

## Empathy & Reality in Dalit Autobiographies: A Brief Discourse

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### Abstract

Dalit autobiographies are significant literary works that shed light on the lived realities of India's marginalised and oppressed Dalits. These memoirs frequently give an unvarnished and uncompromising portrayal of Dalits' social, economic, and cultural struggles, highlighting the impact of caste-based prejudice on their daily lives. Dalit authors use the autobiographical genre to tell their own tales while also portraying the collective realities of their group. These works serve as a kind of resistance against oppression, providing a forum for Dalit struggles and ambitions. They offer a fresh take on India's history and culture, questioning mainstream narratives and elevating the voices of those who have been suppressed for generations. Manohar Mouli Biswas' autobiography *Surviving in My World, Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*, reflects the harsh realities of Dalit existence, like poverty, prejudice, and violence, as well as how Dalits have fought these pressures. This study attempts to navigate through the autobiography using the tools provided to decode Dalit aesthetics in Dalit literature.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Autobiography, Empathy, Sympathy, Reality

### Introduction

Annada Shankar Ray, a bitter opponent of the partition of 1947, in an immensely quotable Bengali rhyme *Teler Sishi Bhanglo Bole* (Because the Oil Jar Broke), voiced his protest against the absurdity of the country's bifurcation:

You scold the little lass  
when she drops the glass  
but what about you,  
adult brats  
when you shatter India  
into little parts. (Das 378)

The partition of 1947, by dividing the community geographically and uprooting many from their territorial anchorage, finally destroyed the Namasudra caste-oriented movement. The Namasudra community hesitated about the partition based on religion and thought that

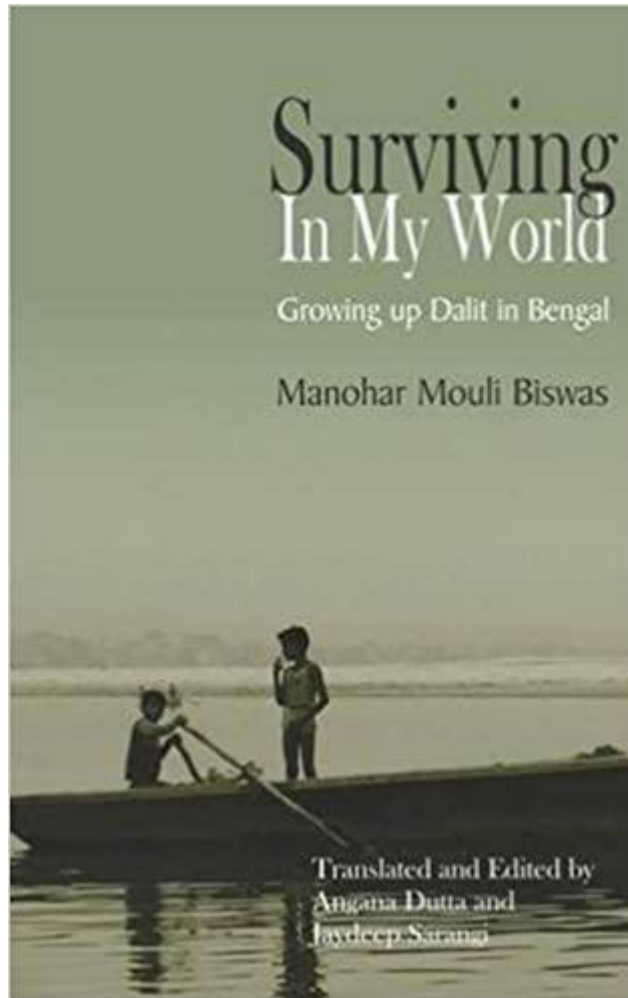
the Hindus and Muslims could cohabit and coexist in undivided Bengal. They wanted a peaceful communal cohabitation despite partition. The leaders like Jogendranath Mandal and Rasiklal Biswas, who were associated with the Scheduled Caste Federation founded by B.R. Ambedkar based on what they surmised, were totally against that kind of freedom of the country, at the cost of dividing the nation; and that too basing it on Hindu-Muslim separatism. Independence from the hands of the British resulted in the partition that had an enormously cruel impact on the life of the common people of Bengal. This division caused both Dalits and non-Dalits to face tremendous grief and suffering. If reality is examined thoroughly, it will be found that the Dalits had too few resources to fight the dreadfully adverse conditions in which they found themselves. This study deals with those dreadfully adverse conditions after the partition of 1947 that the Namasudra Dalits faced in independent India. Articulating those experiences through their autobiography cements the Dalit aesthetics of empathy and reality.

