

DALIT AESTHETICS IN BENGAL

The Dramatic World of Raju Das

DR. MAYURAKSHI MITRA



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www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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Dedicated To

The silenced voices that refused erasure, to the Dalit communities of Bengal whose lived realities shape resistance into art, and to Raju Das, whose theatre transforms pain into political consciousness—

this work is humbly dedicated.

Dalit Aesthetics in Bengal

The Dramatic World of Raju Das

Acknowledgement

This book has evolved from years of research, dialogue, and engagement with questions of caste, performance, and cultural resistance in Bengal. I remain deeply grateful to my teachers and mentors whose intellectual guidance and critical interventions have shaped the conceptual framework of this study. Their scholarship continues to inform my thinking.

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Mayurakshi Mitra

Preface

In India, Dalit aesthetics has evolved into a literary and cultural genre as well as a tool for performative, political, and ethical opposition. In Bengal, where dominant narratives of cultural modernity have long been shaped by *bhadralok* sensibilities, Dalit creative forms, particularly in theatre, have remained sidelined, under-theorized, or selectively appropriated. **Dalit Aesthetics in Bengal: The Dramatic World of Raju Das** seeks to bridge this critical divide by emphasizing theatre as a critical site where caste, body, memory, and resistance meet. In the history of Bengali Dalit theatre, Raju Das has a special place. Rather than only portraying Dalit suffering, his plays perform a fundamental rewriting of aesthetics itself. Through the use of straightforward staging, pure emotional intensity, informal language, and the primacy of the Dalit body, Das challenges the universalist assertions of prevailing aesthetic frameworks as well as popular theatrical norms. His theatre maintains that aesthetics is intricately linked to caste power structures and that form and social location are inextricably linked.

Raju Das is treated in this book as a theorist-in-practice of Dalit aesthetics, a director and dramatist, and a recorder of the caste experience. Using performance analysis, cultural history, and theoretical contributions from Dalit studies, subaltern studies, trauma theory, and political philosophy, the chapters examine how Das's plays convey themes of humiliation, dispossession, migration, gendered violence, and collective memory. His use of stillness, space, corporeality, and folk elements as counter-aesthetic devices that resist sentimentalization and spectacle.

Importantly, this study situates Raju Das's work in the context of pan-Indian Dalit thinking as articulated by contemporary Dalit cultural critics, B.R. Ambedkar, and Gopal Guru. Additionally, it situates Das within a broader lineage of Dalit cultural resistance in Bengal that is

based on political activities, folk performance customs, and oral histories. By doing this, the book argues that rather than being seen as a local subset of a larger movement, Dalit theatre in Bengal should be seen as a place of theoretical production in and of itself. This book is meant for a wide range of readers, including academics studying Dalit studies and theatre studies, students studying Indian literature and performance, and readers interested in how aesthetics could function as a form of resistance. Furthermore, it's an effort to honour a body of work that has persistently challenged silence—both on stage and within academic discourse.

Dalit Aesthetics in Bengal: The Dramatic World of Raju Das suggests that Dalit theatre is about reinventing the conditions of seeing, feeling, and knowing in addition to representation. This book aspires to promote a bigger attempt by paying specific attention to Raju Das's dramatic world: the acceptance of Dalit aesthetics as a revolutionary political philosophy based on collective struggle and lived experience.

Mayurakshi Mitra

About the Author



Dr. Mayurakshi Mitra is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Maharashtra College of Arts, Science and Commerce, University of Mumbai, Mumbai.

Her research engages critically with the marginalised voices in Indian theatre, the intersection of Gender and Caste, Dalit aesthetics and counter-aesthetic practices as site for resistance against gender and caste

oppression. Her doctoral thesis focused on "Gender and Caste Marginalization in the Select Plays of Vijay, Tendulkar, Raju Das and Mahesh Dattani". She has written extensively on the dramatic works of Raju Das, examining themes of marginality, humiliation, gendered violence, memory, and political consciousness through performance.

Her academic interests include Dalit Literary Theory, Protest Literature, Literature of Disability, Intersectional Aesthetics, Trauma and Memory Studies and Eco Critical Studies. She is particularly invested in recovering subaltern voices that have been excluded from the history of mainstream literature or have been given marginalised space and theorizing it as a political and philosophical intervention rather than a mere representation of a category.

Mayurakshi Mitra's work contributes to ongoing debate on caste, culture and resistance in contemporary society. She has also published several research papers in national and international journals and her research papers on Eco Critical concerns in Humanities are worth mentioning.

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Part I:
Dalit Theatre: Origin and
Development in Bengal

Chapter 1

Introduction to Dalit Theatre in India

1. Understanding Dalit Theatre

The history of Indian theatre is often narrated through the lens of classical Sanskrit drama (e.g., Nāṭyaśāstra), colonial-era adaptations, and modern urban theatre. In this dominant narrative, the voices of the Dalit communities have remained largely absent. The emergence of Dalit theatre as a distinct genre is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising in the late 20th century as part of the broader Dalit literary movement.

The evolution of Dalit theatre in India exemplifies a larger socio-political and cultural movement—from the forced silence of the oppressed to their bold assertion through artistic expression. Rooted in the centuries-old caste system, Dalit communities were historically denied access to both education and mainstream artistic platforms. Hence, Dalit theatre, as a form of resistance and assertion, emerges from the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities—those relegated to the margins of Indian society by the rigid caste system. The term "Dalit," meaning "broken" or "oppressed," is both a political and cultural identity, reclaimed to articulate defiance against centuries of social exclusion, discrimination, and violence.

Theatre, as an art form was often dominated by upper-caste aesthetics and narratives, had long excluded Dalit voices and concerns. The history of Indian theatre is often narrated through the lens of classical Sanskrit drama (e.g., Nāṭyaśāstra), colonial-era adaptations, and modern urban theatre. In this dominant narrative, the voices of the Dalit communities have remained largely absent. The emergence of Dalit theatre as a distinct genre is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising in the late 20th century as part of the broader Dalit literary movement. From the 1960s onward, particularly influenced by the Ambedkarite movement, Dalit theatre began to emerge as a radical

space for protest, identity formation, and socio-political resistance. This theatre form, like other Dalit literary forms, is not simply about aesthetic performance. It is inherently political, embodying the collective struggle for dignity, equality, and justice. Rooted in lived realities, Dalit drama moves beyond entertainment; it functions as a testimonial, a space of remembrance, and a mode of resistance. It critiques Brahmanical hegemony, caste oppression, and the exclusionary tendencies of mainstream cultural forms.

Dalit theatre rejects the elitism and Sanskritic traditions of classical Indian drama, instead turning toward folk idioms, oral traditions, and autobiographical realism. It is defined not merely by the caste identity of its creators but by its ideological orientation—whether it challenges systemic caste hierarchies and speaks from within the Dalit lifeworld.

1.1 The Politics of Silence: Caste, Culture, and Erasure

In traditional Indian dramaturgy—from Sanskrit theatre to modern realist plays—the Dalit subject was largely absent or reduced to peripheral stereotypes. The Brahmanical control over cultural production meant that the worldview of Dalits was not only ignored but often distorted. In Bengal, this erasure was compounded by the myth of castelessness propagated by the Bhadrakol intelligentsia, who preferred to portray Bengal as a space of egalitarian modernity, conveniently brushing caste violence and discrimination under the carpet.

Dalit communities in Bengal, despite constituting a significant demographic, remained culturally invisible. Their modes of expression were oral, performative, and communitarian—often deemed non-literary by dominant cultural standards. This historical silencing delayed the emergence of a formal Dalit theatre tradition.

1.2. Seeds of Assertion: From Social Reform to Cultural Awakening

The first waves of assertion came not through theatre directly but via social and religious reform movements, particularly the Matua

movement led by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur. This movement emphasized self-respect, spiritual autonomy, and education for the Namasudras (a major Dalit caste in Bengal), challenging the caste hierarchy through accessible religious and cultural practices.

Influenced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideology and the rise of Dalit literature in Maharashtra, Bengal too saw a gradual cultural reawakening in the post-1970s period. Dalit writers and performers began to reflect on their experiences of exclusion and discrimination through more organized platforms. The shift from silence to assertion began to gain form in writings, performances, street plays, and eventually in full-fledged theatre productions.

Thus, Dalit theatre emerged as a tool for consciousness-raising. More than just a genre, it was recognized as an act of resistance. It started challenging casteist ideologies, exposing structural inequalities, and demanded social justice. In Bengal, this assertion took the form of grassroots theatre movements in rural and semi-urban areas, often performed in dialects, local idioms, and with minimal resources. These performances were community-centric, focusing on real stories of oppression, migration, bonded labour, gender violence, and religious marginalization. Gradually theatre groups began emerging from Dalit-dominated districts such as North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, and parts of Dinajpur. Their performances, although lacking institutional support, captured the urgency of lived Dalit experiences.

In Maharashtra, the Dalit Panthers movement ¹of the 1970s sparked a radical literary and theatrical awakening. Writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Premanand Gajvi, and J.V. Pawar began using theatre as a mode of street-level protest and cultural expression. Gajvi's play *Ghotbhar Pani* ("A Sip of Water") exemplifies how theatre articulated the dehumanisation faced by Dalits while advocating for

¹Dalit Panthers movement a militant social and literary movement founded in Maharashtra in 1972 by young activists like Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar, inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the U.S. Black Panthers.

social justice. In Karnataka, dramatists like K.B. Siddaiah² and Chennaveera Kanavi³ infused theatre with Ambedkarite ideology, bringing Dalit issues into the public consciousness through a fusion of folk forms and political discourse. Tamil Nadu witnessed the rise of self-respect theatre under the influence of Periyar's⁴ rationalist movement, which encouraged anti-caste themes in performance. These regional movements collectively laid the groundwork for Dalit theatre as a pan-Indian phenomenon that redefines performance, space, and spectatorship.

Dalit theatre is marked by an urgency to articulate the pain, resistance, and aspirations of the oppressed. Common thematic strands in Dalit theatre centre around caste-based violence and humiliation (e.g., public lynching, untouchability), landlessness and economic exploitation, religious conversion and Ambedkarite ideals, gendered caste oppression (focusing on Dalit women's bodies and voices), migration, displacement, and urban precarity, hope, collective identity, and cultural assertion. These themes are often presented in raw, unfiltered language, employing regional dialects, irony, and stark imagery to break with the sanitised language of mainstream theatre. These emotions are best expressed by resisting the dominant aesthetics of classical and urban elite theatre. It rejects the "rasa"-based dramaturgy of Sanskrit tradition, which privileges harmony and emotional catharsis, in favour of discomfort, confrontation, and consciousness-raising. Rather than idealising life, it presents the harsh realities of castes. Theatre theorists such as Sharankumar Limbale argue that Dalit aesthetics are rooted in "truth" (satya) and "rebellion" (vidroh), prioritising authenticity over

² K.B. Siddaiah: Indian Kannada-language poet, writer, and sociopolitical philosopher from Karnataka, recognized for his activism in the Dalit movement and literary explorations of caste oppression and social justice.

³ Chennaveera Kanavi: Indian Kannada language poet and author.

⁴ Periyar: Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy, commonly known as Periyar, was an Indian social activist and politician. He was the organiser of the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam and is considered the architect of Dravidian politics.

ornamental art. The performance space is often unconventional—street corners, community halls, or even rural schoolyards—transforming theatre into a people's platform.

Language always played a critical role in Dalit theatre by employing non-standard dialects, regional idioms, and oral storytelling modes to resist Sanskritization and urban elitism. This use of language helped in building intimacy with the audience and reinforced the authenticity of representation.

2. From Devotion to Dissent: Influence of the Bhakti Movement, Ambedkarism, and Postcolonial Resistance on Dalit Theatre

Dalit theatre in India that has emerged as a powerful site of protest and cultural reimagination, had drawn from various philosophical and socio-political streams—particularly the Bhakti movement, Ambedkarite thought, and postcolonial resistance discourse. These influences have shaped not only the thematic core of Dalit theatre but also its aesthetics, politics, and modes of storytelling. In Bengal, where caste oppression was long masked by the myth of a "casteless" Bengali identity, Dalit theatre has evolved into a platform for asserting subaltern voices and reclaiming historical memory.

The Bhakti movement⁵ (from the 8th to 17th centuries) played a radical role in challenging the Brahmanical orthodoxy and caste hierarchy through the use of devotional poetry and music. Saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Chokhamela, and Namdev—many of them from oppressed castes—spoke of a formless god, rejected rituals, and upheld egalitarian ideals.

⁵ Bhakti movement: The Bhakti movement was a 7th–17th century religious and social reformation that swept India, emphasizing intense, personal devotion (bhakti) to a personal god as the primary path to salvation, challenging caste hierarchies, rigid rituals, and elite Sanskrit monopoly by using regional languages and promoting social equality.

In Bengal, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's Vaishnavism⁶, although popular, retained caste distinctions. However, the Matua movement, founded by Harichand Thakur (a Dalit reformer) in the 19th century, drew upon the bhakti tradition and radically reinterpreted it for Namasudra⁷ emancipation. Harichand's son, Guruchand Thakur, carried this forward through education, organization, and cultural expression.

Dalit theatre often draws upon oral traditions, devotional songs, and myth retellings rooted in bhakti sensibilities. This legacy shows up in Performances that blend spirituality with protest, especially in rural contexts. Through cultural art forms like bhajan, kirtan, and folk verse in plays, bhakti figures like Ravidas voiced Dalit assertion. Dalit theatre draws upon this trend of narrative to express devotion to critique caste and spirituality becomes subversive. Thus, bhakti provided Dalit theatre with both a moral vocabulary and a performative heritage.

Besides Bhakti Movement, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contributions to the Dalit movement are immense. His contribution was not limited to politics and law; his influence permeates cultural production, including literature and theatre. His emphatic rejection of Hindu caste orthodoxy, his embrace of Buddhism, and his advocacy for social justice through education and self-respect inspired a generation of Dalit writers and dramatists. In Bengal, Ambedkarite thought gained traction particularly in post-1970 Dalit literary and theatre movements, inspiring a new wave of assertive and radical writing.

In the Postcolonial era, India inherited not just colonial legacies but also entrenched caste-based hierarchies. The dominant nationalist narrative, particularly in Bengal, was shaped by the Bhadrakalok elite,

⁶ Vaishnavism: Vaishnavism is a major, monotheistic Hindu tradition focused on the worship of Vishnu and his avatars, primarily Krishna or Rama, as the Supreme Lord.

⁷ Namasudra: Namasudra, earlier known as Chandal, is an Avarna Bengali Hindu community originating from eastern and central Bengal.

who saw themselves as progressive, secular, and class-conscious—yet were often blind to their own caste privilege. Dalit theatre, especially in the post-1990s liberalization era, has increasingly engaged with postcolonial critiques of nationalism, development, and modernity. Seminal works of Postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Partha Chatterjee have given a fresh leash of life to Dalit literature in the mainstream literature. The convergence of Bhakti's emotive power, Ambedkar's rational critique, and postcolonial resistance discourse has led to a new dramaturgy in Dalit theatre. This synthesis is visible in contemporary performances where bhakti songs are repurposed as protest chants, where Ambedkar appears as a messianic figure, and where postcolonial institutions are critiqued as casteist regimes in modern disguise.

The historical trajectory of Dalit theatre is deeply intertwined with the Bhakti tradition's emotional rebellion, Ambedkarism's moral-political clarity, and postcolonialism's critique of hegemonic narratives. Each influence has contributed to the making of a theatre that is raw, radical, and revolutionary. In Bengal, where caste has long been “invisibilized” by dominant cultural forces, Dalit theatre not only asserts presence—it demands transformation. Whether through the mystic verse of Ravidas, the legal vision of Ambedkar, or the postcolonial refusal of exclusionary nationalism, Dalit theatre has continued to shape a cultural politics of liberation.

Chapter 2

A Historical Overview of Caste in West Bengal

Caste in West Bengal has often been subsumed under the broad canopy of class, colonialism, and nationalism. Intellectual traditions emerging from the Bengal Renaissance and Marxist historiography have contributed to a curious silence around caste, a silence that is both political and epistemic. While caste has been overtly articulated in the sociopolitical structures of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, or Uttar Pradesh, Bengal presents an apparent paradox: caste is both present and invisible, structurally operative yet ideologically denied. However, caste in Bengal, far from being a peripheral or dormant force, has historically shaped every major social and political transformation.

1. Precolonial Formations: Fluidity and Hierarchy

Before British rule, the Bengal region was home to a highly pluralistic and fluid social order. The presence of multiple religious traditions—Buddhism, Tantrism⁸, Islam, and various indigenous practices—challenged the dominance of orthodox Brahmanism. The deltaic landscape, abundance of natural resources, and the relative isolation of many communities from mainstream Hindu orthodoxy allowed for flexible social interactions.

However, from the 10th century onward, the rise of the Sena dynasty⁹, known for its Brahmanical orthodoxy, began reshaping this

⁸ Tantrism is a religious and spiritual movement within Hinduism and Buddhism, characterized by its use of ritual practices and esoteric traditions to achieve spiritual liberation and power. A core belief is that the universe is a manifestation of divine energy and that individuals can harness this energy for spiritual goals.

⁹ The Sena dynasty was a Hindu dynasty during the early medieval period on the Indian subcontinent, that ruled from Bengal through the 11th and 12th centuries. The

pluralistic structure. Ballal Sena and Lakshman Sena are credited with introducing the caste hierarchy more formally. They sought to standardize the varna system and promote Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas to the top of the social ladder. Numerous local communities—Kaivartas,¹⁰ Chandals¹¹ (later Namasudras), Doms¹², and Pods¹³—were relegated to the lower rungs.

This restructuring was not merely symbolic; it had material consequences. Access to land, temple rights, education, and administrative posts were reserved for upper castes. While local caste identities were still in flux, the growing ideological power of Brahmanism, backed by political authority, began hardening social divisions.

2. Colonial Bengal: Codification, Bhadrak Lok Ascendancy, and Dalit Exclusion

The arrival of the British East India Company in the late 18th century ushered in a new regime of knowledge, classification, and

empire at its peak covered much of the north-eastern region of the Indian subcontinent. The Palas of Bengal were succeeded by the Sena Dynasty.

¹⁰ Kaivartas can refer to a historical community of fishermen and boatmen in India, or the medieval Kaivarta revolt led by the chieftain Divya against the Pala king Mahipala II. The term is also used for present-day communities like the Jalia Kaibarta in states like Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar.

¹¹ Chandals, also known as Namasudras, were a Hindu caste group in Eastern Bengal historically associated with "menial" or "outcaste" status. The term "Chandal" itself is of Sanskrit origin and was often used to describe people outside the four-varna caste system, though the specific community known as the Namasudras later rejected this label.

¹² The Doms are a caste or group of people in South Asia, traditionally considered Scheduled Castes (formerly untouchables) in India. Their historical occupations included drumming, singing, and the disposal of dead bodies, leading to their marginalization and social exclusion. While traditional occupations persist, they are also involved in other work like sweeping, sanitation, and crafts.

¹³ "Pods" refers to the Poundra or Poundra Kshatriya, a Bengali Hindu community that is historically a lower-caste group in Bengal, India. They have faced significant social injustice and discrimination, including untouchability, and have been the subject of social movements, such as the Poundra Kshatriya movement.

governance. The colonial project of enumeration—through censuses, ethnographies, and legal systems—transformed the caste system into a rigid and administrative category.

