successful but they also started replicating caste ideology. Similarly, Omvedt observes in *Seeking Begumpura* that "in the late *Matua* legend, Harichand was described as a Brahman who had lost his caste by marrying a *Namasudra* woman" (156). Such failure of *Namasudra* resistance and *Matua* utopia, thus resulted in the subordination of Dalit question in Bengal, unlike that of Maharashtra, as Omvedt argues. Nonetheless, the continuing presence of caste-based discriminations kept caste

experiences alive, at least socially. Most of the Dalit authors of post-colonial West Bengal narrate life experiences of humiliation shaped within the socio-cultural spaces nurtured by Hinduism. Mostly, first-generation learner Dalit authors and activists of the late 20th century write their experiences of caste discrimination and spatial segregations.³ From childhood, caste determines friendship, and then it determines the eligibility of being educated. Later in life, even if they manage to get a job in governmental institutions, they are often subjected to everyday caste humiliations. Indeed, at the local level caste as a social organizing principle not only helped to create division of labourers, but it also retained the framework of purity and pollution at the socio-cultural practices as argued by Dayabati Roy. Thus, Chandra and Nielsen argue that it is *bhadralok* blindness, if one considers that caste had disappeared and reappeared in Bengal in recent past (Chandra and Nielsen). Rather, this conscious avoidance of caste both at the political and intellectual domains— either by identifying it as a “legacy of the feudal system” or by calling it a “relevant category in the politics of West Bengal” only when it makes its presence felt at the state-level electoral campaign— are symptoms of considering caste as an affair of *public secrecy* that enveloped the political forces of caste based contestations. It will be helpful here to lay down a tentative definition of the term public secrecy. Broadly, it signifies the contradictory presence of caste as a ritualistic order and popular social practice while remaining absent from the formal domain of politics; therefore, these secrets have the rhetorical force to constitute public or to carry out certain identity at the domain of everyday interactions. Thus, the implications of Sinharay’s argument not only ignore the functioning of caste as an organizing principle of society at the local level, it also ignores the contestations carried out by the low caste population in West Bengal after independence. Ranabir Samaddar analyzes that in post-colonial West Bengal *Namasudras* have always tended to form *bahujan samaj* (a society constituted by low caste and untouchable population) by building alliances with other low-caste groups or even being involved with several radical transformative political groups. Their involvement with several movements like *Naxalbari andolon* or even the *Lalgarh* movement marks the potentiality which low-caste groups embrace. Therefore, such forms of politics, as was carried out by Dalit-bahujans, were not directed towards the election-centric party politics, rather it involved the question of subjectivity and emancipation from it, as argued by Samaddar (79).

It is within this space of *bahujan samaj*, one can locate the *Namasudra* group-led activities, initially started around 1985 with authors like Mahitosh Biswas, Manohar Mouli Biswas, etc. In 1987, *Bangiya Dalit Lekhak Parishad* (Bengal Dalit Writers’ Association) was formed by Nakul Mullik, who had also been publishing a journal called *Gram Bangla* since 1978. (Byapari and Mukherjee 4118). In 1992, first (*Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sangstha*) Bangla Dalit literary Organisation conference was held in Nadia and by 2005 they organized their 14th annual conference. Largely drawing inspiration from Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra, and Phule-Ambedkarite thought, these conferences aimed at bringing together literary and anti-caste activism. Authors and activists like Anil Gharai, Kapil Krishna Thakur, Manoranjan Byapari, Mahitosh Biswas, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Samarendra Baidya, Sudhir Mallick, Sudhirranjan Halder, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Lilly Halder, etc. are only few of the activists who came together to form an alternative literary genre, almost unknown to the upper-caste led Bengali cultural sphere. Not only did they critique dominant Bengali authors and their biased representation of social reality, they started writing their own experiences in the form of autobiography; they wrote their own version of community history which could create self-respect and social esteem for them. (M. M. Biswas, *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha* 44). Since late twentieth century, we find that several objections were raised by *Namasudra* writers against the origin and history written by colonial ethnographers and historians. Many of them claimed that the name serves Brahmanical interests and power. Their positions though differ in content, but they all deny the negative attribution to the name ‘*Namasudra*’. For example, Sunil Kumar Ray, Naresh Chandra Das, Manimohan Bairagi, consider that the suffix ‘*sudra*’ was attributed by the