### **Dalit Testimonios**

Sharmila Rege prefers to refer to some Dalit life narratives as '*testimonios*'. (Rege 13) Rege utilised John Beverly's expertise to explain what a testimonio is:

By testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: auto-biography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novela-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or "factographic" literature. (Smith et al. 92-93)

The goal of testimonios is not to create a literary product but rather to transmit a group's experiences of tyranny, captivity, and struggle. In recounting their experience, the narrator establishes some agency and encourages readers to actively participate in and evaluate the event. Rege emphasises the relevance of Dalit life experiences as testimonials in establishing the freedom to express oneself not only as an individual but also on behalf of a wider group. They question the "official forgetting" of the history of caste oppression, conflicts, and resistance, either overtly or implicitly. (Rege 13)



Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Surviving-World-Growing-Dalit-Bengal/dp/9381345090/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=OSRBJ57YAZUH&keywords=Surviving+in+My+World%2C+Growing+Up+Dalit+in+Bengal&qid=1682637913&s=books&prefix=surviving+in+my+world%2C+growing+up+dalit+in+bengal+%2Cstripbooks%2C228&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Surviving-World-Growing-Dalit-Bengal/dp/9381345090/ref=sr_1_1?crid=OSRBJ57YAZUH&keywords=Surviving+in+My+World%2C+Growing+Up+Dalit+in+Bengal&qid=1682637913&s=books&prefix=surviving+in+my+world%2C+growing+up+dalit+in+bengal+%2Cstripbooks%2C228&sr=1-1)

*Surviving in My World, Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* by Manohar Mouli Biswas, translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi, is a “testimonio” which portrays a hard-hitting picture illustrating the atrocities that the Namasudra community faced during colonial, post-independence and post-partition Bengal. The hierarchical disjuncture and asymmetrical power relations in mid-twentieth century Bengal are highlighted in this autobiographical work. This book establishes that the Namasudras has been a tremendously independent-minded and peaceful, hardworking community where most of them were from East Bengal in the pre-partition era. A kind of extreme hatred in following someone’s dictate or giving in to slavery works in them. They were the people of mud and water. They were natural warriors of physical labour. That something was physically impossible did not have a place in their dictionaries. They were hardworking people by birth. Labour was another name for life to them. They were the living epitomes of life, elementary and abstemious, wrestling poverty, living on two handfuls of rice a day, a dash of enjoying the beauty of nature while living in its

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **23:4 April 2023**

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midst, learning to tolerate scarcities and complaints. Despite having talent and intelligence, these people remained unwanted in society. They were transformed into leftovers of society.

The developmental benefits of colonial modernity, like railways, education and healthcare, never reached them. This pattern was not of one life but that of Generations. “It was living like a prisnika- a water hyacinth- living on the verge of death and dying on the verge of life!” (Biswas, *Surviving* 39)

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay mentions that in colonial India in the East Bengal region, the land was monopolised by high-caste Hindus and better-class Muslims. (Bandyopadhyay 6) In the socio-economic pyramid, the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok* was at the top, followed by the Muslim rent receivers who belonged to the peasant community. Then the Namasudra elites were smaller in number than the Muslim rent receivers. They were landholders and had education and jobs. But despite economic mobility, they still had to share the same experience of social humiliation and disability. At the bottom of the pyramid were boatmen and fishermen, the Namasudra peasant population. Biswas’ family belonged to this category.

Manohar Mouli Biswas was born in a remote village known as Matiargati in 1943 in the district of Khulna and has experienced caste-based discrepancies in colonial Bengal since childhood. He gives the example of one event that solidified his belief that Namasudras were untouchable. If the boats of the Muslims and Shudras were on the same spot, the higher caste Hindus usually avoided the latter. They preferred to board a Muslim boat. It was a deliberate effort to keep the Namasudra people outside the boundaries of intimacy in the Hindu consciousness. They were only used in the headcount to make Hindus the majority. Socially, economically, culturally and educationally, they were a massive heap of garbage at the bottom. (Biswas, *Surviving* 56)

Human communities are a matter of natural resources, but the Namasudras have failed to transform themselves into resources. When Biswas witnessed as a child how people were victims of discrimination even in their attempt to become boatmen, it left a wound within. They could not own anything- They couldn’t hang onto the trade on the strength of ownership. Unable to use money as capital, they were dependent solely on their labours as capital. Opposed towards slavery, despite becoming defeated soldiers in occupations under the dictates of others, they could wear a crown of victory. (Biswas, *Surviving* 57) Even within the worker or labour class, the Namasudras were discriminated against, and we can see a hint of disappointment and non-admiration for communist ideologies in Biswas’ writing.

