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Survival and struggle: Economic and political exploitation in select Bengali Dalit narratives

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Abstract

This study explores the pervasive economic and political exploitation that Dalits endure, as illustrated in specific Bengali Dalit narratives. The research underscores the systemic exploitation and enduring struggles that Dalit communities encounter by examining literary works by Bengali Dalit authors including Anil Gharai, Gobindo Shoundo, Manoranjan Barman, and Taraknath Majhi. By examining these Dalit stories, the study illuminates the systemic discrimination that Dalits face in their struggle for survival and dignity. The select Dalit narratives provide a vivid portrayal of the socio-economic barriers and political exploitation that perpetuate Dalit oppression. Through a critical examination of these texts, the study aims to uncover the multifaceted dimensions of Dalit exploitation, offering insights into the resilience and resistance inherent within these communities. This exploration not only enhances our understanding of Dalit literature but also underscores the urgent need for socio-political reforms to address the historical and ongoing injustices against Dalits in Bengal.

Keywords: Anil Gharai, gobindo shoundo, manoranjan barman, taraknath majhi, economic exploitation, marginalization, Dalit narratives

Introduction

Dalits in India are subjected to a variety of forms and degrees of exploitation and humiliation. They are not always subjected to oppression by higher caste Hindus due to their caste identity; they may be susceptible to the economic greed of the affluent class as a result of their low status on the economic hierarchy. Using their illiteracy and lack of awareness, numerous wealthy industrialists, merchants, or upper-caste members economically exploit them by employing them as inexpensive labour. The hard work of Dalits, who are perpetually deprived and deceived, benefit these individuals exceedingly. Dalits are also excluded from the government's developmental initiatives.

In contemporary India, Dalits constitute a substantial portion of the electorate, occasionally playing a critical role in the formulation of the government. Consequently, political parties concentrate on wooing Dalit voters with assurances of improvement in their circumstances, although only a small number of these promises are fulfilled upon their ascension to power. Consequently, the Dalit saga of hardship persists for decades without any discernible improvement in their circumstances. Gullible and uneducated Dalits are drawn into political feuds by the deceptive promises of political leaders in order to safeguard the party's stronghold or to advance the personal interests of these leaders. In rural areas, proprietors frequently depend on Dalits to defend their property and even risk their lives to do so. This study aims to elucidate the multifaceted dimensions of Dalit exploitation on economic and political fronts by examining the translated versions of literary works from Bengali Dalit authors such as Anil Gharai, Gobindo Shoundo, Manoranjan Barman, and Taraknath Majhi. It also provides insights into the resilience and resistance that are inherent within these communities. By examining the Bengali Dalit authors' portrayal of the socio-economic barriers and political exploitation that perpetuate Dalit oppression, it aims to emphasise the systemic exploitation and enduring struggles faced by the Dalit communities of Bengal.

"Footprint of an Elephant" by Anil Gharai

Anil Gharai, a prolific and accomplished Dalit writer, first published his story "*Hatichhap*" in Kak o Anyanyo Galpo in 2010.

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The story "Footprint of an Elephant" by Gharai, which was translated by Anuradha Sen from the original Bengali "*Haticchap*," is a poignant narrative of the exploitation of a poor, lower-class peasant named Bhima by an influential, affluent Chief Jata. Bhima, despite his conscience, was compelled to become the instrument of Chief Jata's mechanism to obtain additional funds from the Government's relief fund for farmers through immoral avenues. Bhima would replicate elephant footprints at the behest of the Chief of a distant village. The government would authorise the grant for the devastation of food crops by elephants in this region. The benefit increased as the number of prints increased. The proprietor of the fields acquired numerous advantages. The government was deceived by the poor and elderly Bhima, who used to earn money by drawing elephant footprints in paddy fields. Bhima had acquired this skill from his father. Bhima was unable to abandon the life of comfort he had acquired through such wrongdoing due to his physical infirmity, which prevented him from earning money through alternative means.