upper-caste Bengali elites with the help of colonial ethnographers, and *Namah* (*Namo*) is the actual name of the presently known *Namasudra*. In order to overcome such negative attributions, they mostly prefer to use the term ‘*Namasij*’ (*Nama+Sij* or *Samaj*; i.e. the community of *nama/nomo* people) or only *Namah* (*Namo*)-*jati*. These attempts of the *Namasudra* activists began from late twentieth century and they devoted themselves in creating self-respect for the community. (Bairagi, *Asprishya O Anograsar Jatir Mukti*) (Ray).

Dalit literature after 1990 started spreading very fast in the southern part of West Bengal. Many activists and writers, in Nadia, 24 Parganas (North and South), Hooghly, Burdwan, Howrah, Kolkata, had started writing independently on the caste issue; they started organizing literary conferences, *Chetana-mancha* (caste consciousness programs), free medical camps, building schools for the downtrodden with the help of NGOs etc. By 2007, more than 25 Dalit magazines, journals, and periodicals were published regularly and many authors contributed in them (Biswas *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha*, 49-50). Dominant Dalit literature in West Bengal, since its inception reflected a critical attitude towards left front government; it reflected the oppressive caste structure of Bengali society and aimed at creating an alternative literary and cultural tradition for the lower castes. (Biswas *Dalit Sahityer Ruprekha*, 47). One can see ‘séparation’ as the defining principle for most of the Dalit literatures in Bengal—the attempt was not to get appropriated into the dominant literary traditions of Bengal, dominated by upper caste elites. The contents of this literature, the styles of writing, and most significantly the *author*, who is writing – are different from earlier Bengali popular literature. It is in this context one can locate the emergence of the magazine *Chaturtha Duniya* (The Fourth World) by Achintya Biswas as the editor, in the year 1994. Resonating with Ambedkar’s formulation on *bahiskrit bharat*, *Chaturtha Duniya* attempted to represent the fourth world within India consisting of the oppressed, illiterate, untouchable, poor population. (M. M. Biswas, *Sataborsher Bangla Dalit Sahitya* 17).

Dalit activism, in sum, by the end of the twentieth century became prominent and was quite successful in creating caste consciousness among the *Namasudras* in a significant number. My fieldwork (2010-14) in a village in Nadia district reflects this aspect— several activists (consisting of Matuas and atheist anti-caste intellectuals and Bahujan Samaj Party workers) from several districts would come to the village Chandrapur, where majority of the populations were *Namasudras*, and almost every month they would organize programs, discuss and distribute books written by them, deliver lectures on B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule and even Matua religion, or organize free medical camps, etc. The paper argues that these literary productions and creation of alternative cultural practices and knowledge did result in producing caste consciousness among the low caste population at a large scale by the late twentieth century, which were not reflected in the domain of electoral politics always. Rather, these literatures had two-fold functions at the level of Bengali low caste population — firstly, the narratives of these newly formed literary practices led by the educated *Namasudra* activists created a strong caste-consciousness mostly among the *Namasudra* population as a whole. The language of ‘shared experience’ and similarity of life practices as were represented in these literatures helped them to consolidate into a community. Secondly, the upper-caste dominance in domains like literature and culture also helped this emerging group of low caste activists to get united and create a separate cultural space and a public sphere.

History, Myth and *Namasudra* literature:

In an attempt to revise a stigmatized political discourse, *Namasudras* have quite often constructed their own community history in recent past. It is to argue that such versions of history writing, which posit a golden age in the past, create a sense of belonging together and construct a form of identity to resist upper-caste dominance. The literatures produced by the *Namasudras* quite often took a declarative turn towards a future which is mythical. Myth, in such