2.1 The Birth of the Bhadrakalok

The colonial state favoured certain caste groups—particularly Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas—by employing them in administrative and educational institutions. These groups came to be known as the Bhadrakalok (literally, “gentlefolk”), and they emerged as the dominant class in colonial Bengal. While they presented themselves as liberal, enlightened, and nationalist, they maintained a deep-seated caste exclusivity.

The Bhadrakalok monopolized English education, bureaucratic posts, literary production, and leadership in reformist and nationalist movements. Their cultural and political dominance created a narrative of caste-less modernity that effectively erased lower-caste voices and practices.

2.2 Codification of Caste

Herbert Risley’s anthropometric ethnography and the 1901 Census categorized Bengal’s population into a pseudo-scientific racial hierarchy. Dalit communities such as the Namasudras, Pods, Rajbanshis¹⁴, Bauris, and Doms were labelled as “depressed castes” or “backward classes.” Their traditional occupations—fishing, scavenging, leatherwork, and manual labour—were stigmatized as impure.

Colonial land policies such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793¹⁵ further disenfranchised these communities. While upper castes

¹⁴ The Rajbansis are an ethnic group primarily found in North Bengal, lower Assam, and parts of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan, historically associated with the Koch dynasty.

¹⁵ The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was a land revenue system introduced by the British East India Company in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, establishing the zamindars as hereditary landowners.

became zamindars and rentiers, Dalits were relegated to landless labour or bonded tenancy. Social mobility became virtually impossible.

3. Dalit Assertion and Resistance

Despite exclusion, Dalit communities in Bengal began to assert their agency, often through religious reform, political organization, and educational movements.

3.1 The Matua Movement

Harichand Thakur (1812–1877), a Namasudra mystic and social reformer, founded the Matua Mahasangha¹⁶—a sect that rejected Brahmanical rituals and emphasized self-respect, communal upliftment, and egalitarian spirituality. His son, Guruchand Thakur, extended this movement into the domain of education and legal rights.

The Matuas challenged the caste order both ideologically and institutionally. They built schools, contested untouchability, and organized mass mobilizations. By the early 20th century, the Matua Mahasangha had become a powerful socio-religious force among the Namasudras, influencing political debates on caste and representation.

3.2 Jogendra Nath Mandal and Dalit Politics

Jogendra Nath Mandal, a prominent Namasudra leader, played a crucial role in advocating for Dalit rights. Initially aligned with the Indian National Congress, he later joined forces with the Muslim League, believing it would offer better protection for Dalits. He

¹⁶ Matua Mahasangha is a 19th-century Hindu reform movement founded around 18th century Harichand Thakur in present-day Bangladesh, primarily for the Namasudra community. It advocates for social equality, education, and devotion, aiming to uplift "untouchable" castes through the principles of truth, love, and sanity. The movement holds significant political influence in West Bengal, India.

became Pakistan's first Law Minister but resigned in 1950 after widespread anti-Hindu violence in East Pakistan.

Mandal's trajectory reflects the dilemmas faced by Dalit leaders in Bengal, caught between the hegemony of upper-caste Hindu nationalism and the uncertainties of Muslim-majority politics. His story symbolizes both the potential and the precariousness of Dalit assertion in colonial Bengal.

4. Partition and its Aftermath: Displacement and Dalit Marginalization

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 also contributed to the catastrophic consequences for Dalit communities. Most of Bengal's Dalits lived in the eastern part, which became East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Partition forced millions of Dalits—particularly Namasudras, Rajbanshis, and Matuas—to migrate to West Bengal.

4.1 Refugees and Rehabilitation

Unlike upper-caste Hindu refugees who were often accommodated in urban centres, Dalit refugees were sent to rural or semi-urban areas in districts like Nadia, North 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar. Many were settled in forested or inhospitable terrain, with inadequate infrastructure. The Indian state's rehabilitation policies were discriminatory. Dalit refugees had to agitate for land, rations, and housing. The state saw them as burdensome migrants rather than victims of political upheaval. This neglect laid the groundwork for later Dalit political mobilization.

5. Post-Independence Bengal: The Illusion of Casteless Politics

The postcolonial state in West Bengal, particularly under the Congress and later Left Front governments, perpetuated the myth of caste-less Bengali identity. Caste was dismissed as a “North Indian problem,” while class struggle became the dominant framework for social justice.

5.1 Left Front and the Suppression of Caste

From 1977 to 2011, the Left Front ruled West Bengal with an avowedly Marxist ideology. While it implemented significant land reforms (¹⁷Operation Barga) and decentralized panchayati raj institutions, it failed to recognize caste as a structural determinant of oppression.

Dalits continued to face social exclusion in rural areas, limited access to higher education, and underrepresentation in state services. Upper-caste dominance in CPI(M)'s leadership and cadre structure further alienated Dalits and Adivasis. The party's aversion to caste-based mobilization weakened the potential for intersectional justice.

5.2 Dalit Assertion in Post-Left Bengal

With the decline of the Left and the rise of Trinamool Congress (TMC), caste politics began to re-emerge, albeit in co-opted forms. Mamata Banerjee's government recognized the Matua community as a political constituency, offering welfare schemes and symbolic inclusion. However, many critics argue this was more performative than transformative.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also made inroads by appealing to Matua and Namasudra votes, especially in North 24 Parganas and Nadia. Caste has thus returned to the political forefront, but its articulation remains fragmented and mediated by party interests.

6. Dalit Literature, Theatre, and Cultural Resistance

Beyond politics, caste has found powerful expressions in literature, theatre, and performance. Dalit writers like Manoranjan Byapari, Kalyani Thakur Charal, and poets from the Chaturtha Duniya collective have given voice to experiences of humiliation, resistance, and survival.

¹⁷ Operation Barga was a successful land reform movement launched in West Bengal, India, in 1978, to legally record the rights of sharecroppers, known as bargadars. By recording the names of these cultivators, it provided them with security against eviction and a guaranteed share of the produce, improving their economic conditions and the state's agricultural productivity

Raju Das, a leading figure in Dalit theatre, has used performance as a mode of critique and community mobilization. His plays document the trauma of displacement and the dignity of Dalit life. These cultural forms contest the hegemonic narratives of the Bengali bhadralok, offering counter-aesthetics rooted in lived experience and subaltern epistemologies.

The history of caste in West Bengal is not one of absence, but of strategic erasure. From precolonial hierarchies to colonial codification, from Partition displacement to postcolonial neglect, caste has remained a structuring force in Bengal's society. The dominant narrative of Bengali modernity—articulated by the Bhadraklok elite—has systematically marginalized Dalit voices, struggles, and histories.

Yet, resistance has been equally persistent. From the Matuas to Mandal, from refugee struggles to Dalit literature and theatre, Bengal's oppressed castes have refused to be silent. Their assertion demands a rethinking of Bengal's self-image and a new historiography that centres caste as both a lived reality and a site of political transformation.

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Chapter 3

Caste and Bengal's Myth of Castelessness

1. The Bhadraklok Narrative and the Invisibility of Caste

The dominant narrative of Bengal's social history has often been framed around class, intellectualism, and cultural modernity, overshadowing the entrenched reality of caste oppression. Central to this erasure has been the Bhadraklok—a class-caste formation of upper-caste, educated elites who, during colonial and postcolonial periods, came to dominate Bengal's politics, education, literature, and public discourse. Despite Bengal's contribution to anti-colonial resistance, Renaissance thought, and Marxist politics, the hegemony of the Bhadraklok ensured the systematic marginalization of Dalits, especially in the spheres of culture, education, and representation. In recent decades, however, there has been a significant Dalit resurgence in West Bengal—through movements, literature, theatre, and grassroots politics. This essay examines the mechanisms of Bhadraklok elitism, its impact on Dalit invisibility, and the emergence of Dalit assertion as a radical counter-narrative.

West Bengal's dominant elite class, known as the Bhadraklok, has historically shaped a powerful narrative that Bengal is a “progressive” and even “casteless” society. The term *bhadraklok*, literally meaning “gentlefolk,” refers to a Western-educated, upper-caste Bengali elite—primarily Brahmins, Baidyas, and Kayasthas—who rode the waves of British colonial modernization by embracing English education and bureaucratic roles. Their cultural capital enabled them to redefine Bengali identity and public discourse through polished Bengali prose, literary production, and class-inflected sensibilities. This elite's self-fashioning as anti-caste and class-driven had been quite strategic. Though presented as progressive, this class was deeply conservative in its social values, especially regarding caste hierarchy. The Bhadraklok, while

challenging British authority, reaffirmed Hindu caste order within society, excluding lower castes from meaningful participation in public discourse and institutions. The discourse of the “progressive Bengal”, thus, functions as a mask, rendering caste invisible while preserving its privileges.

Bhadralok hegemony established aesthetic and cultural hierarchies that excluded Dalits from legitimate representation. By elevating cultural refinement and civility over ancestry, the Bhadralok recast caste privilege as meritocratic accomplishment. Literacy, abstaining from physical labour, and adopting a stylized Bengali dialect became badges of belonging—even as underlying caste and class disparities persisted. The result was a social dynamic where caste became a “hidden” identity marker—embedded deeply in everyday norms but rarely acknowledged publicly.

This elite identity, deeply woven into West Bengal’s governance and public culture, reinforced caste invisibility. Political institutions—from the colonial bureaucracy to post-independence Left Front governments—were dominated by the Bhadralok. Their ideological framing of social issues emphasized class over caste, effectively erasing explicit caste discourse from official platforms. Yet, caste violence is rampant but socially unspoken. Caste-based stereotyping—such as refusal of temple entry, segregated seating in educational settings, or derogatory language like *chotolok* (“lower caste person”)—continues in informal interactions, yet it remains rarely acknowledged as casteism. While West Bengal lacks frequent headlines of caste violence seen in other regions, it harbours a consistent pattern of subtle, “invisible” discrimination that affects Dalit and lower-caste communities in deeply entrenched ways.

Dalit families in rural areas are often kept away from religious places of worship and shrines. Upper-caste villagers cut off employment opportunities, blocked access to community roads, and even ceased dairy transactions—illustrating how caste discrimination extends into livelihood spheres. Another significant area where Dalits are still considered outsiders and ostracised are in schools and educational

institutions. Segregation in schools continues to reflect casteist attitudes. A survey conducted by Pratichi Trust in 2001 revealed Scheduled Caste children being made to sit separately in classrooms. Further, mid-day meal segregation has been reported, with lower-caste students forced into separate utensils and dining areas. In everyday life, casteist slurs like *chamar* or *chotolok* are casually used, often without awareness of their impact. These terms, normalized in polite society, reinforced caste bias by sustaining symbolic caste hierarchies.

Even in urban intellectual settings and academic spaces, caste bias crops up covertly. Dalits in academia frequently face covert hostility—separate seating, coded insults, or identity-based alienation. Politically, caste remains underacknowledged. Political bureaucrats famously reduced West Bengal's social divisions to "rich" and "poor," dismissing caste-based identities and caste census is openly resisted, reflecting an unwillingness to address systemic inequality. Without accurate caste data, marginalized groups lack the leverage to press for quotas or inclusive representation. As a result, Dalit and Adivasi voices remain statistically and politically invisible.

Dalits and lower-caste communities in Bengal face persistent marginalization. Manohar Mouli Biswas's autobiography *Surviving in My World* directly challenges the narrative of castelessness, illustrating caste as a lived trauma. Everyday slurs like *chamar* or *chotolok* perpetuate symbolic violence, particularly in academic and cultural spaces, reinforcing caste hierarchies cloaked in civility. Notably, even affluent Dalits encounter exclusion—like being denied entry to elite spaces or facing caste-based policing in colleges—demonstrating caste's persistence across class lines.

2. Historical and Political Roots

Despite centuries of silencing, Dalit communities in Bengal have developed a strong undercurrent of resistance, rooted in both historical movements and contemporary cultural activism. The Matua Movement founded by Harichand Thakur and later led by

Guruchand Thakur, provided the needed Spiritual and Social Mobilization to the silenced section of the society. The Matua Mahasangha challenged Brahminical Hinduism and mobilized Namasudras—a significant Dalit group—through religion, education, and self-respect.

In the mid-1800s, Harichand Thakur (1812–1878), born into the Namasudra (then ‘Chandal’) community in Faridpur (now Bangladesh), founded the Matua Mahasangha—a radical anti-caste Vaishnavite sect promoting equality, self-realisation, and non-Brahmanical religious life. Rejecting Brahminical supremacy (“Na Mani Veda, Na Mani Brahman”), Thakur emphasized twelve egalitarian principles, including anti-casteism, gender equality, and dignity of labour. His son, Guruchand Thakur (1846–1937), further institutionalized the movement—establishing the Namasudra Welfare Association and schools (starting around 1880), and gradually secured reservation under British rule. By recasting the community from “Chandals” to “Namasudras” (in 1911), Guruchand asserted a new identity and dignity. He partnered with missionary C.S. Mead to set up the first English-medium and girls’ schools in Orakandi.

The anti-caste politics of Harichand and Guruchand flourished in East Bengal, but Partition of Bengal (1947) fractured the movement. Many Namasudras became refugees, carving settlements in the present West Bengal (districts like 24 Parganas, Nadia), as well as Dandakaranya and the Andamans. These refugee communities faced tremendous hardship. The Marichjhapi incident (1979–80), where Dalit refugee settlements were violently evicted, tragically exposed state complicity in oppressing marginalized populations.

In the 19th century, the Matua Movement played a pivotal role in challenging entrenched caste hierarchies and ushering in transformative religious and social reforms among the Namasudra (formerly Chandal) community. Harichand Thakur promoted a devotional philosophy (Bhakti) rooted in equality. Central to this was Swayam-Dikshiti, the idea of self-realization through communal

chanting of “Haribol”, bypassing traditional Brahmin intermediaries. Matuaism discouraged idol worship, the use of mantras, pilgrimage rituals, and Brahmin priests in religious ceremonies—emphasizing moral conduct, honesty, and compassion. Both men and women could serve as religious teachers (gonsai), promoting widow remarriage and discouraging child marriage—a radical stance for 19th-century Bengal. Harichand and, later, Guruchand Thakur prioritized education. A landmark campaign led by Guruchand resulted in the 1911 census removing the derogatory term “Chandal,” replacing it with “Namasudra”—a powerful assertion of identity and self-respect. Under Guruchand’s leadership, the movement evolved into a protest campaign demanding equal rights—challenging social norms and untouchability. Reports from 1873 show that lower-caste communities across Faridpur organized boycotts of upper-caste landlords and refused to perform menial services. This organizational body, formalized before 1915 and reenergized in the 1930s under Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, laid the foundation for a unified Dalit social identity and collective action. Practices like Harinam Sankirtan were introduced which helped in reinforcing communal pride and cohesion, particularly amid Partition and refugee resettlement. Consequently, the Thakur legacy successfully established itself with several schools named after the Thakur family. In the political space, with a significant sizable voter base (17% of SC population in Bengal), the Matua community has become a significant constituency, shaping state-level election discourse.

However, the Partition of Bengal (1947) dismantled the Dalit movement’s momentum, as refugees grappled with new identities and landlessness. Without a unified push for caste rights, Dalit politics faded from public consciousness. The Left Front’s emphasis on class struggle further sidelined caste questions. The dominant narrative became one of economic equality, sidelining Dalit-specific concerns. Despite later suppression, Bengal had a rich tradition of anti-caste activism rooted in Dalit and Adivasi thought. Colonial luminaries like Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur,

Mahendranath Karan, and Mahendranath Mallabharman visions of social justice and economic redistribution—contrasting starkly with elite-led nationalism offered a radical anti-caste alternative but their contributions were assimilated under a Brahmanical historiography that underplayed Dalit agency. These voices emerged from within Dalit communities themselves, not as afterthoughts, underscoring a long-standing intellectual tradition often excluded from mainstream historiography.

In the post independent India, Jogendranath Mandal emerged as a key figure. A Namasudra leader who became a minister in Pakistan post-Partition, led Bengal's branch of Ambedkar's Scheduled Castes Federation, and ran for India's Constituent Assembly. Another active Dalit reformer was Mohini Mohan Das (1886–1949), who organized temple-entry satyagrahas in Dhaka, led caste rights campaigns within Congress and the Swaraj Party, and advocated for separate electorates. Meanwhile, Namasudra-led literacy efforts and self-respect campaigns gained traction. The Poundra Kshatriya movement, for instance, produced intellectual literature and promoted caste-status elevation.

Despite political repression, Dalit intellectual production in Bengal remained prolific. Mahitosh Mandal (2022) notes that communities like Poundras and Matuas produced autobiographies, literary tracts, and pamphlets from the 17th century onward—all underrecognized in mainstream historiography. These vernacular textual traditions created subaltern public spheres and contributed to a collective Dalit identity—paving the way for later cultural mobilization.

In contemporary times, the Matua Mahasangha has become a major political constituency. Their leaders—such as Pramatha Ranjan Thakur—have actively engaged with political processes, erected educational institutions (the newly named Harichand Guruchand University), and asserted Dalit representation. Recent scholarship highlights the political deification of Harichand and Guruchand as symbolic anchors of Dalit mobilization—celebrated through community print literature, festivals, and commemorative practices.

Despite this rich history, Bengal lacks a unified, high-profile Dalit movement comparable to those in Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu. The displacement from Partition and internal diversity among Dalit communities have hindered cohesive identity formation. Furthermore, the dominance of left-leaning or class-based political ideologies often sidelined caste-based mobilization—putting Dalit concerns at risk of invisibilization. Despite displacement, political marginalization, and historical invisibility, Dalit communities in Bengal cultivated educational, religious, and literary institutions that have endured and evolved.

The tragic death of Chuni Kotal in 1992 reinvigorated Dalit identity and solidarity, catalyzing the founding of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha in 1994. Publications like *Chaturtha Duniya* offered platforms for Dalit expression and critique. Prominent Dalit authors like Kalyani Thakur Charal and Manoranjan Byapari have openly confronted caste bias, demanding visibility and justice within literary space.

The story of West Bengal is not just about Renaissance, reform, and revolution—it is also about exclusion, erasure, and resistance. The Bhadraklok hegemony, long seen as the bearer of modernity and rationality, is now being critiqued for its cultural elitism and caste blindness. The rise of Dalits in Bengal represents a new paradigm of cultural politics, one that rejects invisibility and asserts presence—in language, performance, memory, and the public sphere. The formation of the West Bengal Dalit Sahitya Academy, amplified Dalit participation in politics, and heightened media attention and is instrumental in making a space in the dominant cultural space.

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Chapter 4

Role of Folk Traditions (Jatra, Kobi-Gaan, Bhawaiya) in the Rise of Dalit Theatre in Bengal

1. The Political Context: Post-Partition Displacement and Identity Assertion

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the consequent refugee crisis had a profound impact on the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The influx of Dalit refugees, particularly the Namasudras from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), led to the formation of new settlements in the peripheries of cities like Kolkata, and in districts like Nadia, North 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar. These communities, long marginalized in both social and cultural spheres, began to use performance as a form of resistance and identity formation. Theatre, in these contexts, was not just an artistic venture but a political act. The Matua Movement, rooted in the teachings of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, played a significant role in awakening Dalit consciousness among Namasudras. As Matuas settled in West Bengal, they carried with them a strong oral tradition and a penchant for performative expressions of faith and resistance. This led to the rise of Dalit community theatre that emphasized lived realities—caste violence, landlessness, migration, and exclusion.