Toti, Bhima's wife, did not endorse her husband's unethical activities. One day, Mangal, their ten-year-old son, was attacked by a ferocious elephant while returning home from school. The elephant, who was insane, lifted him and tossed him onto the stones. "By the irony of fate, his work, his means of livelihood depended on the dreadful, formidable elephants, elephants that had trampled upon his happiness and hope" (Gharai 32). Toti is of the opinion that the world cannot endure for an extended period of time on the basis of falsehoods and lies. Toti believed that her son's mortality was the consequence of this transgression. She argues, "Evil art cannot help man" (Gharai 34). Bhima desired to forget this dishonest project. However, Babu's desire was distinct; he advocated for the continuance of this malpractice by Bhima. However, despite the fact that Bhima left numerous imprints, he was deceived and not adequately compensated by Chief Jata. In this narrative, Gharai delivers a caustic critique of the economic deprivation and exploitation of the helplessness and poverty of a Dalit by a powerful village chief for his own economic prosperity through immoral activities.

Chief Jata requests that Bhima instruct his cowerd Bishahari in the art of copying elephant footprints as he ages in order to prevent any complications in the continuation of his illicit business. Bishahari will assume responsibility for his duties during Bhima's absence. Bishahari's narrative is also a narrative of exploitation and suffering at the hands of Chief Jata. At the residence of the Jata chief, his father consumed poisonous wine, which resulted in his death. Babu's mother, who was troubled by Babu every night following his father's death, became expectant and self-hung herself. Bishahari, who is employed by Square Meal, was unable to object. There is no way for Bishe to escape due to his inability to perform weighty tasks due to his weakness. Bhima performs the sinful task "from the pangs of hunger." The portrayal of Bhima and Bishahari's helplessness as they fall victim to Chief Jata's ambush is executed with great precision. The conclusion of the narrative is symbolic. Bishahari creates elephant imprints during Bhima's lectures. When his work was done, Bhima found that "Bishhari had drawn a pair of human feet. Chief Jata's feet!" (Gharai 40). Gharai, a writer with Dalit consciousness, protests the inhuman exploitation of Dalits by proposing a connection

between Chief Jata and mad elephants. In reality, it is not the elephants that crush human pleasure; rather, it is cruel human beings such as Chief Jata.

"On Water and on Shore" by Gobindo Shoundo

A popular writer of stories, Gobindo Shoundo was born in a fishermen's community of Digha. In 1994, upon his retirement from a government position as a civil engineer, he became a life member of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha. In 1996, *Chathurtha Duniar Galpa* published his Bengali narrative, "On Water and on Shore." The story "On Water and on Shore" by Shoundo, which was translated by Subhajit Sen Gupta from the original Bengali "*Jale Dangai*," is a poignant narrative about a vulnerable fisherman named Shashi who is entangled in the exploitation of a warehouse owner. The narrative also depicts the vicious cycle of debt that moneylenders use to ensnare these impoverished fishermen.

When the tide was low, Shashi would fish in the sea. Shashi's haul was unloaded at the warehouse owned by Nagen Sharma, an upper-caste Hindu. They reached an agreement. He was once ensnared in a tempest during his routine excursion to the sea in quest of fish. The seawater experienced an immense expansion and ascended to an alarming height. He fought valiantly to save himself and his companions when the canoe was thrown into the sea and submerged. He must witness the loss of his senior son in the strong current in a helpless manner. He suffered the loss of his son and two companions. It has been rightly observed that:

The portrayal of this harsh struggle for survival in the deep recesses of the violent sea can perhaps not be authentically done merely by virtue of literary imagination. It demands first-hand experiences of the brutal caprices of marine life. The power relation in the lowest rungs of society is so heavily one-sided that the mainstream myth of progress seems a distant dream to these hapless social marginals. (Singha *et al.* xxxv)

The ware-house proprietor then suggested that he fish in the sea by attaching his boat to his petrol-powered launch. Throughout an entire season, he captured an abundance of fish, and numerous consignments were transported to the Kolkata markets. He had prior experience with water, and he is now acquiring shoreline experience. The launch-owner's directive was that the fish be distributed equally. However, Sashi anticipated an excessive amount of profit when a significant quantity of silver *ilishes* was captured and transported to Kolkata by Nagenbabu's lorry. Nagenbabu, to his dismay, deceived him by claiming that all the fish had perished prior to their arrival in Kolkata and that he had bribed the police to avoid imprisonment. Consequently, Nagenbabu denied him his entitlements. Shashi, who was a believer in Nagenbabu's statements, demonstrated his humanity and compassion by reluctantly accepting a meagre sum of money from him, with the assurance that he would repay him. However, Nagenbabu experiences an increase in wealth subsequent to the incident, and he purchases ice-manufacturing equipment and establishes a cold storage facility, thereby realising his aspiration. Shashi subsequently comprehends how Nagenbabu deceived him with his invented narrative.