contexts plays a role not only by giving a historical agency in everyday politics, but myth also breaks the history (as ‘historicism’) which tends to favor caste ideology. Thus, the creation of a mythical past in Dalit literature represents a utopia, emanating from the present situation in which one asserts/decides retroactively a past from present. This past is not a simple linear past or a mythical or ahistorical past; rather it is a revolutionary past. Here, past marks a decisive change, as can be seen in Gopal Guru’s formulation on ‘heterodox’ tradition as opposed to ‘orthodox’ tradition in Hinduism. The impacts of such attempts are discernible from the contemporary organized and visible political functions and mobilizations led by the *Namasudras*. And such attempts also have an effect in social and political languages of West Bengal. In the coming sections, I will analyze the contents of this community history and explore whether these historical, political and public discourses are ‘inventing’ a past or asserting a new universal, which subverts “the very claim of the dominant dharma that the actual social relations of caste are in perfect conformity with its universal ideality” (Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*).

Caste, Time and Utopia in *Harichand Tattwamrita* by Manindranath Biswas:

Manindranath Biswas is one of the most popular writers among the *Namasudras* in Nadia districts. He is also one of the leading members of *Hari-Guruchand Chetana Mancha*, an organization which runs campaigns for creating caste consciousness. The organization was founded in January, 2006 and presently headed by Biswas. At present it has 30 permanent members but more than 500 people actively participate in several classes, seminars held by the organization. It has its members spread in several districts and classes are held in several places almost every month. Biswas teaches philosophy of critical religion and aspires to create social revolution without getting affiliated to any political party.⁴ His writings are mostly shaped by the religious philosophy of Harichand Thakur, the key religious preacher of Matua sect. Biswas has authored several novellas, poetry and community history texts for the *Namasudras*. Being an author from an untouchable community; he considers low-caste upliftment to be the foremost aspect of his writings. Therefore, instead of enigmatic language or cryptic metaphors, pain and downtrodden-ness is what his literature seeks to document. Among many other texts, this paper will analyze only one book—*Harichand Tattwamrita*, published by Anita Biswas in 2011.

Biswas introduced the book— *Harichand Tattwamrita* as a ‘reinterpretation’ of Harichand’s philosophy and Matua religion. She pointed out that though there were many works written on Matua philosophy but all of them lacked a well-researched understanding of the religion. According to her, an authentic interpretation would suggest that Harichand’s main idea was to oppose any form of Vedic culture and religion. Therefore, imagining Harichand as an avatar of Hinduism would be a big mistake. She introduces the author— Manindranath Biswas as a successful researcher, a genuine historian, whose aim is to recover Harichand’s philosophy and his sermons from superstitious Hindu Vedic order.

The author, Manindranath Biswas explores the life and philosophy of Harichand based on the hagiography— *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, written by Tarak Chandra Sarkar. However, *Harichand Tattwamrita* is critical of Sarkar’s portrayal of Harichand’s life. Biswas concluded that it was because of *Vaishnavite* Tarak Sarkar’s profession as a *kabiyal*,⁵ that Harichand’s philosophy of life and his anti-caste thinking became mystified and other worldly. This biased representation of Harichand, according to Biswas, brought Matua religion close to Vedic Hindu belief system. The publisher of the book Anita Biswas thinks that there are broadly two types of religions in this world— one is Vedic (*baidik*) and the other one is anti/non-Vedic (*abaidik*). To her, any irrational (or faith in the other worldly or supernatural), non-scientific, anti-humanist, superstitious form of religion is *baidik*, whereas the scientific, reason-based religions are *abaidik* (Biswas *Harichand Tattwamrita*, x-xi). Based on such separatist principles on religion, the publisher (and the author too) remarks that Vaishnavism carries *baidik* aspirations along with it,

