

**INVESTIGATING NARRATIVE VOICES IN BISWAS' *GHATOTKACH*  
*AND HIDIMBA: A DIALOGUE***

**By Madhumita Majumdar**

**Abstract**

The paper in the first half makes a brief journey through the Dalit history in Bengal and thereafter locates Manohar Mouli Biswas's life and struggle and his response to dominant ideology through his prose drama *Ghatotkach and Hidimba*. The paper studies the drama as a protest and through it brings up questions that have been on the mind of the subaltern for ages.

If I speak untruth, I can survive,  
If I speak the truth,  
It will be Explosive.

Bulleh Shah<sup>i</sup>

Dalit History in Bengal had been living in 'untruth', surviving in unrecorded pain as an illusion had been created that Bengal had done away with caste division long ago. The truth is otherwise. In fact the caste divide not only goes back long in history, it still lurks in corridors of our times.

"In the 1870s, Chandals of Bakarganj and Faridpur boycotted caste Hindus": when the upper caste people refused to accept an invitation to dine from a Chandal headman; and henceforth they "battled continuously to improve their ritual position" and later claimed the "more respectable title of 'Namasudra' and Brahmin status."<sup>iii</sup> This remains one of the earliest instances of organized protest by the Dalits in Bengal.

Namasudras have led a long struggle against upper caste hegemony in Bengal and is seen as one of the pioneers of Dalit politics in the subcontinent. Namasudra leaders such as Jogendranath Mondal allied with Bhimrao Ambedkar to reject the Congress, which was seen as largely an upper caste organization. Partition, however, greatly affected the Namasudras, since they were mostly concentrated in East Bengal. And those who came to this part of Bengal faced many isolations and trauma. Manohar Mouli Biswas in an interview recollects the lot of the Dalit at Marichjhanpi (1979):

The people who were living in the Marichjhanpi area, a part of the non-farming Sundarbans were exclusively from the Dalit communities and very particularly they were the Namasudras of East Bengal. What happened there? The Namasudras were the major community in East Pakistan at the time of partition of Bengal and they had come to West Bengal as a flux of refugees.

It was a long journey the Dalit refugees traveled through their sufferings in homeless, shelter-less and foodless condition in different parts of Bengal as well as in India. ... these homeless and shelter-less people started to live in the Marichjhanpi-Sundarbans. They started to convert the unproductive lands into the productivity using their unlimited toiling capability.... The police force evacuated the dalit-occupancy from Marichjhanpi(1979). What happened then? The Dalits were forced to leave the place. And perhaps it is the black day in the history of Dalits in West Bengal that 36 people of dalits lost their lives en-masse by police firing on the 31st January...<sup>iii</sup>

The Morichjhanpi episode is not singular and is not to be seen as mere unfortunate fallout of Partition. These people had been living in Marichjhanpu since 1947 and were forcefully evacuated in 1979. Such forceful evacuations have been witnessed even in more recent times. In 2003, again a few hundred Dalits had lost their home very near Kolkata:

On the morning of 2 February 2003, an approximately 500-strong Rapid Action Force, accompanied by ambulances, fire brigades and two or three bulldozers, forcibly entered the Dalit community in Belilious Park, evicted over 700 families, demolishing hundreds of brick houses, a school building, temples and statues.

The eviction was carried out without prior notice and in the absence of a resettlement plan. The Howrah Municipality, it is reported had launched a development and beautification scheme that includes extension of the park in favour of commercial interests. The Dalits residing in Belilious Park area were not trespassers, as alluded, but permanent residents; their families had lived there for almost a century; prohibited from renting in the upper-caste areas of the town in pre-Independence India, they had settled in the park.<sup>iv</sup>