2. Folk Traditions as Predecessors of Community Theatre

Dalit theatre in Bengal did not emerge in isolation—it evolved from a long tradition of folk performance that has served both as community memory and subaltern resistance. Before theatre became an elite cultural product, Bengal had a thriving tradition of folk performances that were participatory, mobile, and communally oriented. Art forms such as Jatra (folk theatre), Kobi-Gaan (poetic duels), and Bhawaiya (folk song tradition) provided the foundational

structures, aesthetics, and idioms for Dalit theatre's rise in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These forms, deeply embedded in rural Bengal, particularly in Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities, allowed marginalized voices to challenge social hierarchies, preserve collective history, and assert identity in the face of systemic exclusion.

2.1 Spectacular Verbal Combats as Assertion

Jatra

A popular spectacle for subaltern voice was the Jatra performance. Jatra as a musical folk theatre tradition became popular in rural and semi-urban Bengal. Known for its open-air performance, melodramatic storytelling, and musical interludes, Jatra often dramatized mythological tales, historical narratives and social issues. Historically dominated by upper-caste troupes, Dalit communities began forming their own Jatra groups in the 20th century, especially in the refugee colonies of North and South 24 Parganas and Nadia. They reinterpreted mythologies and re-told stories like the Shambuka episode or the Ekalavya-Dronacharya conflict, giving the marginalized characters voice and agency. Gradually, Jatra became a medium to raise awareness about caste oppression, displacement, and labour exploitation—with Ambedkar, Harichand Thakur, or Dalit saints as protagonists. Its vibrant music, exaggerated acting, and traveling troupes increased its accessibility and popular appeal, thereby making it ideal for mass mobilization, especially in areas with low literacy but high oral-cultural engagement. In Bengali Dalit theatres, the aesthetics of Jatra—direct address, melodrama, and folk tunes—are used to critique caste violence and state neglect, while preserving the community's emotional truth.

Kobi-Gaan

Kobi-Gaan as a traditional poetic duel between two singer-poets (kobi), combining wit, philosophical argument, and lyrical storytelling, often accompanied by musical instruments paved the way to Dalit drama. Originating in the 18th century, jatra became a

popular debate-based performance in rural Bengal. Though often humorous or spiritual, it successfully gave rise to socially critical and politically charged conversation and dialogues.

Dalit performers and poets appropriated Kobi-Gaan to challenge Brahminical discourse by quoting Ambedkar, Harichand Thakur, Ravidas. They criticized dominant ideologies, rituals, and state policies and used dialectical reasoning to deconstruct casteist logic and affirm Dalit pride. Kobi-Gaan became a space of oratory resistance—where memory, satire, and ideology merged into a powerful public spectacle. Some Dalit collectives organized Ambedkar Jayanti performances in the form of Kobi-Gaan, where Dalit poets “debated” with symbolic upper-caste characters on caste, justice, and identity.

Bhawaiya

Bhawaiya was another melancholic folk music form of North Bengal, especially among the Rajbanshis, a historically marginalized community that dealt with the themes of separation, longing, and hardship, the pain of labour migration and marginal existence and gave vent to deep emotional landscapes tied to rivers, fields, and borders. Though Bhawaiya was not a performative spectacle like Jatra or Kobi-Gaan, it shaped the emotional tone of Dalit theatre. Its haunting tunes and minimal instrumentation were incorporated into scenes of grief, displacement, and loss in Dalit plays. It allowed Dalit playwrights to bridge realism with poetic memory, grounding their stories in ethnographic authenticity.

The Rise of Dalit-Community Theatre

The folk forms as Jatra, Kobi-Gaan, and Bhawaiya laid the foundation for community theatre by offering an aesthetic that was non-elitist, engaging, and deeply connected to people's everyday experiences and served as ancestral roots and living tools for the emergence of Dalit theatre in Bengal. These forms, long dismissed as rural or marginal, carry within them the coded knowledge of survival, dissent, and cultural pride. By embracing folk forms, Dalit

theatre rejected the elitism of mainstream Bengali theatre, which prioritized pure Bengali culture and psychological realism and proscenium stage formats. Dalit theatre, rooted in folk tradition, prioritized local dialects, participatory forms, raw emotion and testimonial truth. By reactivating these traditions in new, political ways, Dalit theatre turned folk culture into resistance literature—unrefined, unrelenting, and unforgettable. In Bengal's ongoing battle with caste invisibility, folk theatre emerged not just as a performance—but as a revolution in rhythm.

Hence, the emergence of the Dalit and subaltern community theatre started with the borrowing from the folk tradition of jatra, kobi gaan etc and gradually transforming them to suit their purpose. Bhakti became protest, myth took an allegorical structure and music served as a memory work. This creative inheritance turned cultural subjugation into a cultural strategy. However, these folk forms had met with immense challenges especially in the form of stigmatisation and marginalization. By the 1990s, inspired in part by the Ambedkarite movement and Dalit literature in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, community theatre in Bengal began to articulate Dalit issues more explicitly.

In Bengal, community-based Dalit theatre thus emerged not simply as a performative art, rather gained visibility as a strategic cultural insurgency. Rooted in folk expression and sustained through networks of solidarity, it foregrounds Dalit identities, affirming self-worth, social dignity, and activism. Though still asserting itself within Bengal's mainstream arts, its growth—from Matua folk roots to modern street stages—marks an essential chapter in India's cultural resistance narrative. In regions like Nadia, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Cooch Behar, and parts of South Bengal, grassroots theatre has become a platform for Dalit resistance and cultural memory. Many dramatists in Bengal, including playwright and performer Raju Dasa Dalit refugee background, pioneered performances that addressed caste violence, partition trauma, refugee marginalisation. His work, performed in local festivals and villages, had inspired younger theatre collectives. Namita Das and Women-

Led Theatre brings Dalit women's voices to the forefront—addressing gender-based oppression within caste structures, sometimes using ritual performance blended with protest theatre. This self-representational performance marks a radical shift from upper-caste narratives of pity or invisibilization. Community theatre has also become a vehicle for critical education and grassroots activism. Plays on land rights, domestic violence, caste-based atrocities, health and hygiene campaigns, especially during pandemics and outbreaks, environmental activism focusing on river pollution, dam displacement, climate impact, political mobilization during elections, protests, and public awareness drives.

Groups like Bangla Gana Natya Sangha, Dalit Theatre Collectives and local youth troupes have integrated drama with community development work, turning performance into pedagogy. Notable figures like Raju Das, a Dalit playwright and theatre practitioner from Nadia district, began staging plays that centred around caste oppression, land rights, and the denial of cultural representation. His theatre group, and platforms like the magazine "Potho Sanket", became spaces for emerging Dalit voices in Bengal. Raju Das, influenced by both Matua philosophy and Ambedkarite ideology, combined a deeply spiritual resistance with a sharp political critique. His plays rejected the Sanskritized, upper-caste aesthetics of mainstream theatre and used dialects, folk tunes, and everyday idioms of Dalit life. Similarly, other community groups began experimenting with forum theatre, participatory theatre, and verbatim theatre, often borrowing from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed model to allow villagers to dramatize their grievances and seek collective solutions.

Despite its vibrancy, grassroots theatre is viewed as "backward" or "lowbrow" by urban elites. It lacks funding and recognition from state institutions, it is still not recognised as a part of academic and critical discourse, often suppressed by local political groups, especially when theatre challenges ruling ideologies. The rise of Dalit organisations and associations and researchers working in these areas have helped substantially in the revival and archiving of the

Dalit folk theatre. Steps have been taken in the documentation and digitization of folk performances and new initiatives should be taken to include Dalit playwrights in theatre education and policy-making. Folk forms must be recognized as legitimate modern aesthetics instead of ignoring and pushing them to the margins as primitive relics. Today it survives—through oral transmission, intergenerational participation, and communal ownership of the art form. In many villages, festivals like Rath Yatra, Baruni, or Harichand Melas now include performances that blur the line between religion, politics, and theatre. In short, grassroots theatre has amplified subaltern voices in a state that has long claimed castelessness, creates alternative aesthetics outside elite literariness, inspires academic interest in Dalit performance, subaltern studies, and theatre anthropology and provides empowerment spaces for women, refugees, and landless labourers. The rise of grassroots and community theatre in Bengal is a powerful testimony to the resilience of marginalised imaginations. It counters the monolithic narrative of Bengal as a homogenous cultural space by revealing the plural, contested, and embodied experiences of its people. More than a performance form, grassroots theatre in Bengal is a movement—of memory, identity, dissent, and hope.

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Chapter 5

The Gap Between Mainstream Bengali Theatre and Dalit Expression

The evolution of Bengali theatre—from the 19th-century renaissance to contemporary experimental drama—has been celebrated for its intellectual depth, nationalist fervour, and socio-political engagement. However, beneath this acclaimed legacy lies a glaring omission: the absence or marginalisation of Dalit voices in the so-called "mainstream" Bengali theatre. Despite the vibrant contributions of Dalit communities, particularly the Namasudras, Matuas, and other subaltern castes, their stories have remained largely excluded, misrepresented, or appropriated by upper-caste theatre practitioners. There is a chain of historical, cultural, and structural reasons that had created this disconnect between elite Bengali theatre and Dalit expression. However, it is this gap that has shaped a parallel theatre tradition rooted in subaltern resistance.

The dominant strand of Bengali theatre has been shaped and controlled by the Bhadrakalok—an upper-caste, educated, urban elite that emerged during the colonial Bengal Renaissance. From Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to Girish Ghosh, and later Utpal Dutt, the mainstream theatre scene was heavily informed by Western realism, Marxist ideology, and Hindu mythological narratives—yet caste was seldom addressed.

Bhadrakalok theatre conceived of the audience as urban, upper-caste, and culturally literate, thus determining what subjects were worthy of artistic exploration. Themes like colonial resistance, romantic idealism, middle-class morality, and even class conflict were portrayed, but caste oppression—particularly Dalit life worlds—were invisibilised. Caste was either rendered invisible under the umbrella of "class" or treated as an archaic rural concern irrelevant to modern Bengal. As a result, Dalit experiences were not only

excluded from the stage but actively erased from the cultural imagination.

Mainstream Bengali theatre has historically adhered to a Sanskritized, high-culture aesthetic, influenced by classical drama and literary refinement. This preference for elevated language, abstract symbolism, and "universal" human themes often alienated Dalit audiences and creators whose lives demanded a more direct, realist, and grounded mode of expression.

Dalit theatre, by contrast, is grounded in local dialects and folk idioms, embodied performance and raw emotion, concrete, lived realities of caste violence and survival. Such forms are often dismissed as 'crude', 'non-literary', or 'folk', reinforcing aesthetic hierarchies. The mainstream stage rarely allowed the Dalit body to appear with dignity or subjectivity—when present, it was often as a caricature, servant, or a metaphor of suffering, not as a thinking, resisting individual.

Dalit performers, playwrights, and theatre groups have long been excluded from institutional spaces such as cultural academies, government theatre boards, urban auditoriums, media coverage and publishing houses. Even when Dalit-themed plays were written, they were often appropriated or sanitised by upper-caste directors who controlled resources and platforms. Funding, training, archiving, and critical discourse all favoured the mainstream, rendering Dalit theatre an underground or peripheral movement. This exclusion has led to a lack of archival preservation of Dalit plays and performances, which continue to survive through oral circulation and community memory rather than institutional endorsement.

When caste appeared in mainstream Bengali plays, it was often through the lens of pity, charity, or reformism, rarely through the lens of rage, agency, or structural critique. The Dalit was often depicted as a victim or passive recipient of kindness, not as a political subject demanding justice. Even well-meaning Leftist theatre, such as the Gananatya Sangha or IPTA, while addressing class exploitation,

often obfuscated caste, treating it as a by-product of feudalism rather than a systemic structure. This ideological blind spot reinforced the marginality of Dalit experiences. The erasure of Matua theology, Dalit folk knowledge, refugee caste trauma, and gendered caste oppression from urban proscenium stages has been a consistent form of symbolic violence.

In response to this exclusion, a parallel theatre movement emerged, led by Dalit dramatists and collectives like Raju Das and Namita Das, who have carved out alternative spaces—street corners, village courtyards, refugee colonies, and local festivals—to stage their plays. Their works challenge mainstream narratives by centering Dalit protagonists, explicit depiction of caste oppression. Their plays are drawn from Matua devotional and oral traditions and use the body and space as tools of disruption. This counter-theatre is not merely oppositional; it is affirmative, regenerative, and community-rooted, offering a new grammar of performance that speaks directly to and from the margins.

Even today, the cultural industry in Bengal continues to tokenize or ignore Dalit theatre. Plays by Dalit writers seldom feature in mainstream festivals, academic syllabi, or critical discussions. However, with the rise of Dalit literature forums, community archives, and digital platforms, Dalit theatre is slowly gaining visibility, demanding not assimilation, but recognition and equity. The gap between mainstream Bengali theatre and Dalit expression is not merely aesthetic or thematic—it is epistemic, political, and systemic. Bridging this gap requires more than inclusion; it demands a radical rethinking of cultural value, authority, and representation.

This gap between mainstream Bengali theatre and Dalit expression reflects broader social inequalities. While theatre claims to be the voice of the people, it has too often remained the voice of the few—those with caste, class, and cultural capital. Dalit theatre emerges as a necessary rupture, not just to add “diversity” but to redefine what theatre can be: a space for truth, testimony, and transformation. To bridge this gap is not merely a matter of inclusion—but of

decolonizing and de-Brahmanizing Bengali cultural spaces, allowing Dalit voices not just to be heard but to lead.

The divide between mainstream Bengali theatre and Dalit expression is a mirror to the larger societal schism between upper-caste cultural hegemony and subaltern resistance. Yet, out of this exclusion has emerged a powerful, autonomous theatrical tradition—grounded in the philosophies of Harichand-Guruchand Thakur, the memories of displacement, and the will to survive with dignity. The plays of Raju Das and Namita Das are not simply acts of performance—they are acts of remembering, reclaiming, and rewriting the terms of cultural belonging.

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Part II:
Dalit Aesthetics in Bengal
and
The Elements of Dalit Theatre

Chapter 6

Conceptualizing Dalit Aesthetics: A Counter-Cultural Framework

Dalit aesthetics in Bengal, thus, arose from a historical need to resist the aesthetic monopoly of Brahmanical art traditions. In Bengal, canonical literature—from Bankimchandra to Tagore—tended to universalize particular caste experiences while invisibilizing the lives of Dalits and other marginalized communities. The emergence of Dalit aesthetics unsettles this universality by insisting that experience precedes form suffering is a legitimate aesthetic category and caste reality cannot be abstracted away from artistic representation. Hence, the body becomes a political site, bearing the scars of labour, untouchability, and displacement. Language becomes an instrument of reclamation, challenging sanitized standard Bengali with dialects, colloquialisms, and oral registers. Memory becomes collective, not individual, rooted in community experience. This aesthetic framework thus functions as a counter-canon that decentralizes elite definitions of taste, form, and literary value.

Oral Memory and the Aesthetic Imagination

The influence of the oral memory in shaping Dalit aesthetics at the level of form and expression is immense. Contemporary Dalit writers—those publishing in print, digital platforms, or theatre—draw heavily from the cadences, metaphors, and narrative structures of collective oral memory. This influences Bengali Dalit aesthetics in numerous ways. Through various formal elements, like rhythmic narration, engaging in direct-address of performance style and communal voice in the performances, Dalit aesthetics in Bengal continually asserts its difference from mainstream literary conventions, refusing the distanced, ornamental style of high literature in favour of visceral immediacy.

Narrative of the Body: Labour, Pain, and Survival

In Dalit aesthetics, the body becomes the primary site of meaning-making. Unlike canonical Bengali literature, which often idealizes or abstracts bodily experience, Dalit narratives foreground the body marked by labour (mat-cutters, fishworkers, rickshaw pullers), the body that is subjected to humiliation (untouchability, social exclusion), the gendered Dalit body (women facing caste and sexual violence) and the migrating or displaced body (post-Partition refugee Dalits). The body does not merely symbolize suffering; it speaks through scars, gestures, movements, and silences. This is particularly evident in Dalit autobiographies in Bengal. Works by Manohar Mouli Biswas, Kalyani Thakur Charal, and Jatin Bala use the body as a register of caste oppression. These autobiographies depart from classical autobiographical forms by refusing linear, sanitized storytelling and instead mobilizing trauma, fragmentation, and the rawness of oral testimony. In Dalit theatre, especially in the works of Raju Das, the performer's body directly enacts the politics of caste. Minimalist sets, realistic gestures, and unembellished speech allow the audience to confront the body's vulnerability and defiance without distraction. Thus, the body becomes not only an aesthetic symbol but also an archive of subaltern history.

Dalit Theatre in Bengal: A Radical Aesthetic Intervention

The emergence of modern Dalit theatre as a distinctly aesthetic and political form introduced conventions that were quite different from the conventional theatrical performances. Hence, Dalit theatre started using minimal props, unadorned stages, and stripped-down lighting. This aesthetic choice reflects both economic constraints and an ideological refusal of spectacle. It emphasized presence over illusion, testimony over fantasy, political urgency over entertainment.

The application of Silence turned out as a powerful aesthetic device—symbolizing erasure, trauma, and the unspoken violence of caste society. Many of the Dalit theatre used testimonies as its Script. Hence, scripts were drawn directly from interviews, community

memories, and oral accounts. Plays such as *Neel Selam*, *Sesh Sandhya of Dr Ambedkar* or *Surjo Tonoy* integrate lived experience into dramatic form, creating a hybrid of documentary theatre, oral narrative, and political performance. By reclaiming the stage—a historically exclusionary space—Dalit theatre constructed a radical aesthetic that merges performance with activism, turning the theatre into a site of public witnessing.

One of the most transformative contributions of Dalit aesthetics in Bengal is the political re-signification of language. Standard Bengali (shuddho bangla), long associated with upper-caste cultural supremacy, has historically dismissed subaltern dialects as impure or crude. Dalit writers reject this hierarchy by embracing dialects like Bangla gabhir bhasha, refugee colloquial Bengali, and East Bengal linguistic rhythms, using unpolished, vernacular expressions and breaking the syntactic rules of classical Bengali prose. Language became a space of revolt. It carried the smell of soil, sweat, river, swamp, and colony-life; the residue of migration and labour; the textures of oral speech. This linguistic defiance destabilized aesthetic elitism and democratized literary production.

Dalit Aesthetics and its Themes

While unbound by rigid categories, several recurring themes like caste violence, every day humiliation, migration, displacement, and belonging, memory, community resistance and self-assertion defined Dalit aesthetics. Dalit theatre wove these themes into the everyday—school rooms, workplaces, temples, refugee camps, public spaces. Labour featured as anticized but presented as essential, painful, and historically exploited. The aesthetic foregrounded dignity in labour rather than idealizing pastoral imagery. Refugee colony life, statelessness, economic precarity—continue to shape Dalit identity and aesthetics. Individual stories were embedded in larger social narratives. Dalit aesthetics favours collective voice over solitary genius. The themes of resistance and self-assertion turned out to be the most significant ones; sometimes reshaped as cultural assertion

(e.g., Matua identity), political activism and reclaiming spaces of representation.