and therefore, Vaishnavism should be rejected by the Matuas. (Biswas, *Harichand Tattwamrita*, ix). Moreover, Biswas considers that it is through Vaishnavism, Brahmanism gets legitimized among low-caste population. Thus, *Harichand Tattwamrita* envisions a humanist Matua religion and a new ethical social order which is devoid of Hinduism as Vedic religion. The book discusses many issues on Matua religion, but the central running theme is to establish the ‘truth’ that Harichand’s coming on earth (*abirbhab*) is nothing but a determinant feature of the contemporary epochal time or modernity (*kali yug*). The text portrays the movement of time as circular. In this text Harichand is seen as the *avatar* of Buddha of modern age (*kali yug*). The author considers that it is the Vedic Aryans who have made the *Namasudras* as outcasts, who were originally Buddhists and rulers of the land. It is Harichand who has come onto earth to uplift the low castes from their present status. Harichand, unlike any other Vedic god, did not believe in any supernatural power or the existence of spirit. To get a clear picture of Biswas’s narrative, we need to discuss the conception of time in detail. He takes up the idea of four epochal times and then reinterprets it in a new manner. The beginning of time is called *satyayug*, when there prevailed equality amongst all, without any social hierarchy. He writes the progression of time is circular and infinite. With the fulfillment of *satyayug*, *tretwa*, and then *dwaparyug* arrive and after that comes *kali* and then again comes *satya* in a circular manner. Moreover, as the author analyses, *onemahayug* is formed with the fulfillment of all four *yugs*. He writes that the present modern time (*kali yug*) is a part of eighth *mahayug*, and there is not much time left for the fulfillment of this *kali jug*. Whereas in the Vedic literature, this *kali yug* is termed as the worst time (*yug*) compared to the previous ages; however, to low-caste authors like Biswas, the present age is considered to be emancipatory. He writes,

Jugerbakhya-te kali sarbata-nikrishta.

Tabu keno bole eke sarba jug shreshta. (Biswas *Harichand Tattwamrita*, 44).

While analyzing the ages [based on Vedic scriptures], modern times are considered the worst/ still people [low castes] call this age the best).

He finds *Kali yug* as emancipatory because it is very closely situated with *satyayug*. Since one *Mahayug* begins with *satyayug* and ends with *kaliyug*, therefore, they are close to each other and they exchange ideas, inspirations, and utopic promises. In a metaphorical way the author describes them as friends, one appears with the completion of another. In Hindu scriptures every *yug* has one *avatar*—in *tretwayug* Rama was the *avatar*, and in *dwaparyug* Krishna was the *avatar*. With the death of lord Krishna, it is said that *kaliyug* begins and this *yug* is criticized for being the most immoralist, unethical in nature—people do not follow caste hierarchy, moral code of conduct. As opposed to this, Biswas argues that such immoralist trend of *kaliyug* is an effect of *dwaparyug* and practices of immorality were not very rare in both *dwapar* and *tretwa*. To him, Hindu moral order is partial in nature as it is created by the Brahmins to incarcerate the lower castes. Being a low caste, he declares to reject these moral orders. Moreover, Biswas’s reading of Hindu scriptures suggests that *kaliyug* is without any *avatar* (except *Kalkiavatar*). Despite the fact that *Vaishnavites* consider Chaitanya as an *avatar* of *kali yug*, Biswas seems to suggest otherwise. He does not consider *Vaishnavism* as a radical departure from Vedic religious fold. According to him, any religion has two prominent aspects— spiritual or ideal and social or material. *Vaishnavism*, like any other Vedic religions, concentrates only on the former aspect, while neglecting the later. Therefore, such indifference towards material social sphere and blind devotion to the spiritual divine makes the society worse. As a result, he points out, it is during Gouranga’s (also called Chaitanya) time that popularity and spread of Islam takes place in an extensive manner, especially among the lower strata of society. (M. Biswas, *Harichand Tattwamrita* 77-80). Thus, Biswas thinks that religion has to give primacy to material social questions and only *Matua* religion (like Buddhism) has done that. Separating himself away from

Vedic inscriptions, Biswas thinks that *kali yug* is the greatest of all epochal times because it introduced the aspiration of *satyayug* (age of Buddha) through *Matua* religion. It is for the first time since *tretwayug*, a counter to Vedic religion (through *Matua* philosophy) comes into existence. Unlike *Vaishnavism* where salvation lies out of this world, as the author opines, in *Matua* religion, salvation lies in this world and in doing worldly activities. As he says,

Sarba-samaje-tekintugrihijanshrestho

Samajbachatetarasarbadasachestho. (Biswas *Harichand Tattwamrita*, 89).

(In every society, associational family life is the best / only this can keep the society alive).

