



CAMOUFLAGING CASTE IN BENGAL: A BRIEF DISCOURSE

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Abstract: During communist rule in Bengal, the *bhadroloks*, who were upper-class, English-educated, and well-versed in Antonio Gramsci's theories, purposefully overlooked caste inequality and camouflaged it with Marxist dogma about class struggle. The Namasudras and other Dalit communities, who had been marginalized for generations due to untouchability and social isolation, were further marginalized during the communist dictatorship, which prioritized constructing a classless society above addressing the unique needs of these oppressed groups. The Left Front administration even staged a genocide on the Sundarban island of Marichjhanpi, which was quickly disregarded by Bengal's caste-Hindu elites in the publishing circles. *Pardon Not: Marichjhampi Massacre* by Nakul Mallik is a fictionalized account of the atrocities faced by Namasudra refugees on Marichjhanpi. The present study intends to resurrect a long-overdue debate in Bengal about caste versus class, which has been neglected for several decades.

Keywords: Communist, Namasudra, Caste, Class, Genocide

Introduction

The dominant historical narrative has frequently ignored or marginalised the struggles of the Dalit minority, especially the Namasudras of Bengal. Academic and literary institutions, for example, have often failed to recognise Dalit achievements and engagement in literary and political movements, resulting in the anonymity of their revolutionary activities. The Namasudras and other Dalit communities were dehumanised and socially isolated due to the stigma of untouchability. Moreover, the Hindu philosophy of reincarnation frequently justified this social exclusion, which dictated and justified untouchability based on karma. This Scriptural legitimacy and excuse offered by Hindu law dictators maintained a condition of mental servility among Namasudras and other Dalits, who frequently accepted their destiny without question. However, it is critical to show historical facts to undermine this concept of social ostracism through scriptural punishments. History should not be used to legitimise prejudice or injustice; instead, it should be founded on evidence, facts, and various viewpoints. It is critical to recognise and emphasise Dalits' contributions, struggles, and agency in shaping history and society, particularly the Namasudras. Efforts to include the unwritten tales of marginalised populations, such as Dalits, into the mainstream discourse of knowledge production are critical for developing a more inclusive and complete view of history. This involves respecting Dalit-led literary and political movements, recognising their resilience and agency, and opposing the societal systems that have oppressed them. Giving voice to the Dalit community's untold stories, viewpoints, and contributions is critical to achieving social justice, equality, and inclusion. This paper is notable in that it highlights the long-standing problems of the Namasudra group and Dalits in general and sheds insight into the caste-based politics in Bengal in the latter half of the twentieth Century. Despite varied socio-political orientations, the dominant upper-caste Hindu society in Bengal rejected or dismissed caste-based politics in favour of class-based politics, a significant issue that must be addressed. This paper sheds light on the Namasudras and Dalits' systemic oppression and marginalisation in Bengal and the necessity to investigate and confront the tampering and truncating of history perpetuating such invisibility.

Furthermore, this study calls into question the purposeful inability of mainstream upper-caste Bengali literary circles to recognise the corpus of work known as Dalit literature of Bengal. It undermines their power over knowledge-

producing institutions. This underscores the need to identify and give room to different perspectives, particularly Dalit voices, in Bengali and global literary and intellectual debate, as well as challenge dominant narratives and representations that frequently perpetuate injustice and prejudice. This study adds to a more inclusive and thorough knowledge of marginalised populations' socio-political dynamics and problems by addressing these concerns and bringing to light the hidden realities and experiences of the Namasudra community and Dalits in Bengal. It emphasises the significance of recognising and amplifying suppressed voices, questioning dominant narratives, and promoting social justice, equality, and inclusion in all sectors of society, including literature and knowledge production.

Caste vs Class

Cultural hegemony in Marxist theory refers to the ruling class's societal dominance. The ruling class controls society's culture, beliefs, and values to promote and legitimise its worldview as the accepted standard. In Bengal, the ruling upper castes enforce the scriptural sanctions of ancient Hindu texts on the Dalits, particularly the Namasudras, depicting them as subhuman and reinforcing their hegemonic discourse by offering their interpretations of history. The prevailing account of history in Bengal frequently presents Dalit struggles as class-based politics, ignoring or dismissing the region's caste-based battles. Although India is classified as a Third World country internationally, significant discrepancies exist between the "haves" and the "have-nots". The "have-nots" world, which includes the Namasudras and other Dalit communities, reflects the Fourth World, where people face poverty, ignorance, exploitation, and humiliation. This finding underlines the enormous social and economic inequities suffered by marginalised populations in Bengal and India, especially the Namasudras and Dalits. It emphasises the importance of challenging and questioning prevailing narratives and representations perpetuating inequities and injustice. It also highlights the significance of recognising and responding to caste-based discrimination and hardships and pushing for social justice, equality, and inclusion for all members of society, regardless of caste or social standing.