Women and gender gained a special mention in Dalit imagination. Dalit women in Bengal who occupy a doubly marginalized space—both within caste society and at times within patriarchal structures of their own community, voiced their perspectives in the Dalit literary output. The plight of Dalit women centred around domestic labour, sexual violence, reproductive exploitation, religious exclusion and the politics of respectability. Writers such as Kalyani Thakur Charal, Swapna Bhowmick, and the growing number of Dalit women poets contribute a raw, fearless aesthetic—one that neither hides pain nor sanitizes rage. Their work challenges both mainstream feminist discourse and patriarchal Dalit narratives, making gender central to Dalit aesthetics.

Aesthetics, Politics, and the Question of Representation

Dalit aesthetics in Bengal refuses the separation of art and politics. Representation itself becomes a political act. Dalit aesthetics challenged systematic erasure of Dalit experience; they interrogated bodies, spaces, and experiences that were invisibilized and excluded from Bengali literature. Dalit aesthetics explicitly rejected pity, exoticization, and aesthetic distance. It demanded recognition, not sympathy and challenged romanticization of marginality. In Dalit aesthetics, neutrality is often a mask for caste privilege. Hence, any art form that avoided discomfort reinforced social hierarchy and Dalit art initiated the move against comfort, making the comfort a discomfort. Representation took a new shape, instead of featuring as descriptive, it showed up as more transformative.

The Contemporary Landscape: Expanding the Dalit Aesthetic Horizon

In the present moment, Dalit aesthetics in Bengal is expanding across multiple platforms. Digital Media and Documentary Forms are gaining prominence through different media like YouTube channels, short films, podcasts, and online storytelling are preserving oral

traditions and amplifying subaltern voices. Small magazines and Dalit editorial spaces have also gained quite a lot of prominence. Platforms like Chaturtha Dunia, Dalit Mirror, and various refugee colony publications curate Dalit creative and critical writing. It has a long path and gained academic and institutional recognition. Universities and cultural bodies increasingly engage with Dalit theory, autobiographies, and oral literature—though often unevenly.

The documentation of the history of the Bengali Dalit community and the contributions of numerous Dalit writers whose works serve as vital testimonies of collective memory, suffering, and resilience had been instrumental in shaping the Dalit aesthetics. Among these, *Borisaler Jogen Mondal* (2010) by Debesh Roy, *Sritir Pata Theke* (2014) by Dr. Jagabandhu Biswas, *Amar Jiban Songram* (2015) by Sunil Krishna Mandal, *Bhanga Berar Panchali* (2019) by Lily Halder, *Mone Pore* (2013) by Manoranjan Boral, *Din Elo Din Gelo* (2020) by Dr. Mohitosh Biswas, *Ujan Tallir Upokotha* (2020) by Kapil Krishna Thakur, *Nangol Kolom* (2021) by Nirmal Gayen and *Sikor Chenra Jiban* (2022) by Jatin Bala stand out as significant contributions. These texts, along with several others, illuminate the lived realities of Bengali Dalits, especially the hardships endured by Dalit refugees in post-Partition West Bengal.

Beyond literary narratives, several writers have provided substantial historical documentation. Works such as *Bangali O Bangla Samaj* (1987) by Dr. A. R. Biswas, *Bangaleer Itihas: Aadi Parba* (2023) by Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Atrocities on Dalits: Since the Partition of Bengal* (2008) by Dilip Halder, and *Bangla o Bengalis Itihas* (1996) by Anil Biswas, alongside contributions from scholars like Shantiranjana Biswas, Sukriti Biswas, and Swapan Biswas, offer crucial insights into the systemic oppression and marginalisation faced by the Bengali Dalit community.

Some non-Dalit scholars have also contributed to this field. Notably, historian Shekhar Bandopadhyay has written extensively on the conditions of Bengali Dalits during the pre- and post-Partition eras. While these works have gained wider recognition, Dalit scholars'

writings have not received comparable visibility. A significant factor behind this disparity is the language barrier: most Dalit historians write in Bengali, whereas scholars like Bandopadhyay publish in English, making their work more accessible, particularly on digital platforms. This linguistic divide has led many researchers to mistakenly assume that Dalit historians have not documented their own histories—an assumption that overlooks the substantial body of Bengali-language Dalit scholarship.

Besides these the community theatres and collective performances have also contributed immensely in the development of Dalit aesthetics. Matua gatherings and Dalit youth organizations have revived oral narrative aesthetics in contemporary forms. Dalit aesthetics thus continues to evolve, adapting to new media while rooted in historical memory.

Dalit aesthetics in Bengal is not a peripheral cultural phenomenon; it is a transformative movement that redefines the parameters of Bengali art and literature. Emerging from oral memory, lived suffering, collective resistance, and community assertion, it challenges the normative structures of taste, form, and representation. In doing so, it creates a new cultural horizon—one where the marginalized are no longer subjects of pity or silence, but creators of powerful, resonant art.

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Chapter 7

Language, Symbolism, Space and Body in Dalit Theatre

Dalit theatre, that has its roots in caste oppression, untouchability, and socio-economic marginalisation, occupies a crucial position in the cultural politics of resistance. Emerging from the historical experience of various forms of exploitation it challenges the aesthetic and ideological structures of mainstream Indian theatre. While modern Indian theatre has often celebrated nationalist or humanist concerns, Dalit theatre insists on foregrounding the lived realities of humiliation, struggle, and assertion of the oppressed. In doing so, it transforms theatre from a medium of entertainment into a vehicle of social critique and political resistance.

Language, symbolism, space, and body form the four central pillars of this counter-aesthetic. Each dimension carries its own subversive potential: the choice of vernacular idioms and dialects defies the Brahminical monopoly over “refined” cultural expression; the symbolic use of objects and imagery encodes histories of stigma and resilience; the relocation of theatre from proscenium stages to village squares and streets redefines the politics of space; and the representation of the Dalit body—once marked as “polluted”—becomes a site of dignity and rebellion. Taken together, these elements articulate what Sharmila Rege (2006) terms the “politics of memory and embodied knowledge,” where the theatre serves not only as performance but also as testimony and archive of Dalit life.

In Bengal, playwrights such as Raju Das and Namita Das have pioneered forms of Dalit theatre that are deeply rooted in the folk traditions of the Namasudras and the Matua movement. Their works resonate with, yet differ from, the Marathi Dalit theatre shaped by activists like Vijay Tendulkar, Namdeo Dhasal, and Shantabai Kamble, and from Kannada Dalit theatre influenced by writers such

as Siddalingaiah and B. Jayashree. These regional variations demonstrate both the shared struggle against caste oppression and the distinctiveness of local histories.

The study of Dalit theatre requires attention to both aesthetics and politics. According to critics like G. N. Devy (1992) and Kancha Ilaiah (1996) oral traditions and performance cultures preserve subaltern epistemes that mainstream literary criticism often neglects. Dalit theatre, by drawing from oral idioms, folk rituals, and embodied performances, positions itself as a “people’s archive” of suffering and resistance. These theatrical performances highlight the epistemic disobedience implicit in Dalit-Bahujan cultural practices, which refuse assimilation into Brahminical frameworks. Through language, symbols, space, and body, Dalit theatre not only contests the canon but also articulates a vision of liberation.

1. Language: Breaking the Brahminical Monotone

Language in Dalit theatre is never neutral; it is an arena of contestation. Historically, theatre in India has privileged refined, Sanskritised registers, often alienating audiences from marginalized backgrounds. Dalit dramatists resist this linguistic hierarchy by embracing colloquial idioms, dialects, and speech patterns that reflect the everyday lives of Dalit communities. In this way, language becomes a weapon of epistemic disobedience (Ilaiah, 1996) and a tool of cultural reclamation.

1.1 Rejecting Sanskritised Aesthetic Norms

The privileging of Sanskrit and elite vernaculars in Indian theatre mirrors caste structures: purity and refinement are associated with the upper castes, while coarseness and impurity are projected onto the Dalit speech community. Dalit theatre subverts this by foregrounding local dialects, earthy idioms, and folk rhythms. For example, in Bengali Dalit theatre, playwrights like Raju Das write dialogues in Namasudra dialects, capturing the rhythms of the riverine communities of southern Bengal. This linguistic choice not only

ensures authenticity but also destabilizes the “high culture” aesthetic that dominates mainstream Bengali theatre.

Similarly, in Marathi theatre, writers like Daya Pawar and Namdeo Dhasal infused their plays with the sharpness of Dalit urban idiom. Their linguistic choices echoed the chawls and bastis of Bombay, producing a rough texture that unsettled the polished, middle-class Marathi stage. As G. N. Devy (1992) notes, such linguistic interventions challenge the very foundation of literary criticism in India, which historically privileges elite texts and idioms.

1.2 Oral Traditions and Folk Rhythms

Dalit theatre also draws deeply from oral traditions. Storytelling, songs, and folk chants are woven into dramatic texts, creating a rhythm that is both performative and communal. In Bengal, the *matua kirtans*—devotional songs central to the Matua religious movement—are often embedded in Dalit plays as a means of connecting the audience to collective histories of migration and struggle. The performative aspect of oral idioms democratizes theatre, blurring the line between performer and spectator.

Kancha Ilaiah (1996) highlights how oral idioms encode alternative epistemes, offering knowledge systems rooted in labour, ecology, and lived experience rather than Brahminical metaphysics. By drawing upon oral traditions, Dalit theatre enacts what Sharmila Rege (2006) describes as a “politics of testimony,” where lived experience speaks against dominant cultural narratives.

1.3 Language as Assertion and Resistance

For Dalit playwrights, language is not only descriptive but also assertive. The use of slogans, chants, and rhythmic repetition becomes a performative strategy of resistance. In Kannada Dalit theatre, street performances often include collective chanting of slogans against untouchability and caste discrimination, transforming language into an act of protest. Theatrical speech

becomes inseparable from political speech, collapsing the boundary between art and activism.

The Dalit use of language also re-signifies words once used as slurs. For example, terms of humiliation such as “chandal” or “chamar,” when spoken on stage, are not suppressed but re-appropriated, forcing audiences to confront their violence. This linguistic re-signification echoes Frantz Fanon’s (1967) observation that colonised people often reclaim the language of insult as an act of self-assertion.

1.4 Regional Specificities and Shared Strategies

Although the linguistic registers vary across regions—Bengali Namasudra idioms, Marathi Dalit urban slang, Kannada rural dialects—the strategy remains consistent: to foreground marginalized voices in their own tongues. By rejecting sanitized, upper-caste speech, Dalit theatre asserts cultural autonomy. As Dalit poet and playwright Namdeo Dhasal once remarked, the role of Dalit literature is to “bring the language of the streets into the temple of literature” (Dhasal, cited in Zelliot, 2001). Dalit dramatists extend this ethos into the theatre, turning linguistic rebellion into aesthetic innovation.

Language in Dalit theatre thus serves as more than a medium of dialogue; it is a political tool that dismantles hierarchies of speech. By privileging oral traditions, dialects, and assertive slogans, Dalit dramatists destabilize elitist notions of culture and affirm the dignity of marginalized voices. This reconfiguration of language sets the stage for the other dimensions—symbolism, space, and body—which similarly work to transform theatre into a counter-aesthetic of resistance.

2. Symbolism: From Stigma to Assertion

Symbolism in Dalit theatre is not ornamental but existential. Every object, image, or metaphor carries the weight of lived history—labour, stigma, humiliation, and resilience. Unlike mainstream

theatre, where symbols often universalize human experience in abstract ways, Dalit theatre grounds its symbolism in the material realities of caste society. Everyday objects associated with “pollution” or “menial” labour—leather, broom, plough, drum, soil—become powerful theatrical signs that subvert Brahminical aesthetic frameworks. Through such symbolic practices, Dalit theatre enacts what Sharmila Rege (2006) calls a “politics of representation,” where cultural memory and collective struggle are encoded into performance.

2.1 Objects of Labour as Symbols of Resistance

The most striking symbols in Dalit theatre are those linked to caste-based occupations. Leather, once a marker of untouchability, appears in plays as both a sign of stigma and survival. In Marathi Dalit plays, the cobbler’s tools—awl, hammer, and shoes—are staged not as instruments of shame but as testaments to labour and dignity. This is a symbolic inversion: the very objects used to degrade Dalits are turned into emblems of resistance.

In Bengali Dalit theatre, agricultural tools such as ploughs, fishing nets, and broken utensils often dominate stage settings. They symbolize both the community’s dependence on land and water, and their historical exclusion from ownership. As Prafulla Chakrabarti (1990) notes, Partition and displacement pushed thousands of Namasudras into precarious livelihoods; Dalit dramatists encode these histories by symbolizing survival through everyday labouring tools.

2.2 Rivers, Boats, and Soil: Symbols of Displacement and Rootedness

Partition, migration, and dispossession shaped Dalit life in Bengal, and these experiences surface as recurring natural symbols. Rivers—both nurturing and destructive—become metaphors for displacement. Props like broken boat in Raju Das’s plays is a central symbol, reflecting the dislocation of Dalit refugees who crossed rivers during Partition only to face exclusion in new lands. Soil and

mud, likewise, signify both rootedness in ancestral land and the experience of dispossession.

These elemental symbols stand in contrast to the divine or mythical symbols often used in mainstream theatre. They foreground materiality—earth, water, labour—as the foundation of Dalit aesthetics. As G. N. Devy (2002) suggests, such symbolic practices reclaim indigenous epistemes where ecology, labour, and survival are deeply interconnected.

2.3 Symbols of Violence: Scars, Chains, and Wounds

Another important category of symbolism in Dalit theatre is the representation of violence. Chains, whips, scars, and wounds frequently appear in plays to signify the history of caste oppression. These symbols do not function as metaphors alone; they are reminders of real violence enacted on Dalit bodies. By staging scars and wounds, Dalit dramatists bring caste brutality into public visibility, forcing audiences to confront realities often erased in sanitized mainstream narratives.

Frantz Fanon (1967) argued that the colonized body bears the marks of systemic violence, which then becomes a site of political awakening. Dalit theatre similarly transforms symbolic violence into a collective call for resistance. The enactment of chains breaking or scars being revealed is not simply dramatic—it is performative testimony.

2.4 Folk Cosmologies as Counter-Symbols

Dalit theatre also mobilizes folk cosmologies as counter-symbols to Brahminical myths. In Bengali Dalit performances, the figures of Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, central to the Matua movement, serve as symbolic anchors of community identity. Their invocation on stage becomes a symbolic re-centring of Dalit spiritual leadership against the dominance of upper-caste gods and epics.

Similarly, in Marathi and Kannada Dalit theatre, folk deities such as Mhasoba or Yellamma are invoked as protectors of the oppressed.

These figures symbolize cultural autonomy, challenging the monopoly of Brahminical pantheons over theatre and ritual. As Kancha Ilaiah (1996) insists, the reclamation of Dalit-Bahujan spiritual symbols is central to resisting cultural domination.

2.5 Symbolic Reversals and Aesthetic Innovation

One of the most radical strategies of Dalit theatre is symbolic reversal. Objects or images traditionally associated with impurity—such as the broom or the drum—are reimagined as tools of liberation. The broom, emblematic of the sweeper caste, is staged as a revolutionary weapon. The drum, once used to announce caste segregation, becomes a symbol of unity when beaten collectively in performances. These reversals destabilize the symbolic order of caste society, enacting an aesthetic that is at once political and innovative.

Symbolism in Dalit theatre thus functions as a double gesture: it encodes histories of stigma and humiliation while simultaneously transforming them into signs of resilience and assertion. By using everyday objects, ecological elements, scars of violence, and folk cosmologies, Dalit dramatists invert Brahminical aesthetics and establish a counter-symbolic order. This symbolic vocabulary not only reflects lived experiences but also reorients theatre towards liberationist politics, setting the stage for the equally radical reconfiguration of space in performance.

3. Space: From Proscenium to Streets and Villages

The politics of space is central to Dalit theatre. Performance does not occur in a vacuum; it is always shaped by its spatial context, which in turn reflects social hierarchies. The mainstream Indian proscenium stage—often associated with urban elites and upper-caste audiences—tends to reproduce the exclusivity of caste society by limiting access to performance and privileging aesthetic distance over immediacy. Dalit dramatists resist this spatial hierarchy by relocating theatre to alternative arenas: village squares, factory compounds, courtyards, streets, and protest sites. By doing so, they

transform theatre into a participatory, democratic, and politically charged practice.

3.1 The Proscenium and Its Exclusions

The proscenium stage, inherited from colonial modernity, became the hallmark of “serious” Indian theatre in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet, its architecture and conventions—ticketed entry, stage-audience separation, and urban location—largely excluded Dalit audiences and performers. As Rustom Bharucha (2001) observes, the proscenium fosters an elitist culture where “theatre as institution reflects the stratifications of society.” Dalit dramatists recognized this structural exclusion and sought to dismantle it through radical spatial choices.

3.2 Village Squares and Open-Air Stages

In Bengal, playwright Raju Das frequently stages his plays in open-air settings, often within Dalit neighbourhoods or refugee colonies. Such performances collapse the boundaries between stage and audience, enabling a communal experience of theatre. The village square becomes both theatre and forum, where spectators are active participants rather than passive observers. This spatial choice reflects what G. N. Devy (1992) terms the “residual energy of oral traditions,” where performance is inseparable from community life.

The use of open-air stages also symbolises accessibility: theatre is not confined to cultural elites but shared with those whose lives it represents. The physical presence of the community within the performance space enhances its testimonial quality, turning theatre into a collective memory project.

3.3 Streets and Protest Spaces

Street theatre has been a particularly effective mode for Dalit dramatists in Maharashtra and Karnataka. Drawing on the legacy of the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) and later movements like Jana Natya Manch, Dalit street theatre adapts the form for caste critique. Slogans, chants, and agit-prop techniques are performed in

markets, factory gates, and village crossroads, directly addressing the public. This choice of space amplifies the urgency of Dalit demands and situates theatre within the politics of protest.

Kannada Dalit theatre groups like Samudaya have often used protest spaces to stage performances against caste violence, creating a continuum between political demonstration and dramatic performance. As Janelle Reinelt (2014) argues, such uses of space embody “performative publics,” where theatre and activism merge.

3.4 Factories and Refugee Colonies

Another striking example comes from Bengal, where Dalit dramatists stage plays inside refugee colonies and factory compounds. These spaces embody the precarious livelihoods of Dalit workers, making them not just backdrops but central to the dramaturgy. For instance, performances set in factory yards evoke the alienation of industrial labour while simultaneously mobilizing workers as audiences. The politics of space here is inseparable from the politics of class and caste.

3.5 Spatial Subversion and Audience Engagement

By abandoning the proscenium, Dalit theatre redefines the relationship between performer and audience. Spectators are not distanced but integrated, often addressed directly or invited to participate. This collapse of the “fourth wall” aligns with Augusto Boal’s (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, where theatre becomes rehearsal for social change. In Dalit theatre, however, the stakes are higher: the audience often consists of the very communities whose struggles are dramatized, making the performance simultaneously representation and lived experience.

Space in Dalit theatre is not merely physical; it is political and symbolic. By relocating performance from exclusive proscenium stages to streets, villages, factories, and protest sites, Dalit dramatists democratize theatre and transform it into a practice of resistance. These alternative spaces embody inclusivity, immediacy, and

urgency, enabling Dalit theatre to function as both cultural expression and political mobilization. In this spatial reconfiguration, theatre becomes inseparable from the community it serves.