Consequently, Shoundo's narrative provides a realistic depiction of the adversity faced by an impoverished Dalit for maintenance of his family. The struggle for survival

transpires both on the shore and in the water. In this relentless struggle against all obstacles, there is no respite for the downtrodden. They are in opposition to both nature and human beings. In contemporary society, the upper castes and affluent segments of society frequently exploit Dalits for economic gain. However, it is crucial to note that their heroic spirit, sense of dignity, and humanity are not shattered by such suffering. Shashi initially declines to accept any money from Nagen Sharma after learning of his loss. However, the avarice and selfishness of the upper caste individuals, such as Nagen Sharma, lead them to exploit and cheat these innocent, honest, impoverished individuals without any remorse. They seize the impoverished and subsequently prosper from their labour.

“Shabori” by Manoranjan Barman

The role of corrupt political leaders in the distress of impoverished factory workers is also evident in Manoranjan Barman's story "Shabori." We observe that the leaders of the labour movement betray their adherents and accumulate wealth as a result of their unholy alliance with the factory owners. The employment of all employees, including Rekha's spouse, is terminated. Those workers who have lost their employment and are plunged into dire poverty find Tapan Maity's discourse regarding the World Bank's conspiracy and struggle for survival against the MNCs to be meaningless. Maity is a school teacher and a party leader. Consequently, the Party is of no assistance to the average individual. Barman's narrative underscores the exploitation and victimisation of impoverished Dalits in the political feuds of rural Bengal. These individuals are frequently guided by landlords or local politicians to fight on their behalf in order to safeguard their property or ideology. Padma's spouse was killed in a feud that took place in the village. Party politics resulted in the mistreatment of two landless labourers. The sacrifices made by Tapan Maity were justified in the context of the system's correction.

“Friendship” by Taraknath Majhi

Taraknath Majhi, who was born in a remote village in the Midnapore district, focuses on the casteist politics of rural Bengal in his narratives. The unravelling of a distinctive form of consciousness is evident in Majhi's story "Friendship," which was translated by Subhendu Sarkar from the original Bengali "*Sakhya*." The sequence of numerous political strifes and conflicts in the Gangetic plains of West Bengal has been expertly organised by Majhi. "Sakhya" first appeared in *Chathurtha Duniar Galpa* in 1996.

It was during Kali Puja that stick-fighting occurred in the courtyard of the *zamindar*. Gayanath acquired the ability to combat with sticks from his forebears. This is the reason the youthful *zamindar* held him in such high regard. Nevertheless, he enrolled his son in his school. Now, Gayanath, who is elderly, has nightmares about his own demise. His golden years are now behind him. Chandibabu, the chief of the Marxist party in Bengal, advised him to use sticks against the *zamindars* against whom he had previously used them. He was unable to comprehend Chandibabu's statements regarding democracy and other topics. However, Gayanath is hesitant to betray the individual who provided him with sustenance once.

Majed Miyan, who was previously a sworn adversary of Gayanath, renounced stick-fighting and became a fakir.

Majed Miyan was unsuccessful in his attempt to assassinate Gayanath. He obtained a horse by visiting Pir Badar's residence. However, he now regards Gayanath as a friend. He laments: "Earlier you were an enemy, now you're my friend. We were stick-fighters in the days of the kings and *zamindars* and we are still stick-fighters in the days of the party leaders. They used us and thrived that way" (Majhi 167)! Consequently, the cognizance of a Dalit is roused, and he is able to comprehend the exploitation he has suffered at the hands of others. Majhi's Dalit narrative is distinguished by this revolutionary spirit.