As if being homeless, as if sudden victimization had not been enough, as if wiping their contribution in society had not been enough... in recent time, when globalization, constitution, education had apparently liberated us, discrimination reared its ugly head - this time in the heartland of an institution of higher Education. Chuni Kotal, a Dalit Adivasi of Lodha Shabar tribe, in 1985 became the first woman graduate among the Lodha Shabars. Her death through

suicide on 16 August 1992, after years of harassment by officials at the University not only united the Lodha Shabar community in a big way but the whole of the Dalit community. The same year of her death, **Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha** started its journey and organized a protest march for Chuni. It's literally counterpart, *Chathurtho Duniya* became a Dalit mouthpiece in Bengal and has been running successfully till date. At the helm of affairs of the magazine is a man called Manohar Mouli Biswas. Born and brought up in a remote village Dakshin Matiargati in Khulna district in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in 1943, he passed matriculation in 1959. After passing Intermediate Science in 1961 with National Scholarship, he completed his graduation in 1963 from Calcutta University. Since long the poems from his pen has been speaking of the sorrows and sufferings of the oppressed Dalit people in the caste-ridden Indian society, with specific reference to Bengal.

Poverty and atrocities could not diminish the spirit of Manohar Mouli Biswas is needless to say. At present, he is the President of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha; he had been editing a famous pioneering bi-monthly literary magazine named *Dalit Mirror* in English for more than a decade. During his stay at Nagpur in 1968 for his Departmental Training as Engineering Supervisor in P and T Dept. of Central Govt. he had come in touch with the Dalit Literary Movement in Maharashtra and that changed the course of his life as a writer.

Biswas's education and consequent job allowed him to overcome the struggles of everyday life but the wounds and pain remained with him. The best part of Biswas is that he wears his identity on his sleeves. When asked in an interview if he called himself a Dalit writer, he had thus replied:

Why shall I go to call myself a Dalit writer? What is fact I'm born in a Dalit caste and I write about my own people and their sufferings. That is the reason why people call me a Dalit writer.<sup>v</sup>

Time and again, Biswas registered his protest through his works and poems. Here in the paper, I would want to study Biswas' *Ghatotkach and Hidimba: A Dialogue* as one such poem of protest against cultural hegemony and dominance.

“I believe that the truth of any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together,” wrote Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*). Now the reason why I chose to quote Alice Walker here is two: a) In the feminist piece *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker rightly identifies that a lack of recorded literary history have robbed the Black African Woman of continuity in history and it is hence easier to isolate her and her experience never got recorded. Here I wish to draw attention to the fact that the subaltern is the unheard voice, unrecorded voice, hence his emotions remain unregistered in canonical literature or history. b) Many times analogy between the experience of the African and the Dalit in India have been drawn. Mouli in his poem, *Ghatotkach* presents the other side of the story and presents nothing but the truth that had gone unheard for so long. The poem contains Ghatotkach's painful question:

I can swell and swallow  
All the injustice of the world  
Then why am I hated? Why am I ignored?

Ghatotkach's question has been on the mind of the Dalit for thousands of years. In subverting the tale and by recording Ghatotkach's view, Manohar Biswas has very successfully communicated the continuity of Dalit experience through time and history. The poem presents the argument that the distinct and unique Dalit experience had indeed existed for a long time.

Biswas in choosing an episode from one of the two famous epics of the land makes a powerful statement. Usually History is written by winners, naturally so are epics. Epics narrate stories of and from life. Whose life? It celebrates the superior race while the marginalized remain in the periphery. For them, there is no protest nor the necessary glory or grandeur. Biased representations developed cultural genealogy in favour of the dominant group/s while the non-dominant groups naturally marginalized do not seem to have become well delineated characters in epics. Conclusively, to say that there has always been a conscious pedagogic agenda embedded in the epics wherein the subalterns never have had their stories told squarely would not be wrong. There has been always been slight or partial presentation of them.

When Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak wrote her phenomenal essay: *Can the subaltern speak?* - she was clearly hinting at the need of alternative point of view and the need to give voice to the subaltern. Spivak's question expectedly stirred a hornet. The essay discusses the lack of account and how the subaltern is left anonymous and mute. Biswas' poem of our discussion gives voice to that mute subaltern.