4. The Body: Site of Trauma and Rebellion

If language, symbolism, and space constitute the external structures of Dalit theatre, the body is its most visceral and immediate medium. The Dalit body—historically stigmatized as impure, polluted, and untouchable—has long been marked by caste society as the site of humiliation and exclusion. Dalit theatre reclaims this body, transforming it into a stage for testimony, dignity, and resistance. Through gestures, silences, scars, and collective rhythms, the Dalit body becomes both the archive of trauma and the instrument of rebellion.

4.1 The Stigmatized Body as Testimony

Caste oppression is inscribed directly on the Dalit body through labour, violence, and ritual segregation. Dalit theatre foregrounds these embodied experiences. For instance, in Raju Das's *Kolonko*, *Surjo Tanay*, the refugees' bodies are shown bent from years of physical toil, their scars symbolising both displacement and resilience. By staging bodies that visibly bear the weight of suffering, Dalit theatre refuses the erasure of violence and makes the audience confront embodied histories that elite theatre often suppresses.

Frantz Fanon (1967) reminds us that the colonised body carries the marks of systemic oppression, which in turn generate political consciousness. Similarly, the Dalit body on stage is not just an object of suffering but also a source of political awakening. The act of showing scars, limps, or bodily exhaustion becomes testimony—a living archive that performs history.

4.2 Gestures, Movement, and Silence

The grammar of the Dalit body is distinct. Bent backs, calloused hands, and rhythmic labouring movements often dominate Dalit performances. These gestures embody the physicality of caste labour

while simultaneously re-signifying it as dignity rather than degradation. Silence, too, becomes a powerful bodily gesture. The refusal to speak on stage, or the use of mute suffering as performance, dramatizes the historical silencing of Dalit voices. Yet, when such silence breaks into collective chants or drumming, it signals a rupture—a reclaiming of voice and agency through the body.

4.3 The Gendered Dalit Body

The representation of Dalit women's bodies adds another dimension. Plays by Namita Das foreground themes of sexual violence, maternal suffering, and bodily autonomy. In one of her plays, the mother's body becomes both a site of violence (rape, exploitation) and of resistance (nurturing, survival, refusal). Sharmila Rege (2006) argues that Dalit women's testimonios highlight the intersection of caste and gender oppression through embodied experiences. On stage, this manifests in maternal figures who resist domination not through speech alone but through the physical endurance of their bodies.

The staging of sexual violence in Dalit theatre forces audiences to confront brutal realities, but it also asserts resilience: the Dalit woman's body is not simply violated but also reclaimed as a site of defiance. By centring the female Dalit body, dramatists contest both Brahminical patriarchy and patriarchal tendencies within Dalit movements themselves.

4.4 The Collective Body and Rhythm

Dalit theatre often deploys collective bodily performances—group chanting, synchronized drumming, folk dances—that transform the body from individual testimony into communal assertion. The collective raising of fists, the chorus of labouring movements, or the ritualistic pounding of drums dissolve individuality into solidarity. This collective embodiment resonates with the Ambedkarite slogan of “educate, agitate, organize,” where the body itself becomes a tool of organization.

In Bengali Dalit performances, Matua kirtans often involve the audience in rhythmic chanting and clapping, blurring the line between performer and spectator. The collective body thus disrupts the elitist model of spectatorship and transforms theatre into a participatory act of community building.

4.5 The Aesthetic of the Wounded but Defiant Body

Dalit theatre deliberately stages the wounded body—scarred, beaten, humiliated—yet transforms it into a defiant aesthetic. The visual of a Dalit worker's body bearing scars while standing tall, or a mother refusing to bow despite her suffering, creates what can be termed an aesthetic of defiance. This aesthetic disrupts sanitized theatrical traditions by placing raw bodily experience at the centre of performance.

The Dalit body in theatre is simultaneously stigmatized and reclaimed, wounded and resistant. It operates as a site of trauma, testimony, and rebellion, transforming performance into embodied memory. Whether through gestures, silences, scars, or collective movements, the Dalit body contests its historical degradation and asserts dignity on stage. By reclaiming the body, Dalit dramatists reclaim history itself, positioning performance as a radical intervention in the politics of caste and gender.

5. Intersections: Language–Symbolism–Space–Body

While language, symbolism, space, and body can be analysed separately as constitutive features of Dalit theatre, their full power emerges in their interconnections. Dalit dramatists rarely employ them in isolation; rather, they converge to create a holistic counter-aesthetic that destabilizes caste hierarchies and articulates resistance. This interweaving transforms theatre from mere performance into lived politics, where form and content are inseparable.

5.1 Language Inscribed on the Body

In Dalit theatre, language often manifests through bodily expression. Dialects, chants, and folk idioms are not simply spoken; they are

embodied through rhythm, tone, and movement. In his plays, refugee bodies—bent backs, trembling hands, laboured breaths. The linguistic register thus fuses with bodily gesture, making the audience experience language as lived suffering.

Namdeo Dhasal's urban idioms in Marathi theatre similarly draw strength from performance: when delivered with the aggressive stance of street actors, the words acquire a physical force that written text alone cannot convey. Here, language and body operate as a single unit of resistance.

5.2 Symbolism Enacted in Space

Symbols in Dalit theatre derive their potency from spatial context. A broken boat staged in a refugee colony carries deeper resonance than the same object on a proscenium stage. Soil scattered across the ground of an open-air performance in a Namasudra settlement does not remain an abstract symbol; it becomes literal, tangible, part of the audience's lived environment.

Similarly, the broom or drum, when wielded in a village square during performance, is not only a theatrical symbol but also a political declaration visible to the community. As Augusto Boal (1979) suggested in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, spatial context activates symbolic meanings, turning them into acts of resistance. Dalit dramatists extend this logic by grounding symbols in spaces already charged with caste memory.

5.3 The Body as Symbolic Language

The Dalit body itself functions as both symbol and language. Scars, gestures, and silences on stage “speak” histories of oppression that words cannot fully capture. Sharmila Rege (2006) describes Dalit testimonios as forms of embodied knowledge, where the body testifies to violence and survival. In theatre, the raised fist, the collective dance, or the maternal figure refusing to collapse transforms the body into a symbolic vocabulary.

In Namita Das's plays, the female body becomes doubly symbolic: a site of caste oppression and gendered resistance. When the maternal body bears both suffering and endurance, it symbolises the resilience of the community itself. Thus, the body does not merely enact language or display symbols—it becomes a language-symbol hybrid, embodying both articulation and metaphor.

5.4 Space as Language of Inclusion

Performance space, too, functions as a form of language. By rejecting the proscenium and moving into streets and courtyards, Dalit theatre “speaks” inclusivity. The very choice of staging in a refugee colony or factory compound symbolises solidarity with marginalised workers and refugees. This spatial gesture carries meaning even before dialogue begins. In this sense, space communicates as effectively as words or symbols, integrating physical environment into the dramaturgy.

5.5 Interwoven Aesthetics

In Raju Das's *Kolonko*, the refugee body of a helpless woman was depicted as hanging from the tree, the body reflects the pain of sexual abuse that many women like her had faced. It is staged on a mud-soiled open ground, speaking in dialects while surrounded by symbols of displacement (broken boats, fishing nets). Language, body, space, and symbol converge, making the play an immersive testimony of uprooted lives.

In Namita Das's women-centric plays, chants in folk idioms are delivered by groups of women in village courtyards, their bodies enacting both labour and resistance, while objects like pots, brooms, and torn saris become symbols of dignity and defiance. Here again, all four dimensions operate together.

In Kannada Dalit Street theatre, the collective chant of slogans (language), performed by bodies marching in unison (body), in markets or protest grounds (space), while holding tools of labour (symbolism), creates an integrated aesthetic of protest.

6. Towards a Counter-Aesthetic

The intersections of language, symbolism, space, and body illustrate how Dalit theatre functions as a holistic counter-aesthetic. Each dimension enhances the others, producing a multi-layered performance where speech is physical, symbols are spatial, bodies are linguistic, and spaces are symbolic. This integration resists compartmentalisation, embodying a lived Dalit epistemology. As G. N. Devy (2002) notes, subaltern performance traditions thrive in “polyphonic” modes, where elements of oral, visual, and embodied cultures merge. Dalit theatre exemplifies this polyphony, turning performance into a radical site where art and politics, aesthetics and life, collapse into one another. By weaving together language, symbolism, space, and body, Dalit dramatists create an aesthetic that is inseparable from politics. These intersections amplify each element’s power and produce a theatre that is not just representational but also transformational. The integration of these dimensions makes Dalit theatre a unique cultural form—at once testimony, archive, and revolutionary practice.

Comparative Lens: Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada Dalit Theatre

Dalit theatre across India emerges from specific histories of caste oppression, yet it shares common strategies of resistance. A comparative exploration of Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada Dalit theatre highlights both shared concerns—such as reclaiming language, centring the Dalit body, and transforming space—and regional distinctiveness rooted in local histories, aesthetics, and politics.

7. Shared Concerns: A Common Grammar of Resistance

All three traditions employ language, symbolism, space, and body as tools of defiance against caste domination. The use of folk idioms, rejection of elite proscenium theatre, and emphasis on embodied suffering and dignity are common across regions. Whether in Maharashtra, Karnataka, or Bengal, Dalit dramatists seek to

democratize theatre by breaking the exclusivity of elite culture and transforming it into a community-driven performance practice.

As Kancha Ilaiah (1996) points out, Dalit cultural productions are not simply “literary” but function as epistemic revolutions, challenging Brahminical hegemony and creating alternative ways of knowing. Dalit theatre across regions enacts this revolution through performance.

7.1 Marathi Dalit Theatre: Radical Language and Assertion

Marathi Dalit theatre, influenced by the legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the rise of Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, is marked by radical assertion and aggressive linguistic experimentation. Playwrights like Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale infused street theatre with the raw idioms of Mumbai’s underclass, challenging polite Marathi with the force of Dalit urban speech. For example, Dhasal’s work deploys urban slang, sexual frankness, and bodily gestures to shock audiences into confronting caste violence. The theatre of this region is often confrontational, seeking to provoke rather than merely narrate. Symbolism tends to be stark and political—the burning of Manusmriti, the imagery of chains, or the evocation of Ambedkar as liberator.

7.2 Kannada Dalit Theatre: Street Protest and Collective Body

Kannada Dalit theatre has its roots in the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Here, theatre often takes the form of protest marches, street plays (beedi nataka), and collective performances in public spaces. Playwrights like Siddalingaiah and K. B. Sidda deploy folk performance forms like yakshagana and burra katha, repurposing them as tools of agitation. The Kannada tradition emphasizes the collective body. Performers often move as a group, chanting slogans and enacting rituals of humiliation and defiance. The performance space is rarely a stage but instead the street, the village square, or the protest ground—symbolising the immediacy of political struggle. Symbolism here

often arises from objects of labour and survival: ploughs, sickles, and drums.

8. Bengali Dalit Theatre: Memory, Displacement, and Symbolic Minimalism

Bengali Dalit theatre, while sharing the oppositional ethos of its Marathi and Kannada counterparts, is distinctive for its focus on memory, displacement, and symbolic minimalism. Playwrights like Raju Das centre refugee experiences, gender and caste oppression foregrounding the trauma of uprooted Namasudras after Partition. The language is rooted in dialects and folk speech but often juxtaposed with silences and pauses that symbolize historical erasure.

Namita Das's plays highlight the intersection of caste and gender in Bengal, often staging maternal bodies as symbols of both suffering and endurance. Minimal props—broken boats, nets, brooms—become powerful symbols in open-air performances staged in refugee colonies or villages. Unlike the confrontational aggression of Marathi theatre or the militant collectivism of Kannada theatre, Bengali Dalit theatre often emphasizes a quieter, memory-infused aesthetic, where resistance takes the form of testimony and endurance.

8.1 Cross-Regional Resonances and Distinctiveness

Language: Marathi Dalit theatre uses aggressive urban slang, Kannada theatre employs folk idioms tied to labouring communities, and Bengali theatre privileges dialects of refugees and rural Dalits.

Symbolism: Marathi theatre is explicit and confrontational (chains, fire, Ambedkarite imagery); Kannada theatre uses tools of survival (plough, drum) as protest symbols; Bengali theatre employs minimal, everyday objects (soil, nets, broken boats) that carry layered historical memory.

Space: All reject elite proscenium spaces, but with variation—Marathi theatre often uses streets in urban settings, Kannada theatre foregrounds protest marches and rural squares, Bengali theatre stages

performances in refugee colonies or riverside villages, binding theatre to displacement.

Body: Marathi actors embody anger and aggression, Kannada performers stress collective bodily assertion, while Bengali Dalit theatre emphasizes the wounded but enduring body, often maternal or refugee in form.

8.2 Towards an Indian Dalit Aesthetic

Despite regional differences, the three traditions together reveal the emergence of a distinctly Dalit aesthetic in Indian theatre: raw, embodied, community-driven, and deeply political. Each region brings its historical specificity—Ambedkarite radicalism in Maharashtra, militant collectivism in Karnataka, memory and displacement in Bengal—but their convergence points to a pan-Indian counter-theatre that destabilizes caste dominance and democratizes performance.

As Gopal Guru (2009) argues, Dalit cultural productions must be understood not merely as literature or art but as philosophy-in-action. The comparative study of these theatres demonstrates how performance becomes praxis: a lived, collective form of thinking, resisting, and imagining.

Dalit theatre in India is more than an artistic practice—it is a radical cultural and political intervention. Through its unique mobilization of language, symbolism, space, and body, it challenges entrenched caste hierarchies, destabilises elitist aesthetics, and asserts the dignity of marginalised lives. Unlike mainstream theatre, which often privileges polished language, ornate symbolism, and closed proscenium spaces, Dalit theatre insists on a raw, embodied, community-driven aesthetic rooted in lived experience.

The use of dialects, folk idioms, and oral traditions transforms Dalit language into a weapon of resistance. It dismantles linguistic hierarchies by privileging voices historically silenced or dismissed as “impure.” This reclamation of speech is not just representational but

epistemic—it asserts alternative knowledge systems that emerge from the margins.

The Dalit body, historically stigmatized as untouchable, becomes the central site of testimony and rebellion. Gestures, silences, scars, and collective rhythms on stage bear witness to histories of trauma while also asserting resilience. Dalit dramatists turn the wounded body into an aesthetic of defiance, insisting that the same body society degrades is capable of dignity, endurance, and collective power.

Dalit theatre redefines symbolism by rejecting abstract or mythical imagery in favour of ordinary objects—soil, brooms, boats, drums—that are charged with historical and political meaning. These symbols emerge directly from lived experiences of Dalit worlds, making theatre a reflection of everyday struggles rather than a detached spectacle.

By moving away from the proscenium and into streets, courtyards, villages, and refugee colonies, Dalit theatre democratizes performance. Space itself becomes part of the dramaturgy, blurring the line between performer and spectator. The act of staging in lived environments ensures that theatre remains a communal act of memory, solidarity, and agitation.

9. A Polyphonic Counter-Aesthetic

When woven together, these four elements of Dalit theatre produce a polyphonic counter-aesthetic that is at once political and philosophical, not only about representing marginalised communities but indicative of transforming theatre itself into a practice of resistance. As Gopal Guru (2009) notes, Dalit cultural productions are not supplementary to politics; they are politics in action.

The comparative study of Bengali, Marathi, and Kannada Dalit theatres shows that while each draw from distinct regional histories—Ambedkarite radicalism in Maharashtra, militant collectivism in Karnataka, and refugee memory in Bengal—they all converge on a shared vision: to dismantle caste through performance.

This convergence reveals the possibility of a pan-Indian Dalit aesthetic, one that is flexible, embodied, and deeply rooted in lived histories of oppression and survival.

Dalit theatre, then, is not simply a “genre” but a movement of thought and action. It reimagines theatre as archive, testimony, and protest. By centring the voices, bodies, spaces, and symbols of the oppressed, it transforms art into a site of dignity and defiance. In doing so, Dalit dramatists remind one that theatre is not only about representation but about reconstitution—of culture, of memory, and of politics.

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Chapter 8

Minimalism and Realism in Dalit Theatre in Bengal

1. Minimalism: A Theatrical Strategy

Minimalism in theatre refers to a stylistic and political strategy that rejects elaborate stagecraft, ornamental dialogue, and excessive spectacle in favour of essential elements such as the body, voice, and symbol. In Bengali Dalit plays, minimalism emerges not only as an aesthetic choice but also as a reflection of material conditions and cultural politics. Dalit dramatists, who often come from marginalized communities with limited resources, embrace minimalism as a way of transforming scarcity into strength. Their stripped-down performances reject the elitism of proscenium theatre and instead foreground the raw immediacy of lived experience.

1.1 Minimalism as Aesthetics of Scarcity

The socio-economic realities of Dalit communities shape the aesthetics of their theatre. Limited access to funding, rehearsal spaces, and stage resources naturally lead to frugal stagecraft. Yet, this scarcity is transformed into a powerful aesthetics of resistance. The bare stage, improvised props, and absence of spectacle prevent distraction and direct the audience's attention to the political urgency of the performance. For instance, a single broken cot in a play can symbolize both displacement and rootlessness, while a piece of torn cloth can stand for both poverty and lost dignity.

1.2 The Body as Minimalist Instrument

In Bengali Dalit plays, the performer's body itself becomes the primary site of minimalism. Gestures, silences, and raw emotional expression replace elaborate costumes and stage design. This is particularly visible in plays like *Surjo Tonoy*, *Neel Selam*, *Kolonko*

where the emaciated protagonist's body conveys refugee hunger and humiliation without the need for elaborate narrative devices. The actor's body thus becomes a minimalist canvas, inscribed with the histories of oppression and survival.

1.3 Language and Dialogue

Minimalism in Dalit theatre is also evident in the use of everyday speech rather than ornate or literary Bengali. Dialogue is pared down, direct, and unembellished, often borrowing from refugee colony conversations, rural dialects, and working-class idioms. This linguistic minimalism democratizes theatre: it ensures accessibility for Dalit audiences while rejecting the linguistic elitism of mainstream theatre. In most of the Bengali Dalit plays, women's voices emerge in colloquial tones, grounded in daily struggles rather than in metaphoric or abstract speech.

1.4 Symbolic Minimalism

Props and stage elements in Bengali Dalit plays often carry multiple symbolic meanings. A rope may signify both labour and bondage; an empty plate may evoke hunger as well as exclusion from communal meals due to untouchability. This symbolic minimalism is not decorative but deeply political: it condenses layers of Dalit experience into ordinary objects, allowing audiences to grasp structural realities through a single image.

1.6 Spatial Minimalism: From Proscenium to Colony Streets

Dalit theatre frequently rejects the elitist proscenium stage and relocates performance to refugee colonies, village squares, or makeshift community halls. These spaces require minimal resources but amplify the immediacy of performance. In these contexts, the stage may be nothing more than an open courtyard, but the absence of architectural grandeur becomes an advantage—erasing distance between actors and audiences and reinforcing a sense of collective witnessing.