Biswas lived in a joint family, helping his father and uncle to cultivate the land. He was the first to be educated in his family. He recalls a debate on education among his father, grandfather and great-uncle. His grandfather, Haradhan, often said, “I do not know how to read and write. I could not make you all literate, but does it mean that even your children will remain as mukku, illiterate, as this old man?” (Biswas, *Surviving* 2). His grandfather wanted

to educate the children. But he could not manage to do it. Biswas's uncle argued differently from the reality of Dalit life,

Will our children be able to become babus if they are educated? They cannot, they cannot, they cannot! Even if our children get educated they won't be able to become babus. They will have to do manual labour, they will have to hold onto the butt of the plough- such is the inscription in the scriptures by the Gods. (Biswas, *Surviving* 4)

The uncle believed that those who would evaluate qualifications were bound to find deficiencies in the children from illiterate families. Biswas' father, on the other hand, had a distinct point of view. He believed in himself and his children despite the odds. While he realised his children were unlikely to become judges or lawyers, he saw no reason they couldn't work as a peon in an office or a constable at a police station. His faith in his children helped them to see a future beyond society's expectations and restrictions. (Biswas, *Surviving* 5) Narayan Rao, a Telegu poet from Warangal, commented at the All India Dalit Writers Conference held in Hyderabad in 1987, 'The dead cannot be exploited; so, the hoodlums do not want the dalit to die-they exploit him through his entire lifespan.' (Biswas, *Dalit Literature* 44) In the tenth chapter, Biswas says,

I ACHE WITH pain under the weight of my memory. Breaking the doors of the past means that so many things have come forth. Many more remain locked in the cage of yesteryears. Whatever has come out, I have narrated one by one. It is not a story of someone growing up with a middle-class lifestyle that is usually taken to be standard. Those who are born into light, set forth their feet towards school, holding of their parents' hands; those who get to eat a bellyful twice a day, who wear new clothes during festivals, wear shoes on their feet, get treatment when sick, who bear no stamp of malnutrition on their bodies, get to wear warm clothes in winter, who grow up with care and concern- this is not their story. (Biswas, *Surviving* 77)

Biswas, in his autobiography, added another interesting story at the very end, about one of his female friends named Rushita during his time as a central government employee long after partition and independence during the 70s in Calcutta. He became an engineering supervisor in the Department of Posts and Telegraph. He met Rushita after a long time and was invited by her to her house for lunch. Rushita's mother was a university professor. At some point during lunch, Rushita's mother says with a smile, 'A big "but" has defeated us - our minds and hearts have not been able to overcome it. It is our fault, not yours - the fault of all high caste people.' (Biswas *Surviving* 85) When the readers think that the protagonist made it big in life after a considerable struggle, they are brought into reality within seconds. Despite equal or even a little higher educational qualifications, Biswas failed to become equivalent to Rushita. The words with which her mother had bid farewell remained alive within him as a deep wound, and time could not heal it.

Another special mention should be Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical work *Itibritte Chandal Jiban (Memoirs of a Chandal Life Vol 1 and 2)*, a chilling discourse; militant in texture. His coming to India as a refugee after partition, stories of hooliganism during the Left Front government after 1977 and facing jail time is a story of a deprived Namasudra man who fell to the evil forces without proper education and guidance in society. But the exciting part is how he became a writer after learning the Bangla language and wrote two volumes of the pure non-fictional history of a Namasudra man crossing the hurdles of hardship and surviving as a Dalit in post-independence Bengal.

Byapari's autobiography also traces the tragic history of the refugee settlements after 1947. In the refugee camp, the segregation of people based on caste identity was surprising. People with perfect caste pearls in their pockets received preferences in the settlement in market areas, business centres, developed areas and posh localities. In contrast, people with lower castes, such as Namasudras, were given settlements in hilly areas, barren lands, unproductive areas, marshes and on the sides of the Eastern Railway tracks. Most of these people had been given allotments outside Bengal.

In 2012, the autobiography of Byapari was unveiled at the Kolkata Book Fair. Before becoming a writer, Byapari worked as a rickshaw puller and a hostel chef, where he cooked daily meals for many boarders. However, he has established himself as a major presence in Bangla Dalit literary circles and gained prominence as a political figure. His accomplishments have piqued the media's interest, and the *Times of India* published an article on 11 March 2012 that drew parallels between Alexander Dumas, a French author, and the American film *Shawshank Redemption* with Byapari's Book. The reporter said, 'Like the Count of Monte Cristo, Edmund Dantes, he learnt his first letters on the prison walls. Like Andy Dufresne in *Shawshank Redemption* he swam through the foulest-smelling river and came out clean.' (Biswas, *Dalit Literature* 63) The reporter further adds,