Marichjhanpi Massacre

In *Atrocities on Dalits since The Partition of Bengal*, Dilip Halder mentions certain events that created havoc in the Bengal political scenario,

Since 24.01.79, we have been blocked by the police force of West Bengal Government. All the supply lines have been cut off. Every household is crying for food. Throughout the day, the police launch is patrolling us. In want of food, the people are now eating leaves, foliage etc. As a result, 81 starvation deaths have occurred in the meantime...Seeing the brutality on women the local people of Kumirmari got infuriated. Police fired 5 round teargas on them. Three girls were about to die in this incident...The oppression took more ferocious turn, when on 31.01.79, Wednesday, the police started showering teargas since morning...The police entered into a house and shot a lady to death with a baby on her lap...another 5-year-old boy was strangled to death by a policeman...and indiscriminate firing took a toll of 30 persons...the 30 dead bodies were taken to the Police Station of Sandeshkhali. (Biswas 86)

This bloodied account is about the Marichjhanpi Massacre of 1978, where Communism and Humanity failed miserably against the Namasudra refugees who tried to make a living in a foreign land that believed that land for the tigers was more precious than the lives of human beings. It's a staunch and harsh critique of the policies of the left government that failed to live up to their ideologies about the upliftment of the proletariat. The violence unleashed in Marichjhanpi was chilling and mind-numbing. It was an orgy of murder and bloodletting. The Namasudra refugees who arrived in the 1950s did not get a fair deal in Bengal. Unlike the first wave of high caste '*bhadrolok*' refugees, they were dispatched forcefully to the 78,000 square miles of inhospitable, unirrigated land in the tribal areas of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh called the Dandakaranya region by 1973. In 1978 about 120,000 refugees, mostly Namasudras, returned to Bengal and settled in Marichjhanpi, a 125-square-kilometre uninhabited island in the Sundarbans. They built twelve settlements within a few months, with roads, drainage, a school, a dispensary, a market and a dike system to hold the tide. At last, these enterprising Namasudra refugees hoped their dream of rehabilitation in Bengal would be realised as the Left Front government came to power in 1977. Nakul Mallik's novel *Khoma Nei* (Pardon Not) tells us the story of this dream, which soon turns into a nightmare. After coming to power, the left front's policy towards these refugees changed dramatically. It was feared that the continued influx of refugees from Dandakaranya might jeopardise the state's precarious economy; also, by settling down in a tiger reserve forest area, the refugees had broken the forest laws. Their act was regarded as criminal trespass, while the earlier squatter movement of the high-caste refugees was hailed as noble dissent. The government wanted to send them back to Dandakaranya, and when they refused, they were fired upon, subjected to an economic blockade, and finally forced eviction. Although many of these refugees later managed to escape, the massacre of Marichjhanpi, where the interests of the protected tiger population took precedence over those of the Namasudra refugees, constitutes the most bizarre part of the saga of refugee rehabilitation in Bengal. (Mallik 93-94) The irony in this tragedy is that this left government that came to power in 1977 in Bengal is the same left government that rose to power for their policies regarding the upliftment of the downtrodden-the peasants, farmers, and workers who are collectively known as the proletariat or the working class in communist terminology. The leftist '*bhadrolok*' (educated upper caste people) in power in West Bengal did not need to use the refugees as a tool for their politics any longer. So, they used their police and cadre to free Marichjhanpi from the refugees' hands. In Mallik's novel, the tragedy which forms the backdrop proves that when a communist government established with great effort and a lengthy movement uses its police force for the mass killings of Dalits, it can without a doubt be called an undeniable failing of West- Bengal's search for equality. The Dalit genocide of Marichjhanpi in 1979 is a terrible crime in the history of the communist government, a crime that brooks no pardon. It was in 1979 when thousands of Dalits, refugees of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), lost their lives at Marichjhanpi, in Sundarban, for their dream of resettling in the region, which they considered part of their motherland. Marichjhanpi is just one incident in the tragic tale of one of the most powerful Dalit communities- Namasudras of Bengal- who first became the victim of Hindu Muslim communalism during the partition of 1947 and 1971 and later became the victims of caste oppression in independent India. Moreover, the complete silence of Bengal's civil society and the fact that Dalits were killed by the Communist government of West Bengal