1.7 Minimalism as Counter-Aesthetics

Besides these, minimalism in Bengali Dalit plays serves as a counter-aesthetic to mainstream theatre, which has historically privileged grandeur, mythological narratives, and nationalist themes. By contrast, Dalit theatre strips performance down to essentials to foreground voices that have been systematically silenced. The absence of spectacle becomes a critique of caste privilege in cultural production. Where mainstream theatre dazzles, Dalit theatre provokes; where mainstream theatre entertains, Dalit theatre unsettles.

Gender and Minimalism

Dalit playwrights deploy minimalism to emphasize bodily autonomy and resistance. Minimal settings highlight the vulnerability and resilience of women's bodies under caste and patriarchal violence. Instead of dramatizing suffering through spectacle, minimalist dramaturgy allows audiences to focus on the raw, unembellished truth of gendered experience.

Minimalism in Bengali Dalit plays is not simply the result of resource limitations but a deliberate political and aesthetic strategy. It channelises the reality of scarcity into a theatre of urgency, where the body, language, and symbolic object acquire heightened meaning. By rejecting spectacle and privileging essentials, Dalit playwrights such as Raju Das and Namita Das craft a counter-theatre that resists elitism, democratizes performance, and centres the lived realities of marginalized communities. In this way, minimalism becomes both an artistic language and an assertion of dignity—an aesthetic of survival and resistance that defines Dalit theatre in Bengal.

2. Realism as Political Truth

Theatre has historically served as a space for reflecting, contesting, and re-imagining social realities. In Bengal, mainstream theatre—from Girish Chandra Ghosh's mythological spectacles to Utpal Dutt's political dramas—has often claimed to speak for the people. Yet, Dalit voices remained absent from this cultural sphere until the

late twentieth century, when Dalit playwrights such as Raju Das and Namita Das began to articulate the experiences of marginalized communities. A defining feature of these plays is their embrace of realism, not as a neutral stylistic device but as a political truth that forces society to confront caste-based violence, poverty, displacement, and humiliation. In the Dalit theatrical tradition of Bengal, realism becomes more than an aesthetic; it is an instrument of testimony, memory, and resistance.

2.1 Realism Beyond Aesthetic Representation

In mainstream Bengali theatre, realism has often meant mimetic representation—accurately recreating social conditions through dialogue, set design, and acting. However, in Dalit theatre, realism acquires a different function. It emerges from lived experience and aims to unmask the structural violence of caste and class. The plays resist stylization and allegory, preferring instead to reveal the everyday cruelty of untouchability, landlessness, and refugee suffering. Here, realism refuses to be ornamental; it is raw, urgent, and unsettling, demanding recognition of truths that are usually silenced in dominant cultural discourses.

2.2 Refugee Trauma and Realist Testimony

One of the recurring themes in Bengali Dalit plays is the trauma of Partition and the subsequent displacement of Namasudra and other Dalit communities. Dalit theatre offers a searing portrayal of refugee life with complete absence of grandeur and sharp focus on stark images—families forced to live on pavements, children starving, women being humiliated by landlords and officials. This realism does not seek audience sympathy in a sentimental mode but instead presents the stark truth of systemic neglect. Through realist dialogue and characters drawn from everyday refugee life, Dalit theatre functions as a political document that chronicles how caste and class intersect with Partition history.

2.3 The Suffering Body as Realist Symbol

In Dalit plays, the body itself becomes a site of realism. Starved, beaten, or humiliated bodies are not presented as metaphors but as living realities of the Dalit condition. For example, in Raju Das's *Surjo Tonoy*, the emaciated figure of the protagonist reflects the material deprivation of refugee life, while his silence and broken gestures convey the dehumanization inflicted by caste society. This embodied realism transforms the stage into a site of political witnessing, where the body refuses erasure and insists on being recognized as part of the collective memory of suffering.

2.4 Gendered Realism: Women's Experiences

Dalit women occupy a central space in Dalit theatre, where realism extends into the domains of gender and sexuality. These plays often depict experiences of sexual violence, maternal suffering, and bodily exploitation that Dalit women endure in both public and private spheres. Unlike upper-caste representations that aestheticize women's pain, Dalit theatre presents these realities in stark, unembellished terms. The realism of maternal resistance—a mother refusing to give up her child despite hunger, or a woman fighting back against casteist sexual violence—becomes a political assertion of dignity and survival. By foregrounding gendered bodies, Dalit plays expose how realism must also account for the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression.

2.5 Realism as Counter-Narrative

Dalit theatre in Bengal deploys realism as a counter-narrative against dominant theatre traditions. The proscenium stage often cultivated distance between audience and performance, privileging elite aesthetics. In contrast, Dalit plays use realist dialogue, familiar spaces, and accessible language to collapse this distance. Performances staged in refugee colonies or rural settings amplify the effect of realism, as audiences recognize their own lives being dramatized. Thus, realism becomes not just a style but a communal mirror, reinforcing collective memory and forging solidarity among marginalized spectators.

2.6 Audience Reception and Political Truth

For Dalit audiences, the realist mode affirms lived truths that mainstream culture erases. The plays validate their struggles and articulate anger, hope, and resilience. For non-Dalit audiences, however, this realism is often unsettling—it disrupts comfortable narratives of Bengal’s progressive politics by revealing caste’s persistent violence. In this sense, the political truth of realism lies in its ability to unsettle dominant ideologies while grounding performance in the material realities of marginalized lives.

3. Comparative Perspectives

Compared with Marathi Dalit theatre, which often draws upon Ambedkarite ideology, or Kannada Dalit theatre, which integrates ritualistic folk forms, Bengali Dalit theatre is deeply shaped by the refugee experience and Leftist movements. Its commitment to realism reflects this historical specificity. The bare, realist portrayal of Partition, displacement, and caste marginalization distinguishes it as a unique expression within the wider landscape of Dalit performance traditions in India.

Realism in Dalit plays of Bengal is not simply an artistic device; it is a political truth grounded in testimony, memory, and resistance. By dramatizing the stark realities of caste oppression, refugee suffering, and gendered violence, these plays create a theatre of survival and dignity. They transform the stage into a site where silenced voices reclaim space and force audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. Realism here is not passive imitation but active resistance—it destabilizes dominant cultural narratives and articulates the lived truths of Dalit communities in Bengal. As such, realism in Dalit theatre is a radical aesthetic practice, one that refuses erasure and insists on justice.

Dalit theatre in Bengal often adopts a social realist mode, depicting the everyday violence, humiliation, and survival struggles of Dalit communities. Realism in such context does not mean a mere imitation of life but the dramatization of structural oppression—

landlessness, untouchability, gender violence, refugee trauma, and political betrayal. Many Dalit plays of Bengal draw upon the Partition and refugee experience of Namasudras, representing hunger, eviction, and state violence in stark, unromantic terms. The suffering body itself becomes a realist symbol—emaciated, displaced, humiliated—embodying the socio-political condition of the community.

4. Interplay of Minimalism and Realism

The power of Bengali Dalit theatre lies in the fusion of minimalism and realism. Minimalism sharpens realism by eliminating distractions, while realism grounds minimalism in social truth. Together, they create a theatre that is raw, direct, and politically charged. This kind of interplay often functions as Objects as Dual Signs, e.g., an empty plate functions minimally as a prop, but realistically it signifies both hunger and exclusion from upper-caste dining practices. A performer's emaciated body, minimally costumed, realistically embodies the effects of poverty and displacement where the body serves as the performative space. Minimal performance space like the streets, refugee colonies, village squares—intensify the realist immediacy of theatre by situating plays in environments where these struggles are lived realities.

This interplay collapses the distinction between form and content. The stripped-down stage emphasizes the material truth of caste and class oppression, while realism ensures that minimalism does not drift into abstraction but remains grounded in political testimony.

5. Audience Reception of the Interplay of Minimalism and Realism in Theatre Performances

The interplay of minimalism and realism shapes audience response in distinct ways. For Dalit audiences, it offers recognition—a mirror of their own realities articulated without embellishment. For non-Dalit audiences, it creates discomfort by dismantling the aesthetic distance cultivated by mainstream theatre. Minimalism ensures accessibility, allowing performances in modest settings, while

realism guarantees that the plays resonate as authentic political truths rather than artistic abstractions.

6. Comparative Context

In contrast to Marathi Dalit theatre (with its emphasis on Ambedkarite ideological assertion) and Kannada Dalit theatre (with ritualistic and folk incorporations), Bengali Dalit theatre leans heavily on minimalism and social realism. This may be linked to Bengal's refugee experience, Left politics, and a long tradition of realist literature. The exploration of minimalism and realism in Dalit theatre in Bengal reveals how aesthetic form and political content intersect to produce a radical counter-narrative against dominant cultural structures. Minimalism, with its sparse sets, frugal props, and pared-down dialogues, is not merely the consequence of material deprivation but a deliberate artistic strategy that reflects the lived precarity of Dalit communities while ensuring accessibility to diverse performance spaces. It transforms scarcity into strength by drawing the audience's focus to the body, voice, and lived experience of the performers.

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Chapter 9

Performance Politics: Stage, Space and Audience

The stage, traditionally associated with spectacle and aesthetics, becomes in Dalit performance a site of contestation, where the wounded and humiliated body asserts itself as the central medium of expression. Space, which in classical Indian theatre was often coded in elite terms—temple courtyards, royal courts, and proscenium stages—is redefined in Dalit theatre to include streets, village squares, refugee settlements, and working-class neighbourhoods. Audience, which in mainstream theatre is often a passive observer, is transformed in Dalit theatre into an active participant, a community of witnesses, and sometimes even co-creators of the performance. Hence, in Dalit theatre, representation is not simply an artistic choice but a political battleground.

The performance politics of Dalit theatre is not simply about telling the stories of the oppressed; it is about unsettling the grammar of Indian cultural production itself. By centring marginalized voices, breaking the monopoly of dominant aesthetics, and foregrounding the lived experiences of caste oppression, Dalit theatre demonstrates that performance is never politically innocent. It challenges the illusion of neutrality that elite theatre often claims, revealing instead the deep entanglements between art, power, and ideology.

1. The Dalit Movement and Theatrical Assertion in the 20th Century

The 20th century was crucial for the consolidation of Dalit theatre as a political movement. The rise of B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in Maharashtra gave performance a distinctly political direction. Ambedkar recognized the importance of cultural forms in shaping collective consciousness. Dalit activists used plays, songs,

and street performances to spread his message of equality, education, and resistance.

The 1970s marked a watershed moment with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, who drew inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the US. Theatre became one of their most powerful tools of mobilization. Performances were staged in streets and slums, addressing themes of untouchability, violence, and economic exploitation. Shahir Amar Shaikh and Namdeo Dhasal infused powadas and street plays with revolutionary fervor, turning performance into an act of confrontation with the state and dominant castes.

In Bengal, Dalit theatre took shape in the late 20th century through the works of playwrights such as Raju Das and Namita Das, who depicted the suffering of refugee Dalit communities in the wake of Partition. Their plays, often staged in modest community spaces rather than elite auditoriums, emphasized raw emotion, realism, and the lived body of humiliation.

In Karnataka, writers like K.B. Siddaiah and groups like the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti used theatre to address both caste oppression and economic exploitation, often blending folk forms with modern dramaturgy. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, Dalit Christian groups reappropriated biblical narratives in performance, while secular groups highlighted land struggles and caste violence.

2. Dalit Theatre as Counter-Public Sphere

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Dalit theatre had consolidated itself as a counter-public sphere. It offered a platform for voices excluded from mainstream cultural institutions. Unlike elite theatre, which often catered to urban middle-class audiences in proscenium halls, Dalit theatre thrived in streets, village squares, and makeshift stages.

This counter-public character was not accidental but strategic. Dalit theatre refused to confine itself to elite aesthetics. Instead, it

embraced minimalism, raw expressivity, and community engagement. It often blurred the boundaries between performer and spectator, between stage and audience, between art and politics. Its strength lay precisely in its refusal to be assimilated into mainstream cultural circuits without losing its political edge.

Dalit theatre counter questions Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", and challenges the main stream audience to consider whether marginalized voices can ever be authentically represented within dominant cultural frameworks; thereby raising a pertinent question, "Can the subaltern perform?"

Dalit theatre is not just about representation but about reclaiming agency in performance. Unlike elite theatre, which often portrays Dalit characters through the gaze of dominant castes, Dalit theatre insists on self-representation. The Dalit subject is no longer spoken for; they speak, sing, and perform for themselves.

Dalit theatre functions as a counter-historical archive, staging stories of caste violence, famine, Partition, and displacement that are often absent from official histories. Raju Das's plays in Bengal or street plays performed by the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra serve as alternative historiographies enacted before live audiences.

3. Transition to Contemporary Forms

In the contemporary era, Dalit theatre continues to evolve, engaging with new media and digital platforms while retaining its emphasis on stage, space, and audience politics. Younger Dalit playwrights and performers experiment with hybrid forms—blending folk, modern, and digital techniques. Yet, the centrality of performance politics remains. The stage continues to be a space of assertion, the occupation of public space continues to challenge caste hierarchies, and the audience remains integral to the creation of a shared political consciousness.

Thus, the history of Dalit theatre is not merely a story of artistic evolution but of political struggle. From oral traditions of resistance

to contemporary digital adaptations, Dalit theatre has consistently sought to transform performance into praxis, ensuring that art remains inseparable from the fight for dignity and justice.

4. Representation as Power

Representation is never innocent. It is always entangled with structures of power. In mainstream Indian theatre—whether rooted in Sanskrit dramaturgy or in modern urban proscenium traditions—Dalits were historically excluded as authors, performers, and audiences. When represented at all, Dalits often appeared as caricatures, servants, or objects of pity, their lives reduced to stereotypes that reinforced Brahminical dominance. Representations of Dalits in mainstream theatre shaped societal perceptions, legitimizing caste hierarchies as natural and eternal. In this sense, theatre functioned as a disciplinary apparatus, regulating the visibility of Dalit bodies and voices. Dalit theatre disrupts this by asserting self-representation. No longer mediated by upper-caste playwrights or directors, Dalit performers speak in their own voices, staging their lived experiences of humiliation, displacement, and resilience. In Dalit theatres, the refugee Dalit body is not presented as an object of sympathy but as a political subject demanding recognition. Similarly, the street plays of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra redefined performance as direct confrontation with the structures of caste power. Representation here becomes an act of reclaiming epistemic authority. Dalit theatre insists that the oppressed are not mere subjects of representation but agents of history who narrate, embody, and perform their own realities.

5. Space as a Political Category

Space is central to the politics of representation. Theatres, auditoriums, and stages are not neutral sites; they are imbued with social codes that include some bodies and exclude others. Historically, proscenium stages in India catered to urban, upper-caste, middle-class audiences. The cost of tickets, the etiquette of spectatorship, and even the architecture of the auditorium reinforced

exclusivity. Dalits, even when permitted entry, often occupied marginal positions in these spaces. Dalit theatre responded by reconfiguring performance spaces. Instead of waiting for entry into elite auditoriums, Dalit performers occupied streets, village courtyards, refugee settlements, and factory gates. These spaces were not merely pragmatic choices but ideological ones: they disrupted the monopoly of dominant cultural institutions and created alternative public spheres. A street performance in a Dalit basti is not the same as a proscenium play in a metropolitan theatre. The former transforms everyday space into a stage of resistance, collapsing the divide between art and life. The audience here is not distanced but embedded, not abstract but communal. The Dalit Sangharsh Samiti in Karnataka staged performances in village squares to protest landlessness and bonded labour. In Bengal, Namita Das performed in makeshift community halls, where the intimacy of the space allowed the audience to witness not spectacle but shared suffering. These performances demonstrate that representation is inseparable from the spatial politics of staging.

6. Cultural Capital and the Hierarchies of Aesthetics

In India, Sanskrit theatre, classical dance, and proscenium drama have historically enjoyed the prestige of “high culture,” while Dalit performance traditions were dismissed as folk, crude, or merely entertaining. Dalit theatre contests these hierarchies by redefining what counts as cultural value. Its aesthetics are rooted not in refinement or ornamentation but in authentic experience, raw emotion, and political urgency. Sharankumar Limbale insists that Dalit art must be judged not by Brahminical standards of beauty but by its fidelity to truth and experience. What mainstream critics dismiss as anger, crudeness, or lack of polish is, in fact, a deliberate rejection of elitist aesthetics. The challenge, however, is that cultural capital is not easily redistributed. When Dalit plays enter elite festivals or university syllabi, they risk being co-opted, sanitized, or commodified for consumption by upper-caste audiences. The very recognition that confers legitimacy can also neutralize radical edge.

This tension—between visibility and co-option—is central to the politics of cultural capital in Dalit theatre.

7. The Audience and the Politics of Reception

Representation is incomplete without considering the audience. In mainstream theatre, the audience is imagined as a passive observer, distanced from the action. Dalit theatre reconfigures this relationship, often treating the audience as witness, participant, and community. For Dalit audiences, theatre becomes a mirror of shared suffering and a catalyst for solidarity. A play performed in a refugee colony or a village square does not merely “entertain”; it affirms collective identity and mobilizes political consciousness. For elite audiences, however, the same play may function differently—either as an exotic spectacle of subaltern suffering or as a troubling confrontation with their own complicity in caste hierarchies. This double reception underscores the politics of representation. Dalit theatre lives within this tension: it must speak both to its community and beyond it, constantly negotiating between authenticity and accessibility.

8. Global Resonances: Representation and Subaltern Performance

The politics of representation in Dalit theatre resonates with global struggles of marginalized groups. Yet it has a unique character of its own. Its struggle is not only against racial or colonial hierarchies but against a caste system that is deeply embedded in everyday life and cultural practice. Its politics of representation must therefore address not just external domination but also internalized hierarchies within Indian society.

The politics of representation in Dalit theatre unfolds across the interwoven terrains of power, space, and cultural capital. It challenges the discursive power that has historically silenced Dalit voices, reconfigures performance spaces to create counter-public spheres, and contests the monopolies of cultural legitimacy maintained by dominant castes. At the same time, it navigates the complex terrain of audience reception and the risks of co-option.

Dalit theatre demonstrates that representation is not merely symbolic; it is material, embodied, and political. The stage is not only a site of performance but a site of struggle. Space is not neutral but contested. Cultural capital is not fixed but open to challenge. Through its politics of representation, Dalit theatre asserts that those who were once objects of representation are now subjects of history, performers of resistance, and creators of alternative futures.

Theatre is not only an act of performance; it is also an act of reception. A play acquires meaning in the dynamic interaction between the stage and its audience. For Dalit theatre in particular, where representation is political and embodied, audience response becomes central to the cultural and political life of performance. Raju Das, one of the most significant Dalit playwrights of Bengal, has consistently foregrounded the voices and bodies of marginalized communities, especially those of Dalit refugees displaced during and after Partition. His plays such as *Surjo Tonoy* (Son of the Sun), and *Kolonko* not only stage histories of violence and displacement but also demand a critical rethinking of theatre itself as a site of resistance.

9. Community Audiences: Recognition and Catharsis

For Dalit and refugee communities in Bengal, Raju Das's plays resonate as mirrors of lived experience. The depiction of hunger, displacement, caste humiliation, and the fragility of survival produces a profound sense of recognition. When *Chhinnamul* stages the trauma of refugee life in makeshift settlements, community audiences do not see it as distant history but as part of their familial memory.