Majed Miya's words leave a tremendous impression on Gayanath. Here, both a Muslim and a Hindu are depicted as Dalits, who are the victims of exploitation by the affluent class and political party. Previously, the affluent elite exploited them; however, in the current socio-political environment, the party has become their exploiter. Consequently, the future of Dalits remains unchanged. Consequently, the author has responded to the evolving political landscape of Bengal. The Party's leaders enticed the son of a fakir to become a stick-fighter by offering him land. He sacrificed his life for the occasion. His son embarked on a campaign to secure land. Gayanath forbids his daughter-in-law from donating alms to the fakir, as he has been his arch adversary. However, the fakir, whose convictions regarding nonviolence and love are rooted in his religious beliefs and life experiences, maintains: "No one is born an enemy in the world of Allah" (Majhi 168). He declares his friendship. Gayanath is dissatisfied because he is unable to ignore the animosity that existed previously. However, he observes that Majed is content with his status as a Pir devotee, despite the loss of his son. He exudes serenity and composure. He is not disheartened. Gayanath has been defeated by him. At last, Gayanath acknowledges him as his friend.

Hence, Majhi's narrative provides a starkly genuine depiction of rural Bengal, where the plight of Dalits remains unchanged. The political landscape undergoes a transformation. The tyrant proprietors of the past are succeeded by new political leaders and parties that are influenced by communist ideology. Democracy replaces feudalism. However, the status of the impoverished Dalits remains unchanged. Previously, they were employed by landlords to safeguard their property; however, they are now employed by politicians to combat the landlords and promote communism. The identity of the exploiter has undergone a transformation, while the identity of the exploited remains unchanged. Majhi has sincerely depicted the perpetual cycle of suffering that impoverished Dalits endure, from which they receive no relief. However, Majhi, a writer who is deeply immersed in Dalit consciousness, demonstrates that his protagonists have discovered the devious nature of their exploitation by the landlords and politicians. His protagonists reject their oppressors and rebel against their policies of exploitation. They comprehend that these exploiters are accountable for exacerbating the internal divisions among Dalits. In order to improve themselves, they must recognise the genuine character of their exploitation and remove animosity among themselves. In order to guarantee the liberation of Dalits from this vicious cycle of oppression, they must unite and refer to one another as "friends." They come to realize that Dalits are all members of the oppressed class, and as a result, they are unable to practice multiple religions. Consequently, Majed

Miya, a Muslim, and Gayanath, a Hindu, may establish a friendship. Majhi's narrative motivates us to envision a society that is egalitarian and devoid of religious, caste, and class oppression.

Conclusion

The socio-economic circumstances of the writers of Bengali Dalit short stories are diverse. Some of them are in a dignified social and economic position as a result of the high status of their profession. However, the majority of the writings are infused with the writers' genuine experiences of residing in a Dalit society. The authors' social commitment is evident in their meticulous observation, examination, and documentation of the challenges faced by Dalits in West Bengal. The Dalits and conscious readers are not the only ones who are drawn to these issues and their solutions; a strong appeal has also been made for the complete rejection of the oppressive social, political, and economic order. The socio-political contexts of the sufferings of Dalits in West Bengal have been identified by Bengali Dalit authors in their writings, as Bengal society has experienced the polyvalent and multifarious effects of Marxist Movements, Naxalite movements, abolition of feudalism, industrialization, urbanisation, and various government projects of development in the post-independence period. Bengali Dalit authors endeavour to reconstruct society on the foundation of human dignity, equality, and respect. Their writings exemplify Dalit consciousness, demonstrate dedication to the Dalit cause, and endeavour to alter the societal structure.

The conspiracy of wealthy landlords, businessmen, and political leaders is instrumental in the merciless exploitation and victimisation of impoverished members of lower castes in stories such as "Friendship," "On Water and on Shore," and "Footprint of an Elephant." These individuals are deceived and must sacrifice their entire lives to serve their social superiors. The authors of these stories have exhibited an extraordinary dedication to the cause of Dalits. The persecution and deprivation of Dalits on economic and political fronts are the subject of protest in the selected Dalit narratives. Dalit authors, who are invested with Dalit consciousness, endeavour to raise awareness of the deception, marginalisation, deprivation, degradation, and exploitation of Dalits by the affluent class and unscrupulous politicians. These narratives not only document the hardships faced by Dalits but also highlight their resilience and resistance. A deeper understanding of these experiences is essential for addressing the entrenched inequalities and fostering genuine social and political change.

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