that came into power in the name of the poor and dispossessed raises serious questions about the representation of Dalits in every sphere, the constitution of civil society and hegemony of few privileged castes in the political sphere in independent India. Nakul Mallick thus becomes a literary figure and a novelist who stands out. Keeping the cruel history of a Dalit genocide perpetrated by the communist government of West Bengal, Mallick pens his novel and names it *Khoma Nei* (Pardon Not). In this declaration, in the echo of these words, *Khoma Nei*, which translates into pardon not, one hopes that the axe of someone's resistance will be seen to flower. In Bengal, there has been a long history of the communist movement, mainly sponsored by the people of the *bhadralok Samaj* which Kancha Ilaiah has taken as a focal point in his *Untouchable God*. In his novel, he mentions an adda or gathering at the Calcutta Coffee House: "All I wanted to point out to you is that talking about classes makes no sense unless we also talk about castes. Caste is India's class. Caste is India's race...I think it is particularly our duty as communists to discuss this point." (Ilaiah 125) Every one imagined that the high-caste Bengali intellectuals had set themselves to destroying hegemony by keeping Gramsci and Marx in front of them as a model. The Leftists, especially the Marxists, would rise above caste differences was the fond hope of many in Bengal. But they failed to leave an impact on the marginalised people. In the fabric of everyday life, in everyday needs and complaints and struggles, no part of Gramsci's thought has affected organised political existence. In West Bengal's leftist politics, no attempt has been made to touch the hierarchy and inequality apparatus. Articulated class consciousness would have threatened the facade of class struggle. The Bengal upper caste society contains caste and class identity combined with maintaining hegemony, particularly literary, political, administrative, and cultural hegemony. Antonio Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, talked about cultural hegemony. (Gramsci et al. 421) Hegemony is, in reality, the dictatorship of the cultured classes over the entire world. (Petras and Veltmeyer 61) When elections occur, the proletariat votes, but the bourgeoisie is in power. Kanshi Ram, who founded the Bahujan Samaj Party, had once said that the vote would be ours and the power all yours—this cannot continue. (Ram 22) This state of things must end. By the law of nature, the man or woman of culture does not wish to relinquish his/her pride in being cultured. Bengal being a cultural and intellectual hub because of its literature and intelligentsia, camouflaged the caste hierarchy and discrimination prevalent in the grass root throughout history with the more intellectual and fashionable property called class during the years of the United Left Front Government. The whole discourse on caste and its atrocities which comes with it, has also been neglected by the publishing houses, which are dominated by the caste Hindu majority in Bengal. The mainstream publishing houses under the communist government did not print and publish the atrocities related to the practice of casteism portrayed in different literary forms by Dalit writers. Their excuse was that the writing was not literary enough to publish. But the crux of the matter is to deny the people the right to know that there is a caste problem penetrating the different stratus of society and creating a facade by providing them with a so-called bigger problem that is class which was close to their ideology and propaganda. The big shots controlling the government and the mainstream publication and media diverted the caste question because most were caste Hindus operating from the highest level of authority in the state. The Bengali hierarchical mindset and ego would not let such a major phenomenon called caste spread to the world and let its cultural rating go down or get stained. So came the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha and *Chaturtho Duniya* (The Fourth World), a publishing house daring enough to voice the cries of the oppressed and marginalised in the 21st Century Bengal. The Bengal Left-Front government chose class over caste because it was dominated by a majority of caste Hindu Brahmins who did not want to sacrifice their social hierarchy and a place of privilege by locating and rectifying the abomination that is caste. That is why Marichjhanpi happened under the Left government. It was an undeclared war to eradicate a significant number of the Dalit Namasudra population from the face of the earth by using deadly violence. They were workers of the world united to die. By doing this, they killed their ideological belief in the first place and ran the government on a poisoned principle for the next 32 years. The victims were workers and commoners turned refugees from Bangladesh who came to settle in Marichjhanpi. Before failing to address the caste question, they failed miserably to hold on to the atrocities of class struggle, which they promoted to be their ideological viewpoint by openly firing upon the working-class people who made a living and built a society or civilisation for that matter from scratch, trying to forget the horrors of partition and displacement. They wanted to live peacefully under the so-called Communist Government, take care of the working-class people, and participate in their class struggle against the bourgeoisie powers. But their faith turned against them. In a strange role reversal situation, the communist during the events of Marichjhanpi became the bourgeoisie oppressor and obliterated the working-class community into ashes. The priority was to safeguard the workers or refugees at Marichjhanpi. Still, the Marxist leaders and their intellectual dishonesty in dealing with the real contemporary problems surrounding the area were eye-opening. The decisions were more of a nuclear Leninist extremism that insisted political governance be explicitly committed to the political cause of the Left, which was class and not caste. As Marx mentions in *Capital*, the process of reification concerns the way when capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, and workers are bereft of their full humanity. They are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force'; people, in a word, become commodities. (Marx 167)

Conclusion

The incident at Marichjhanpi can be called reification incarnate, where the workers were used just as commodities to gain political prominence in the national spectrum. As Nilanjana Chatterjee's unpublished PhD thesis, *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*, points out, their use of the slogan 'Amrakara? Bastuhara!' (who are we? Refugees!) speaks a deliberate privileging of the overarching self-definition of refugee. (Bandyopadhyay 262) It raises whether a classless society can be built within a system perpetuating caste-based discrimination. Dr B.R. Ambedkar advocated "State Socialism" and emphasised the significance of democracy for India's poor masses. He contended that democracy, if not accompanied by socialism, would be deceitful for people experiencing poverty. (Ambedkar 411) Would democratic socialism in India be successful? The world of Dalit minority writers and literature seeks to move forward based on that social equality.

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