The reception of his plays is not merely intellectual but affective and embodied. Audiences respond with tears, with verbal affirmations, sometimes even by narrating their own stories after performances. This interactive, almost participatory mode of reception transforms theatre into a form of collective memory-making. The audience is not a passive consumer but a community of witnesses and survivors.

10. Urban Middle-Class Audiences: Uneasy Confrontation

For urban, largely upper-caste and middle-class audiences in Kolkata, Dalit theatre often produce discomfort. They unsettle the sanitized aesthetics of mainstream Bengali theatre, which traditionally valorised refinement, abstraction, and symbolic subtlety. Das's raw realism, minimalism, and emphasis on the suffering body disrupt these expectations. The reception in this case is marked by ambivalence. On one hand, critics praise the plays for their "authenticity" and their "political urgency." On the other hand, there is a tendency to frame them within the language of victimhood, reducing Dalit suffering to a spectacle. In some cases, reviewers lament the "lack of sophistication" in staging, revealing how entrenched Brahminical standards of theatre continue to shape critical perception.

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Chapter 10

Gender and Dalit Theatre

The representation of Dalit women in Indian cultural, literary, and theatrical traditions has long been fraught with invisibility, distortion, or victimhood. In mainstream theatre and literature, Dalit women are often reduced to passive sufferers of double oppression—of caste and of gender—while their voices remain mediated by dominant castes or even by Dalit men themselves. Yet, in recent decades, Dalit women have emerged not only as protagonists within stories but also as powerful creators, playwrights, directors, and performers who reshape cultural narratives and aesthetics. Their interventions challenge tokenistic inclusion and demand a radical rethinking of representation, agency, and authorship.

Dalit women's lives have historically been marked by multiple layers of marginalization. Colonial ethnographies, Brahminical texts, and even early social reformist writings often rendered Dalit women as either “objects of reform” or “symbols of degradation.” Their lived experiences were narrated about them rather than by them. In theatre, their presence was minimal, often limited to stereotypical depictions of suffering mothers, victimized wives, or symbols of pollution. Even within Dalit literary and performance traditions, the question of gender was often sidelined. Early Dalit theatre in states like Maharashtra and Bengal focused primarily on caste humiliation, land struggles, and labour exploitation, with male figures at the centre. Women were present, but rarely as subjects with autonomy or creative authority.

1. Dalit Women as Protagonists and Creators

The emergence of Dalit women as protagonists in theatre and literature represents a rupture in representational politics. These portrayals resist victimhood and articulate subjectivities rooted in resilience, defiance, and creativity. Dalit women embodied narratives

of resistance; embodying both suffering and defiance. In plays that centre women's voices, the stage becomes a site where their labour, pain, and struggles against caste and patriarchy are dramatized. Unlike tokenistic representations, these protagonists are agents of change, not passive sufferers. The female body on stage becomes a political text, representing histories of caste-gender violence, but also reclaiming dignity and power. The act of speaking, moving, or asserting presence in public performance challenges centuries of silencing.

Dalit women protagonists articulate an intersectional politics—acknowledging that their oppression cannot be reduced to caste alone but must be understood through the entanglement of caste, gender, class, and religion. In the autobiographical plays and performances by Dalit women, the women foreground their own voices rather than allowing male playwrights to narrate their experiences.

Beyond being represented, Dalit women are increasingly the authors of their own narratives. This shift is crucial, as it disrupts the cultural monopoly of both upper-caste creators and Dalit men. Namita Das's plays in Bengal embody the Dalit woman as both the creator and the performer. Her plays centre round Dalit women's experiences, addressing issues like domestic labour, sexual violence, migration, and memory. Their authorship redefines what stories get told and how they are staged. Her plays are rooted in traditional oral culture—such as songs, folktales, and street theatre. By reclaiming these forms, women playwrights like Namita Das assert continuity with community memory and transform oralities into political performance. In her plays another key feature that can be witnessed is the presence of minimalism, raw emotionality, and symbolic use of space to emphasize authenticity. Her plays resist the polished aesthetics of elite theatre, instead using the stage as a lived political space where audience and performers engage in dialogue.

While Dalit women have carved spaces for themselves as creators, they continue to face systemic challenges. Both within the mainstream theatre and Dalit cultural movements, male dominance

often limits the visibility and recognition of women's work. At times, women are included in theatre groups or cultural festivals as a symbol of diversity, without being given creative authority. However, Namita das's powerful plays have successfully challenged patriarchal gatekeeping and are well received in her community. For her the stage becomes not merely an artistic arena but a battlefield of assertion, reclaiming voices silenced by caste, patriarchy, and systemic violence. Her plays confront some of the most urgent and painful realities of Dalit women's lives: the denial of bodily autonomy, the recurring experience of sexual violence, and the subversive potential of maternal resistance.

2. Themes of Bodily Autonomy, Sexual Violence and Maternal Resistance

Like any other Dalit theatre, theatres focusing on Dalit women distinguishes itself by refusing tokenistic portrayals or sanitized narratives. Instead, it foregrounds the body—violated, silenced, yet resilient—as a site of both oppression and resistance. Themes of sexual violence against Dalit women are not presented as isolated tragedies, but as systemic, caste-driven acts of control and humiliation. Yet, amidst the brutality, the plays often illuminate maternal figures—mothers, grandmothers, and even metaphorical “mothers of the community”—who embody both suffering and a radical form of resistance.

The body is central to Dalit women's theatre. Unlike elite aesthetics, which often idealize or abstract the female form, Dalit women playwrights, like Namita Das emphasize its materiality—marked by labour, humiliation, and desire. Her plays often depict how the Dalit female body is denied ownership in social and cultural life. Marriage, reproduction, sexuality, and even mobility are determined by patriarchal and casteist structures. The struggle for bodily autonomy, therefore, becomes a central motif. In monologues and dialogues, women characters assert their right to speak of their bodies—whether in terms of menstruation, sexuality, or labour—subjects often erased from mainstream theatre. Performance in Namita Das's plays itself

becomes an act of reclaiming bodily autonomy. When Dalit women appear on stage, occupying space with gestures, voice, and presence, they disrupt centuries of invisibility. The staging of the Dalit woman's body as subject rather than object creates a radical shift in representation.

One of the recurring themes in Dalit women's plays is sexual violence, which is represented not as an individual crime but as a systemic instrument of caste domination. The rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men is a recurring historical reality, rooted in both caste and patriarchy. Dalit theatre stages this violence to expose its systemic nature. Plays often depict how the threat of sexual violence regulates community behaviour, reinforcing caste hierarchies.

While mainstream theatre often avoids graphic depictions of sexual violence, Dalit women playwrights bring it to the centre, not for spectacle but for truth-telling. Naming and staging these violences counters the social mechanisms of silence and shame that surround such events. Many of her plays highlight not only individual suffering but also collective outrage and mobilization. The violated body is presented as symbolic of the violation of the entire community, prompting resistance. Motherhood occupies a complex position in Dalit women's theatre. While often associated with suffering and sacrifice, it also becomes a source of radical strength or as chroniclers of memory, narrating past struggles, violence, and resilience. Through storytelling, they pass down not only trauma but also strategies of survival and defiance.

In plays by Dalit women, motherhood is not restricted to biological ties. The maternal extends into the communal—figures who nurture, shelter, and protect become metaphors of collective resistance. By feeding, clothing, and educating amidst scarcity, mothers enact a politics of care that resists systemic annihilation. Many plays invert the traditional notion of the “self-sacrificing mother” by depicting women who fight back, challenge perpetrators, or lead protests. Their resistance often arises from the desire to protect their children and community from further violence.

Audiences, particularly from Dalit communities, often respond to women-centred plays with deep recognition, as these performances resonate with lived experiences of mothers, sisters, and wives. International audiences, too, have increasingly recognized Dalit women's theatre as a vital contribution to global feminist and subaltern performance traditions. The impact lies not only in the representation of women on stage but in the fact that these women are reshaping the very politics of theatre—from stagecraft to authorship.

The representation of Dalit women as protagonists and creators pushes Dalit theatre towards a feminist redefinition. This is not about adding women into existing male-centred narratives, but about reconstructing the aesthetics of Dalit theatre to foreground multiplicity, intersectionality, and inclusivity. The stage thus becomes not just a site of resistance against caste, but also a site of critique against patriarchy within and beyond Dalit communities.

Dalit playwright Namita Das's journey from invisibility to protagonism and authorship marks a radical shift in the cultural politics of representation. Her journey symbolises that Dalit women are no longer passive figures of suffering but active creators who redefine aesthetics, politics, and performance. By reclaiming the stage, the narrative, and the audience, Dalit women ensure that their representation is not tokenistic but transformative.

3. Dalit Feminism

Dalit theatre in Bengal embodies the principles of Dalit feminism by centring Dalit women's voices, experiences, and bodies in the theatrical space. Dalit dramaturgy resists both the patriarchal tendencies of Dalit male narratives and the caste-blindness of mainstream feminism. Through themes of bodily autonomy, maternal resistance, and community survival, it constructs an aesthetic that is both political and affective. Unlike mainstream liberal or upper-caste feminism, Dalit feminism foregrounds the structural violence of caste and its everyday manifestations in Dalit

women's lives. It demands a different representational politics, one that resists tokenism and claims subjectivity for Dalit women as creators and protagonists. Dalit feminist theatre embodies this framework by foregrounding female agency, bodily autonomy, and collective memory. In Das's plays, Dalit women are not passive victims but active subjects who confront caste and patriarchal violence. Its protagonists often embody resilience while negotiating the oppressive structures of society. Through depictions of domestic labour, sexual exploitation, and community struggles, it situates Dalit women's bodies as contested sites of both subjugation and resistance. A recurring theme in Dalit feminist theatre is the violation of Dalit women's bodies by upper-caste men, reflecting the structural violence of caste-patriarchy. Yet, unlike sensationalist representations that objectify such violence, Das turns these moments into political acts of testimony. The Dalit woman's body in such plays becomes a space of resistance, as women articulate anger, memory, and defiance.

Dalit feminist theatre critiques the silences of mainstream feminist discourse that often universalizes the category of "woman" without acknowledging caste-specific vulnerabilities. By focusing on sexual violence as systemic rather than individualized, it emphasizes that Dalit women's oppression cannot be separated from caste. Another key aspect of Dalit feminism is the portrayal of maternal figures who resist oppression not only for themselves but for the survival of their families and communities. This maternal resistance is not reducible to stereotypical sacrifice but is a form of political action rooted in the ethics of care and survival. Such narratives highlight how Dalit women act as cultural repositories, carrying forward histories of both suffering and defiance. In this way, Dalit feminist theatre aligns her dramaturgy with Dalit feminist thought that sees women not just as subjects of exploitation but as agents of historical continuity and change.

3.1 Influence of Bama, Daya Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble on Dalit Feminism in Bengal

Dalit feminism in Bengal had been influenced and shaped by strong Dalit feminist writers from other regions. The autobiographical work called *Baluta* (1978) by Daya Pawar (1935–1996) from Maharashtra, exposed the brutality of untouchability and everyday humiliation. Pawar's emphasis on autobiographical truth-telling inspired Bengal's Dalit dramatists like Namita Das to write from lived memory rather than abstract ideology. Just as *Baluta* shattered the silence around Dalit experience in Marathi literature, plays like *Neel Selam*, *Kolonkol* and *Surjo Tonoy* broke Bengal's silence on caste and refugee struggles. Pawar's realist, unsentimental tone resonates not only in Namita Das's plays but also in Raju Das's refusal of melodrama; he uses raw realism, silence, and fragmented speech to capture humiliation.

Another Dalit writer from Maharashtra who heavily influenced Dalit feminism in Bengal was Shantabai Kamble (1923–2000). Her seminal work, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life, 1983), first autobiography by a Dalit woman, narrating caste oppression, gender discrimination, and struggles for education, created a template for Dalit women's voices in literature, which influenced Bengal's Namita Das and Kalyani Thakur Charal. Namita Das's plays centre Dalit women as protagonists of resistance rather than victims, echoing Kamble's strategy of self-assertion. Themes of education, bodily autonomy, and maternal resilience in Kamble's work find parallels in Namita Das's portrayal of women resisting both patriarchy and caste oppression. Kamble's intersectional approach helped open a space for feminist aesthetics within Bengali Dalit theatre.

Pioneering Tamil Dalit Christian autobiography, *Karukku* (1992) by Bama's (1958) highlights caste oppression within religious institutions, gendered marginalization, and community solidarity. Bama's sharp critique of institutions (Church, school, village hierarchies) resonates with Bengal's dramatists who critique state

institutions, refugee policies, and bhadralok elitism. Her focus on Dalit women's agency influenced Bengali Dalit dramatists to foreground women not as symbols but as agents of resistance (e.g., Namita Das's female-centred plays). Bama's innovative use of colloquial Tamil legitimized subaltern speech on stage. This resonates even in Raju Das's plays, which employ Dalit refugee dialects and broken Bengali, resisting bhadralok linguistic purity.

3.2 Cross-Regional Influence: A Pan-Dalit Aesthetic

The autobiographical impulse in Bama, Pawar, and Kamble shaped Bengal's Dalit dramatists' choice to treat theatre not as abstraction but as embodied memory. Besides this, Kamble and Bama's works widened the Dalit aesthetic to include gender, religion, and education as axes of oppression—ideas Bengali dramatists incorporated into plays about maternal resistance, caste-sexual violence, and women's voices. The turn towards vernacular idioms and oral traditions (Bama's colloquial Tamil, Pawar's raw Marathi, Kamble's everyday speech) inspired Bengali Dalit playwrights to reject elite Bengali and incorporate Dalit oral culture (Matua songs, refugee speech, local idioms). All these writers showed that literature can be weaponized as social critique. Bengali Dalit dramatists extend this by weaponizing theatre as public performance of memory, humiliation, and resistance.

The works of Daya Pawar, Shantabai Kamble, and Bama did not merely inspire Bengali Dalit dramatists thematically; they provided methodologies of resistance. Together, they form a pan-Indian Dalit aesthetic genealogy that enabled Bengal's dramatists like Raju Das, Namita Das, and Kalyani Thakur Charal to carve a distinctly Bengali Dalit theatre while staying connected to the wider Dalit literary movement in India.

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Part III:
Raju Das and His Major Plays

Chapter 11

Raju Das: The Chronicler of Collective Suffering

Raju Das (1953-25) occupied a prominent place in Bengali Dalit literature as a dramatist, poet, activist, and short story writer whose creative journey was inseparable from the socio-political upheavals that shaped his early life. Born on 11 April 1953 in Dhaka (then East Pakistan), he witnessed first-hand the escalating communal tensions that compelled his family to migrate to West Bengal. The experience of displacement, coupled with years of labour as a rickshaw puller, left a deep imprint on his consciousness, and later became the foundation of his literary and theatrical vision.

Raju Das as a playwright, performer, and cultural activist from Bengal had played a pivotal role in shaping and popularising Dalit consciousness through the medium of community theatre and folk performance. Grounded in Matua philosophy, Das's work embodies a dynamic intersection of caste resistance, cultural reclamation, and performative pedagogy. Over several decades, Das had created an extensive and diverse body of work. His contributions include more than sixty one-act plays, twenty full-length plays, and twenty-five street plays, alongside forty-three short stories and numerous poems. His writings regularly appeared in journals such as “Chaturtha Dunia”, “Adolbodol”, “Road Map”, “Avinoy”, “Nabarun”, “Shantikunja”, and “Ajker Ekbela”. His autobiography, *Ekti Rickshawallar Atmakotha* (2015), stands out as a rare, first-person account of caste, migration, and survival from the perspective of a Dalit labourer.

Raju Das belonged to the Namasudra community, historically labelled as "Chandal" under the colonial regime and subjected to systemic oppression. The Namasudra assertion against Brahminical domination in colonial Bengal was central to the broader Dalit

awakening. The spiritual movement initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, which later evolved into the Matua sect, formed the ideological foundation for Das's early consciousness. Matua philosophy that focuses on egalitarianism, dignity of labour, and rejection of caste hierarchy profoundly influenced him. He was exposed to Matua kirtans and communal gatherings from childhood, where the recitation of Harichand's life became a pedagogic device to instil dignity and defiance. These early experiences laid the foundation for his politicisation. His plays consistently foregrounded the politics of caste, structural injustice, and the everyday struggles of Dalit communities, combining artistic expression with an unmistakable political commitment.

Das's formal engagement with theatre began in the 1980s, amid the rising mobilisation of Scheduled Castes in Bengal and debates on Dalit identity politics, triggered in part by the Mandal Commission. While Dalit assertion had already found voice in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, Bengal was witnessing a gradual emergence of caste-conscious discourse within the performing arts. Raju Das stood at the confluence of these forces—his encounter with Ambedkarite literature, Marathi Dalit theatre, and Navayana Buddhism offered him new interpretive frameworks to understand oppression, and performance became his medium of articulation.

Some of his important Bengali publications included *Ashibhag Manusher (Tinti) Natok* (1997), *Noiti Sarajagano Patha Natok* (1999), *Prem o Protibader Panchti Ek-anka Natok* (1999), *Tinti Ek-anka o Charti Shruti Natok* (2000), *Mahamanab Guruchand Thakur (Prosango)* (2002), *Dalit Mahamanab o Mahioishider Jibani Natok* (2016), *Tetrishi Dalit Natok* (2016), and *Dalit Muktir Poitrishi Natok* (2023). His English-translated collections, *Dalit Protest Unbridled: Two Dozen Plays of Raju Das* (2022) and *Trauma, Protest, Transcendence* (2023), have widened the reach of his work.

Throughout his career, Das had been recognised by several institutions, including the Dalit Sahitya Natya Academy, Hari-Guruchand Ambedkar Chetna Samaj, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Mission,

Bangiyo Hari-Guruchand Chetna Manch, the All India Postal SC/ST Employees Welfare Association, Ramdhanu Theatre Group, and the Mahapran Jogendranath Mandol Shriti Raksha Committee.

From a Rickshaw puller to a Dalit Dramatist

Raju Das's early life was marked by poverty and displacement, circumstances that compelled him to take up rickshaw pulling in his teenage years. For nearly seventeen years, he worked as a rickshaw puller, a job that exposed him to the stark realities of society and offered a close view of the struggles faced by those on the margins. Among them were Dalit refugees from East Bengal who had settled in districts such as Bardhaman, Cooch Behar, and Murshidabad, many of whom travelled to Calcutta simply to secure the means to survive.

As the leader of the Rickshaw Pullers' Union in Dum Dum Municipality, he shared the collective hardships and occasional moments of joy experienced by his fellow workers. Despite limited formal education, he often used breaks and gatherings to share whatever knowledge he possessed. He introduced many to the basics of literacy and initiated conversations on politics, society, culture, and the deeper reasons behind the community's continuing exclusion.

His involvement in organising wall magazines, running night schools, and forming a workers' drama club grew naturally out of these exchanges. Encouraged by his peers and driven by an unwavering desire to read, learn, and question, he began to recognise the power of storytelling. The social injustices he witnessed daily and the resilience of the community he belonged to ultimately pushed him toward writing. The need to articulate their collective struggles and assert their lived experiences through literature became the foundation of his creative journey.