His life is a study in contrast and the contradictions begin right with his name-Manoranjan Byapari. He is not a trader of entertainment that entices the mind but a narrator of pain. His journey from a life among crooks to the world of books fulfils all criteria for an epic- conflict and struggle, journey to hell, redemption and resurrection. He is possibly the only rickshaw-puller in the world set to have his work published by Oxford University Press. (Biswas, *Dalit Literature* 63)

### **Empathy & Reality**

Autobiography, particularly Dalit autobiographies, is extraordinary as literature, contributing to a counter-canon. This is a kind of narrative where a single exposure gives multidimensional propensity. These narratives sometimes give rise to self-glorification and sometimes glorify the caste in which the individual is born. They reveal the plight of being

oppressed and subjugated by an individual more substantial than the maelstrom surrounding him. A Dalit autobiography is, by its merits, a reality show: a sincere effort of accurate life exposure. What happens is that each Dalit autobiography exposes a different kind of taste in literature, which can help pupils study the livelihood and survival details of marginal people in depth, in particular, the sub-caste in which the autobiographer is born. It provides a better understanding of the area of cultural and ritual entities. An autobiography implies self-exposure, whether positive or negative and the Dalit autobiography, in particular, demonstrates, in addition, caste discrimination and its adverse impact on society. In Bengal, the Dalit autobiography contributed to identity politics before independence.

Because of India's diversity, the concept of merger via uniformity is difficult to realise. As a result, those at the bottom of society are frequently socially, educationally, culturally, and intellectually isolated, as evidenced by their autobiographical writings. These works represent marginalised people's difficulties, showing their battles to find a place in a society that frequently emphasises uniformity over variety.

When a Dalit writes about Dalits, he expresses his direct experiences and interactions of life, suffering and battles in the discourse of his writing. And that can create Dalit consciousness and perception through natural expression to the readers, which a Dalit reader realises as one that a fellow Dalit brother or sister has suffered. It is readily acceptable to him and makes him Dalit-conscious. To see the Dalits through a Dalit's eye is one thing, and to see Dalits through a non-dalit's eye is something else. One stands on reality, and the other on pseudo-reality, a portrayal attempted through imagination. Dalit men and women are on the same plank of negation, deprivation and suffering.

The non-Dalit writers were not born into the Dalit community, nor did they grow up in its midst. They have seen these people close up and felt their deprivations and sorrows in their hearts. Their pens exude sympathy, which evokes pity, love and sharing.

But Dalit literature is not based on Sympathy but survives on Empathy and a new component that forms part of the aesthetics of Dalit literature - Reality. It is based on *anubhava* (experience) and takes precedence over *anumana* (speculation). (Biswas, "Dalit Mirror" 7) No fantasy is involved or works behind it.

The fact that hierarchy causes terrible grief to many people is difficult for mainstream non-Dalit writers and individuals from the upper strata to comprehend. Even poor caste Hindu writers cannot fathom and explicitly narrate the caste injustices of society. Writing Dalit literature from the mainstream is not aesthetically Dalit but a literature of imagination and sympathy.

The Dalit life narrative arises as a genre that tries to negotiate the Dalit's place within their society, changing the individual journey - key to autobiographical writing - into a community discourse. This alteration changes the "I" to a "We," signifying the Dalit community's shared experiences. The purpose is to share the Dalit experience and increase awareness of the social, economic, and cultural concerns that afflict this marginalised minority. In this way, a Dalit's life story serves as a vehicle for personal and social reform. (Biswas *Dalit Literature* 62 )

Tony Morrison, an Afro-American writer, took six years to complete her novel *Beloved*, and in the year 1993, she came to international prominence by acquiring the Nobel Prize for Literature. As soon as the news aired, the media assembled in her house and were curious about her next project. In response to the questions, she said, "I'm born in Black, I know the Black well, I write about the Black." (Biswas, *Dalit Literature* 112)

## Conclusion

Manohar Mouli Biswas, in *Dalit Literature, Aesthetic Theory and Movements*, reinterpreted her words, "I'm born in Dalits, I know the Dalits well, I write about the Dalits." ( 112) The recognition of one's Dalit identity, according to Yogendra Meshram, catalyses the production of Dalit literature. This understanding not only drives a longing for liberty but also defines an individual's nature. Dalit literature is founded on revolt against oppression and resistance against insults, and recollections of past and current conflicts form its core. Dalit writers hope to influence their futures by relying on their experiences and conserving the past and present as witnesses. Because they were born into Dalit homes, these writers have a distinct ethical sensibility that allows them to create a new type of aesthetics. (Biswas, *Dalit Literature* 43)

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