Monohar Biswas as an educated Dalit gives voice to two 'othered'/subaltern characters as he reconstructs the Ghatotkach and Hidimba tale from the *Mahabharata*. To begin with, literature by the subaltern should not be seen just as telling the tale from one's location but also to be understood as a form of protest. Sharankumar Limbale's in *Towards an Aesthetic Dalit Literature* suggests that the standards of evaluation of Dalit literature are: a) Artists must be motivated by their experience b) Artists must socialize their experiences c) Artists experiences must seem relevant to all time.<sup>vi</sup>

I would like to look at Manohar Mouli Biswas's long poem *Ghatotkach and Hidimba: A Dialogue* (translated by Ipsita Chanda from Bengali to English) that the poet himself says is one poem of resistance as representation of an experience relevant to all time. The said poem is actually a dialogue between Hidimba and her son. In the Sanskrit epic Ghatotkach appears dutifully to fight the war on behalf of the Pandavas when called. What should shock us is that he and his mother are remembered after such a long gap! In the Sanskrit epic Krishna does something that shocks us for its heartlessness. At the death of Ghatotkacha, the *Rakshasa* son of Bheema, while the entire Pandava army grieves, Krishna alone is delighted. Such is his joy that it is said that he begins to roar like a lion, something so uncharacteristic of him. Roaring, repeatedly in rapture, he embraces Arjuna in joy - Arjuna is thoroughly confused. He asks Krishna the reason of such joy when all the Pandavas were in tears. He had never seen Krishna like this before, he confesses. Krishna explains the cause of his happiness. One, that the Shakti, the mighty, infallible weapon Karna had received from Indra in return for his *kavacha* (body cover) and *kundala* (earrings) which could be used only once and against a single enemy, has now been used against Ghatotkacha and cannot now be used against Arjuna anymore. Krishna is essentially justifies the death of Ghatotkach.

Biswas questions this unjust status of Gatotkach and his mother through a dialogue between them in the poem:

Ghatotkach: Today, mother, tell me

In which family was I born?

What is my identity?

Why I am here today in the forest?

If I am not fatherless,

Why have I been, tell me Ma,

Deprived of father-love?

You have told me,

So today I know

My maternal grandparent is not from the lineage of the Sun or Moon

No blood-saffron mark or

Sandal paste of pride ever adorned his forehead;

My maternal uncle

Was a forest-king, the demon Hidimb

Who called him demon?

Why? By what right?

Were his nails sharp enough

To rend apart a human breast?

Or tear with teeth

The bloodiest flesh of many a living being?

Then tell me mother,

Why should I believe in absurd imagined tales?

I reject these absurd imaginings

I reject them

In truth this a cunning trick a terrible plot.

In childhood I sucked  
The pure white milk of your breasts  
Sucked  
Like any other child born on earth.

In the conversation with her son, Hidimba also speaks of her pain and neglect:

My husband, with his elder, his mother  
And leading the three youngers by the hand  
Returned, once more to their home.  
Panchali, won in an ordeal from the land of Panchal  
Went with them too  
In the palace, today,  
She gathers with both hands  
The love of five husbands.  
And this unfortunate one  
Never had a loving word  
From her husband  
Never once did he say,  
Beloved, the mother of my son Ghatotkach  
Come with us, let me take you  
To your martial home,  
The line of emperors.

Mother-in-law too----- she who once  
Lovingly took me into her home  
Blessed me with love  
On the day of our union



Even she did not say a word  
Did not say- Come, daughter-in-law,  
Come now,  
This is the age-old custom of Bharat,  
All daughters leave their natal home,  
Accompany their husbands to the martial abode.

A little later, Hidimba explains how Bheema and she had met and she was neither conquered nor won but it had been love at first sight between them (Hidimba was the first consort of any Pandava brother, yet she is never given her due):

Son, your mother was the consort of the bravest  
Remember, your father  
Was the greatest of braves  
On the day we first saw each other  
We both carried swords  
But the difference was  
He was an Arya male, and I, a  
Non-Aryan woman;  
When we saw each other  
Both of us cast down our eyes  
And our swords  
Who knows which inscrutable power directed us,  
Whose blessings showered  
Upon our bowed heads.