The author considers *satyayug* as the emancipated ideal age and *kali yug* is very close to achieving total equality. In a section on “*Satya Yuger Anusandhan*” (in search of the age of antiquity), the author narrates the egalitarian social structure in ancient India which was destroyed with the invasion of Vedic Aryans (who were originally of barbaric race) and the beginning of *tretwayug*. Before the coming of Aryans, according to Biswas, there was no social division and caste-based violence and there existed religious and humanist ethics throughout India. To him, there is an egalitarian promise that the *kali yug* introduces to the life of the untouchables and it gets materialized through *Matua* philosophy.

It is important to note that in this text, we see a certain tension emerging between two concepts of time, which renders the text inoperative by opening it up to the paradoxical moment of its own discontinuity. In order to produce a constitutive or an originary moment of a community, Biswas subscribes to a linear logic of historical development. However, while thinking of a utopia— an imaginative and yet redemptive future is invoked by Biswas through the promise of a certain past connected through the logic of circular time. This is not simply a retrogressive movement of finding a traditional logic for the arrival of modern time; rather, one can argue that it is only modernity which creates the condition of such a move (i.e. to seek historical agency) possible, which is motivated by a linear historical imperative. It is in this disjunction of such temporal narratives between what is being narrated and the ‘conditions’ (modernity) of narration, or in other words, the circular temporality of the content of the narrative and the linear or historical imperative of its conditions of production that we finally identify the operation of myth in Biswas’s history. Thus, Dalit imagination of going back to the past is not a simple reference to authentic or mythical past. It means that the present situation has a particular exigency or it has a particular demand for social justice. Due to this demand *past* is waged speculatively, in which one asserts retroactively a past from present. Therefore, it has a certain historicism, which is not a linear one. This past isn’t a simple linear past or a mythical or ahistorical past; rather it is a utopic past. Scholars like Guru has termed this past a ‘heterodox’ revolutionary past for the Dalit as opposed to Brahmanical ‘orthodox’ past (Guru) . Here, an oppressed past is waged in the name of social justice.

Although there are many⁶ historical narratives like Biswas’s which are produced in recent past and they differ in their contents, we see a sense of utopia running through their literature. The emergence of *Namasudra* literature and its wide circulations among the large sections of the masses created a strong sense of caste consciousness. The mytho-poetic literature produced by *Namasudras* culminated into a dignity discourse in social spaces in West Bengal. Most of the literatures are on history, religion, social justice, reservation and autobiography. Such literatures do not only create a Dalit public at the grassroots level but they also express a language of shared experience within a certain version of popular and yet mythical history and religion. This newly formed Dalit literate public sphere with its popularity at the grassroots has impacted upon the political practices in West Bengal through the forming of a *bahujansamaj*. The historical

narratives which are imagined in Dalit literature have helped in creating a community-consciousness and a dignity oriented social discourse for the Dalits. These discourses carry a certain political possibility for assertion of Dalit identity which may or may not always emerge with the demand for seeking space in the formal domain of party-politics; rather, like many other anti-caste movements, *Namasudra* assertions remain primarily socio-cultural and outside the domain of governmental politics.

Notes

¹ This second aspect (appropriation of caste identity) is also pointed out by Kancha Illaiah with regard to the BJP's consolidation of OBC voters in Bengal (Bhattacharya).

² I am using this concept from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's work on caste and identity in colonial period in Bengal (S. Bandyopadhyay 7).

³ In West Bengal, village spaces are usually called as *para* or neighborhood. These *paras* are often named based on caste titles and are segregated by caste. Mostly, at the margin of village spaces, the untouchable populations reside. Therefore, life, friendship, social status, dignity of people is determined within these spaces.

⁴ It is important here to note that most of the members of Chetana Mancha began their activist life as a supporter of Bahujan Samaj Party in late 1990s.

⁵ *Kavyals* are the leading singers in *kavigaan*, which is a musical and rhythmic contestation between poets and musicians.

⁶ For example, authors like—Manimohan Bairagi (Bairagi, *Analokito Atit Itihashe Bharatiyo Mulnibasira O Tader Dharmo Bhabna*), or Sarath Chandra Biswas (S. C. Biswas), or Manindranath Biswas (M. Biswas, *Proshnottore Matua Darshan*) etc.

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