Hidimba tells her son how she paid the price of her first love with the life of her only sibling who was killed by Bheema. She further tells her son that for five months she collected food for the five Pandavas and their mother in the forest, this phase she recollects as the only time when she

had marital joy. Unlike other women in the epic, who needed to be protected by men, Hidimba is the protector of the Pandavas in the dense forest. Even Kunti asks Bhima to marry her, as a son by Hidimba would be help to them in the future. Slowly the poem by Biswas veers towards the question of the division between the Aryans and non-Aryans. Ghatotkach rises to protest the inequality melted out to them through ages and what he says in the play makes him the spokesman of the Dalit/ oppressed class:

Have the great epic poets  
Explained the matter thus?  
Valmiki, Vyasa, both great

Valmiki in the Treta era

Dwaipayana in Dwapar  
Each of them, in the throes of agony  
Etched their own mindscape  
In their own way.  
Today I shall speak

My own words,  
Merge, for once, my voice  
With that of the poets.

Later, Ghatotkach speaks of the combat that would take place between him and Karna in the field of Kurushetra. He understands Karna, as the son of a low caste man had faced ignominy and it was an ironic twist of fate that they were to face each other in a deadly combat:

Oh mother, this is difficult time for me  
I have been deprived of parental love  
By the arrogant pride of Aryan-ness  
In these same hands must I take up  
Arms to kill.  
With heart turned to stone must I shower  
Those arms upon paternal kin,  
Radheya, Karna, he is named,  
Who has been deprived from even a drop  
Of maternal love, from the moment of his birth.  
I ask your permission mother  
Shall I go to war?  
To war, shall I go,  
A child deprived of father's love  
To fight against a child deprived of mother's love –  
Ma, this a difficult war the earth presents  
The deprived fight against the deprived,  
From time immemorial on this earth  
The dispossessed kill themselves  
    Indulging in suicidal wars,  
They wipe themselves out from the earth's face.

What is noteworthy is that Karna is cursed by Draupadi that he would never be able to fight like a kshyatriya. She had earlier rejected him as her possible husband because he was a 'suta putra'. Karna who is said to have had the potential to stand upto Arjuna is in actuality never shown as a winner of any war. In the beginning of the 18 day war, he is not even allowed to fight because of his supposed lineage! Both Ghatotkach and Karna are not allowed to realize their fullest potential in the great war of Mahabharata. Is that not injustice?

Interestingly the death of Ghatotkach's cousin, Abhimanyu is also in the fatal war at Kurushetra and literally at the hands of Karna. Both prove their mettle on battlefield. Unlike Abhimanyu, Ghatotkach's place in the war is a favour done to him. Let us recollect an episode in the epic: King Kiratasena, a forest dweller but an invincible warrior had three infallible arrows with which he could win a war, offered first to fight on behalf of the Kauravas. Duryodhana rejected his offer – in the war of the cultured, the forest dwellers could not have any role to play. Disappointed, he then went to the Pandavas but Yudhisthir too refused him for the same reason. Ghatotkach had been time and again used by the Pandavas. In his death Yudhisthira laments:

O son of Devaki, when we were living in the forest Ghatotkacha came to us and rendered many services. While Arjuna was away in the heavenly planets, Ghatotkacha stayed with us for our protection. When we traveled great distances, he used to carry Draupadi upon his back and relieve her from fatigue. My affection for Ghatotkacha is twice what I feel for Sahadeva. I was dear to him, and he was dear to me. For offending Arjuna, the Sindhu King was slain, and for offending me, I will slay that sinful Karna. This act alone will console my grief.<sup>vii</sup>

But where is Bheema? He laments the death of his child but why does he not flare up like Arjuna? Arjuna vows to immerse in fire if by day end, he fails to avenge the death of his son, Abhimanyu. Bheema who had been vocal about the many wrongs melted out to them and Draupadi and even swore to drink the blood of his own cousin, does not say much on the death of his son. Both Ghatotkach and Abhimanyu are reared by their mothers away from their fathers. But in the end crucial war, Shubadra, Arjuna's wife and Abhimanyu's mother is allowed in the tents on the battlefield. But why is Hidimba not recalled like her son? The Pandavas strangely during their exile had not remembered Hidimba. The latter was last seen in the epic when Yudhistir had to perform a yajna at Indrapastra. The holy fire did not light up as Yudhistir was childless and it was then that Ghatotkach was recalled.

Hidimba advised her son to pay homage to his father, Krishna, Vysa and Yudhistir only. This enraged Draupadi who cursed Ghatotkach with a short life. A fuming Hidimba ended up cursing

the future children of Draupadi with short span of life and no glory as warriors. Ironically, both the women ended up cursing the future generation with terrible end. Nonetheless Hidimba who should have been the rightful queen is never remembered by Bhima or by his family, once they had left the forest. This is difficult to swallow as Hidimba was neither won in a Swyamvar nor abducted but love had tied her with Bhima... and love was so easily forgotten. In having lost her only son, we can only imagine her agony as Hidimba's pain is not recorded in the epic.

Biswas is not alone in wanting to question the wrong done to the avarna/dalit; there has been similar anger that has been vented out by other Dalit poets:

You can do a lot of things

With your left hand.

Besides, fascist Dronacharyas warrant

Left-handed treatment.

Also,

You don't need your right thumb,

To pull a trigger or hurl a bomb.<sup>viii</sup> (*Ekalavya*, Meena Kandaswamy)

Dalit literature reveals the collective consciousness of people whose voice had been suppressed through long ages of history. It that is Dalit Poetry, being a branch of the same tree believes in the same. It “transfers the themes of isolation, alienation, protest, revolt, and struggle for survival, freedom from all sorts of bondage and exploitation, apathy, estrangement and uprootedness - a search for identity and a longing for human dignity”<sup>ix</sup>

And finally, the spirit of this paper can be best embodied if I take the liberty of quoting again from Biswas' poem that brings out the sense of wrong that Ghatotkack feels and that he rightly claims is the fate of many like him:

Ma, you told me to forget

The divisions between Aryan and non-Aryan

I too want to forget

But who allows it?

Keeping people oppressed

Is like a vile secret plan

That courses in the blood,

The blood-cells struggle to survive,

Draw fragrance from the breast of earth

We too become bloodied

With labour from dawn to dusk

The white blood cells from some civilized State

Colonize our labour, write our history

Tell me mother, this an useless debate,

Arguments for their own sake,

Why should I accept them?

Biswas' style is that of subversion and not anti-language and this I think makes his work a process of reordering and reconstructing the truth that had remained untold for ages.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=PT0AfSD9u2gC>. Accessed on 5th April,2017. Bulleh Shah is a poet from Punjab and the quoted lines are couplets by him.

<sup>ii</sup> Joya Chatterji, Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947. Cambridge University Press, 2002. pp. 191-194.

<sup>iii</sup> Manohar Mouli Biswas, Why Dalits in Bengal are in Protest? Round the Table, 21Dec,2010. <https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com...dalits...bengal>. Accessed on 14th May,2017

<sup>iv</sup> Shoba Chatterjee, Children Impacted by Forced Evictions, 7th June,2011. [www.indiatogether.org/articles/cry-human-rights/print](http://www.indiatogether.org/articles/cry-human-rights/print). Accessed on 20th April,2017

<sup>v</sup> Santanu Halder, Manohar Biswas: A revolutionary Dalit voice in Bengali Dalit Literature, Merinews, 8th March,2013. [www.merineews.com/article/manohar-biswas-a-revolutionary.../15882505](http://www.merineews.com/article/manohar-biswas-a-revolutionary.../15882505). Accessed on 10th April, 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Sharan Kumar Limbale, (2004). About Dalit Literature. In A. Mukherjee (Trans.), Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations ,Orient Longman, p.88.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.wisdomlib.org> > Contents > Drona Parva, Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> April,2017.

<sup>viii</sup> Raji Narasimhan, Meena Kandasamy's Touch: The Aggression of Suppression, Language in India. [languageinindia.com/may2011/rajimeenakfinal.pdf](http://languageinindia.com/may2011/rajimeenakfinal.pdf). Accessed on 8th April,2017.

<sup>ix</sup> L.S. Deshpande, 'Dalit Poetry' in N. M. Aston ed. Dalit literature and African-American Literature. New Delhi, Prestige Books, 2001, p.60.

**Bio**

**Dr. Madhumita Majumdar** ,PhD (University of Jadavpur) is an Assistant Professor in English at Bhangar Mahavidyalaya,(affiliated to Calcutta University) Bhangar, 24 Paraganas (S) has been teaching at the college for 15 years now. Her areas of interest are Victorian Literature, Indian Writing in English with inclination towards Dalit Literature. She has presented papers at national and international seminars and has articles to her credit in reputed journals and books.