According to Raju Das, Dalit literature is understood as a powerful literary expression of protest entrenched systems of discrimination, including caste oppression, communal prejudice, and religious

extremism. It upholds the principles of equality and socialism while rejecting terrorism, hierarchical social structures, and any ideology that sustains exclusion. At its core, Dalit literature seeks to build a constructive and affirmative Dalit identity, insisting on fair representation and participation in social, political, economic, cultural, and literary domains. As a movement, it strives to free the Dalit community from the religious, political, and social domination historically enforced through texts like the *Manusmriti* and other doctrines that legitimised oppression in the name of caste and religion.

He maintained that the inspiration behind his writings cannot be traced to the ideology of B. R. Ambedkar alone. His work draws from a wide and diverse lineage of social thinkers and activists who fought on behalf of the subaltern and the marginalised. The ideas of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, and Jogendranath Mandal, among others, have significantly shaped his understanding of justice and social equality. Yet, he also acknowledged that Ambedkar's contributions to Dalit emancipation, along with his mission and vision, exert a profound and enduring influence on the discourse of the Indian subaltern. Ambedkar's legacy remains central to his interpretation of Dalit struggle and empowerment.

Das acknowledged that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's writings and speeches served as a profound source of inspiration for Dalit writers. Ambedkar's resistance to caste politics, his transformative role in post-independence India, his central contribution to drafting the Constitution, and his declaration of untouchability as a punishable social crime form a powerful foundation for his own literary and activist efforts. Ambedkar's ideas continue to energise his commitment to confronting social injustice through writing. Jogendranath Mandal played a crucial role in supporting Ambedkar's election to the Indian Parliament from a Bengal constituency. He emphasised that the growth of Dalit literature in India cannot be

attributed solely to the Dalit Panthers; in several regions, especially Mumbai, literary production inspired by Gautama Buddha, Jyotirao Phule, and Ambedkar had already been flourishing. Thus, even though West Bengal witnessed a delayed emergence, Dalit literature made significant strides in other parts of the country.

Personally, Raju Das was strongly influenced by Harichand Thakur (1812–1887), the pioneering leader whose mission and vision were instrumental in shaping Dalit consciousness. The Namasudra assertion against Brahminical domination and the Matua philosophy of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur focusing on egalitarianism, dignity of labour, and rejection of caste hierarchy spiritual formed the ideological foundation for Das's early consciousness. As a literary activist, he showed his responsibility as that of a chronicler—someone who must narrate the history of a community whose story has long been inadequately or inaccurately recorded by dominant historical narratives. His plays emphasised the need for social revolution, drawing deeply on the missions and philosophies of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and other Dalit revolutionaries who challenged caste oppression. Inspired by Namasudra assertion and Matua philosophy, Raju Das had created nearly ten dramas and telefilms dedicated to this subject. His works include *Harichand Garhastho Dharma* (1916), *Banijje Basati Lakshmi* (1916), *Shanti Hari's Dharma Kanya* (1916), *Mahamanab Guruchand Thakur* (1916), *Dr. C. S. Meed O Guruchand Thakur* (2016), *Sikhshabrati Agradut Guruchand Thakur* (2024), *Potit Pabon Guruchand Thakur* (2002), *Mahamanab Guruchand Thakur* (2002), among others. Through these works, he continued to contribute to the cultural and political documentation of Matua heritage and Dalit resistance.

Raju Das had contributed in developing Dalit literary trend as against the prevalent main stream literature produced by the Savarna community. Dalits assert that they are the true Indigenous people of the nation, with a literary tradition that predates many dominant narratives. He notes that their ancestors once created literature in the

Chasare or Sandho Bhasha¹⁸, the language in which the ancient Charyapada poems were composed. Significantly, many of the Charyapada poets came from lower castes—Fishers, Malos, Pods, Muchis, Shudras, Chamars, Tatis, and others. Figures such as Dombi, Sarobi, Kamli, Chandali, Gundilini, Sabor, and Jele belonged to communities labelled “untouchable.” He reminds us that castes like Jele, Dhopa, Rakhal, Bedh, Kamar, Kumor, Teli, and Tati even led the Kaivarta Rebellion against Brahmin rulers in the 11th century. He further observed that the artists behind the Ajanta and Ellora traditions also emerged from lower-caste groups.

In this context, he asserted that Dalit literature—not the literature shaped by *Manusmriti*-based hierarchies—is the true mainstream. Dalit writing documents struggle, memory, and history, while dominant-caste literature typically centres concepts such as Satyam, Shivam, and Sundaram, reflecting a different worldview.

Raju Das was quite uncomfortable with readers’ misinterpretation of Dalit intention depicted by non-Dalit authors. He observed that many non-Dalit writers produced poetry, fiction, and drama about Dalit lives from an outsider’s viewpoint which creates ample scope of misinterpretation. However, critical examination reveals gaps in representation, largely due to the absence of Dalit chetnā (consciousness). Dalit writers, grounded in lived experience, portray their worlds with an authenticity and immediacy that cannot be replicated through observation alone. In the writings of caste Hindu authors, one may find sympathy but rarely empathy; for this reason, he maintained, their work cannot be considered genuine Dalit literature, though it may be situated within broader subaltern discourse in postcolonial studies.

¹⁸ Sandho Bhasha" (or Sandhya Bhasha) is not a conventional spoken language but a term used to describe a specific type of **encoded, symbolic language** found in early Indian literature, particularly the *Charyapada*, the first known work of Bengali literature.

Das was a writer with limited formal education, whose creative work was rooted in the pain, deprivation, and resilience he had personally experienced and observed within Dalit communities. Within Bengali Dalit literature, he was recognised as a playwright who boldly brings contemporary Dalit issues to both the stage and the street. For nearly six decades, he had worked simultaneously as a playwright, actor, and director, shaping a sustained and committed career in theatre.

As the editor of *Potho Sanket*, a little magazine that serves as a critical platform for Dalit writers, poets, and performers in Bengal, Raju Das published essays on Dalit thinkers, poetry in dialects, play scripts, and field notes from cultural performances. *Potho Sanket*, as the name suggests, it symbolises a journey of awakening; not just literary but political as well. The main objective of this magazine was to promote Ambedkarite ideology, critique Hindu orthodoxy and document ongoing Dalit struggles in West Bengal. It provided theory from below, bridging performance and publication.

Das's theatre was rooted in experiential testimony—the lived reality of caste humiliation, denial of access, and everyday resistance. His plays such as *Aamar Naam Chandala* (“My Name is Chandala”) or *Bhangi Gaan* (“The Song of the Scavenger”) do not follow conventional dramatic structure but are woven through narrative fragments, ritual elements, songs, and first-person monologues. These created a performative archive of subaltern memory and pain. His writings engaged with a wide spectrum of critical concerns, including caste inequality, disability, the trauma of Partition, women's rights, and the citizenship debates surrounding the CAA and NRC, as well as the complexities of Hindu–Muslim relations and the politics embedded within them.

In his autobiography, *Autobiography of a Rickshaw Puller*, he recounts his life, family, the sociopolitical environment that shaped him, and the evolution of his literary journey up to 2015. He viewed human life as a continuous journey—an idea that resonates deeply with him because he changed homes multiple times and shifted professions frequently. For this reason, the theme of “journey”

framed both the beginning and the end of his life narrative. According to him autobiography is a literary genre in which many writers rely on imagination; however, he considered himself an exception. His narrative avoided fictional embellishment and was grounded entirely in events he lived through and witnessed. While writing, he often reflected on an English phrase that reminded him of the purpose of living— “existing for life.”

The 1964 national riots in East Pakistan unleashed a new chapter in his life. The crisis compelled him and his family to flee to safeguard their lives and dignity. Their initial days in India were spent enduring the hardships of a refugee camp. Soon after, he was forced to begin pulling a rickshaw at a young age to support his education and survival. The shared struggles of the rickshaw pullers left a deep impression on him, as their hardships were collective and unrelenting. He continued this work for nearly seventeen years. During this period, he began writing for local magazines and developed a strong interest in the performing arts. He frequently organised performance groups in open theatre spaces to entertain local audiences. This instinctive engagement with performance and storytelling eventually led him toward becoming a writer and playwright.

Das’s formal engagement with theatre began in the 1980s, amid the rising mobilisation of Scheduled Castes in Bengal and debates on Dalit identity politics, triggered in part by the Mandal Commission. While Dalit assertion had already found voice in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, Bengal was witnessing a gradual emergence of caste-conscious discourse within the performing arts. Raju Das stood at the confluence of these forces—his encounter with Ambedkarite literature, Marathi Dalit theatre, and Navayana Buddhism offered him new interpretive frameworks to understand oppression, and performance became his medium of articulation.

He also believed that linguistic barrier was also instrumental in its invisibility. Though his literary work was extensive enough to include eighty Dalit playwrights from the Bahunjan Samaj,

culminating in an anthology that he published in the early 2024, he lacked the visibility that a mainstream writer of his type would have received. Yet, he continued showing his commitment for Dalit writings along with his wife Namita Das till his last breath.

He firmly believed that Dalit plays typically challenge Brahmanism and frequently criticise governmental policies, which often provoke resistance from multiple quarters. Even he had endured instances of physical assault and verbal abuse for writing and performing such plays, with the details documented in two Dalit newspapers. He and his colleagues fully realised that protest invites obstruction, yet they remained committed to their work. He had also observed that Dalits in Bengal, much like their counterparts across India, continue to confront numerous challenges. However, in Bengal, caste operates more subtly—manifesting primarily at psychological, social, and documental levels rather than through overt physical violence. At times, these issues also take on distinctly political dimensions. The legacy of Partition had created an enduring and unresolved crisis for Dalits in the region. Along with this, the denial of political power, persistent socioeconomic inequality, and administrative injustice continue to obstruct their ability to live with autonomy and dignity.

According to Raju Das, the appalling rate of illiteracy among the Dalits is one of the crucial reasons for their miserable plight. His determination to write for creating social awareness in his community was driven by this reality. His relentless efforts and creative mind soon gave rise to his drama troop called Shanti Kunja Natya Group. Through this drama group, he made theatre as an accessible and compelling medium capable of engaging diverse audiences. Raju Das believed that while autobiographies, stories, novels, and poems depend largely on the reader's imagination to take shape, drama brings those imagined images vividly to life through performance. This fusion of literature and embodied expression transformed drama into a “dramatic poetry,” where words on the page acquire movement, voice, and presence before an audience.

Raju Das realised that promoting Dalit drama across India required significant effort from Dalit organisations, along with adequate financial support. Since such efforts were absent in the literary institutions and newspaper networks of West Bengal, his drama troop could never bloom as was visualised by him. However, his determination was sufficient to keep the embers alive and his drama troupe, the Shanti Kunja Natya Group, had performed outside the state in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Mumbai. He also believed that with English translations, these plays will eventually reach audiences and readers across India and beyond.

Das believed meaningful social change or resistance to bourgeois domination and exploitation requires a strong cultural movement. While folk music, poetry, painting, and video can all inspire people across rural and urban spaces. Citing the examples of how the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the independence movements of India and Bangladesh were mobilized by theatre, he expressed his belief that Dalit theatre would play a decisive role in mobilising people and shaping political consciousness.

Raju Das showed huge enthusiasm for English translation of his work along with other Dalit work written in regional languages. He openly expressed his sincere gratitude for the English translations of his plays that had taken his plays to global readers making new histories by being discussed at academic seminars and conferences. Gradually, he had invites from several institutions to deliver talks on lived experiences of Dalit writers and on his writings. Though he failed to get the recognition as a Dalit writer and performer in mainstream Bengali literary circle, he was invited for a talk and a performance at a cultural event organised by the Clipland Bengali Sangha in the United States. The power of his pen was also recognised by the Nottingham University where he was invited for a talk, but unfortunately because of Covid 19 Pandemic he could not attend it.

Raju Das was a man full of positive vibes. He believed that with digital transformation drama that stands as the most dynamic and powerful of all literary forms will reach new heights. With the

increasing availability of digital platforms, he showed extreme hopefulness with digital media and was certain that it would create new opportunities to record, preserve, and disseminate Dalit drama widely through social media and online channels. From this perspective, he believed that Dalit drama is uniquely positioned not only to confront caste discrimination but also to challenge and dismantle oppressive power structures through a robust theatrical movement. He and other Dalit revolutionary writers firmly hold that drama has always been, and will continue to be, a potent weapon for social transformation. For him, Dalit drama functions as an essential instrument in the ongoing struggle for Dalit liberation. Citing Guruchand Thakur's call—"Eat or not, teach the children"—and Ambedkar's message of "Educate, agitate, and unite," he insisted that Dalits must resist Brahminical politics, unite as a collective power to claim political visibility.

The role of Raju Das in popularising Dalit consciousness through performance is immense. As a well-known playwright, performer, and cultural activist from Bengal, he had been instrumental in shaping and popularising Dalit consciousness through the medium of community theatre and folk performance. Grounded in Matua philosophy, Das's work embodies a dynamic intersection of caste resistance, cultural reclamation, and performative pedagogy. His contributions within the broader context of Dalit performance traditions in India and Bengal, especially his engagement with symbolic forms, marginal voices, and embodied protest have redefined Dalit theatre in Bengal. His active involvement with theatrical practices, publications (like *Potho Sanket*), and grassroots mobilisations have reshaped and redefined Bengali Dalit aesthetics.

Chapter 12

The Plays of Raju Das in the Light of Dalit Aesthetics

Raju Das, a name that is often quoted in Bangla Dalit literary circle, was one such playwright and street play performer whose plays make clarion calls for the economically underprivileged and socially marginalised to rise and rebel against their oppressors and oppressive systems to reclaim their human rights and position in a caste stratified Hindu society. His plays vocalize the silent agony of the socially oppressed and marginalised people, both men and women. They are the victims of strong caste and gender discrimination in a Hindu society. His women characters like Alodebi, Bani and Reema are not only the victims of caste politics of a Brahmanical society but are doubly marginalised because of their gender. Most of his plays, like *Neel Selam*, *Surjo Tono*, reflect the seething anger of his protagonists and their lifelong struggles to achieve freedom and equality.

On the essence of Dalit literature, Muktibodh remarks, “human freedom is the inspiration behind it...the nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by Dalits—in the past and even at present...” (Muktibodh 270). The corpus of Raju Das’s work reflects the oppression prevalent in a caste stratified society and targets at rebelling against its exploitative nature and system to replace it with an egalitarian society. In his efforts to fight against Brahminism and its selfish ways of dealing with human lives, Raju Das had adopted drama as his weapon to attack the Brahminical social system. His angst was as much against the Brahminical system as against all sorts of other oppressive systems and institutions that have become part and parcel of the working of the society. His dramas not only voice the pain and humiliation of the oppressed but also hint at a positive ray of light, the hope for a more tolerable society that will be rooted in equality

and liberty. His plays like *Neel Selam*, *Surjo Tonoy*, *Ragging* and *Kolonko* are some examples that show Raju Das's Dalit consciousness and commitment.

His major plays depict the ramifications of caste discriminations and the position of women in a stratified society. His play *Neel Selam* besides focusing on the personal struggles of an abandoned mother of two blind children also depicts the struggle of a partially blind Bani and her completely blind brother for economic independence. *Hypen Noi Coma Chai* explores how the social conventions impose restrictions upon the free will and liberty of the socially marginalised people. His play *Ragging* is a token of Reema's journey towards equal opportunities for education irrespective of caste and gender discrimination.

The major concern of Raju Das's work was to articulate the real picture of a caste based Hindu society. The element of realism in Dalit aesthetics that define the success of a creative piece as a Dalit writing is strongly evident in his plays. He drew inspiration for his plays from real life incidents or social situations. Hence his plays are realistic in true sense. *Ragging* is based on the suicide incident of a tribal young woman called Chuni Kotal. Chuni was the first woman of her tribe who managed to have higher education and then a government job in a college as a lecturer. However, unable to bear the caste criticism and humiliations because of her low caste identity, she ended her life leaving a note against the rigours of a caste stratified society that does not recognise their presence as human beings. The hardships that Reema's family goes through in their endeavours to give Reema the light of higher education reflects the hardships that the playwright and his wife, Namita Das had taken to educate their three daughters. The thematic concerns of his plays like *Neel Selam* and *Kolonko* have their origin in his acute observations of the caste mechanisms in a Hindu society. The themes and characters of his plays reveal the ruthless reality of the marginalised sections of the society that otherwise go unseen and unheard by the mainstream writers and readers.

A socially committed playwright as he was, Raju Das in his essay on “Drama and Dramatists in Dalit Movement”, observed that the significance of drama, especially street theatre, lies in initiating a change in the society. In this essay, he advocated “to bring a change, we need to be changed” (Das 260). Emphasising on the role of drama to achieve this, he observed:

The need of the hour is good orators, poetry readers, singers, actors and actresses who can go from one place to another sometimes narrating, sometimes reciting, or maybe even acting out episodes of their lives, of their feelings and desires. Probably there is no other alternative better than these that can stimulate the conscience of the distressed ones for a revolution. It should be their prime responsibility to stand by those who have been suffering since ages under the burden of caste discrimination and waiting for someone to direct them towards a better future. (Das 260)

In his commitment to create social awareness and mobilise his people for a revolt to reclaim their lost human dignity, he never aspired to stage his plays in proscenium theatres. Rather he had chosen the narrow lanes and by-lanes of remote villages, courtyards and grounds in villages and small towns as his stage to reach the real receivers of his plays, the economically and socially marginalised people. His plays are severely criticised for multiple themes but he never reacted and showed agitation against such criticism. Instead, he defended his trend of introducing several ideas in his plays in the following words:

As a Dalit playwright I hardly get an opportunity to stage my plays. Sometimes to get the right audience is also a challenge. Therefore, whenever, I get chance to stage a play, I try to accommodate as many ideas of social interest as possible. (Das, *A Preface to A Collection of Three Street Plays*, 1)

Raju Das’s creation of his characters also reflected his social commitment. His characters are socially responsible ones who boldly and confidently handle their oppressive situation and leave no

opportunity to raise their voice against the oppressive system. They are in fact ‘role models who rebel against ‘today’s exploitative society for a better tomorrow’. Pishima in *Ragging* is an outstanding example. In her conversation with Anupama, Reema’s senior in her new college, Pishima not only brings out the exploitative tendencies of the Brahmins prevalent in the society since ages but also pinpoints how the upper castes have restricted the access to education exclusively for themselves:

Brahmin and Khasatriya children only had access to education. The Vaishyas and Shudras were never given the right to education and that is why the great archer Dronacharya had cut off the thumb of Eklavya as his punishment for secretly learning this art. It is also because of this that Lord Ram dared to cut off the head of Shambhu. The Brahminical system of education and running the society was existing till 18th century, even would have continued for some centuries had not reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, Swami Naicker, Arichand Thakur Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ram Lohia Monohar and Guruchand Thakur had not contributed to Dalit cause. (Das, *Ragging* 5)

The dialogic exchange between Alok and Panu Master in *Surjo Tonoy* is an eye-opening conversation on the creation of different castes to perpetuate the existence of exploiter and exploited; the oppressor and the oppressed; the master and slave. It also highlights on the discriminatory nature of religious scriptures like Vedas that maintain the feminine gender as lower than the other creations of God, ‘All women are shudras’— *Nari Matroi shudrani* – (Das *Surjo Tonoy*. 8) as a universal truth.

Further in the play, Raju Das rendered in the character of Panu Master the role of a historian who dwells deep into the cultural history of Dalit Movement that originated in 1779 with Baba Tiloka Majhi, a tribal, as the pioneering head of the movement who waged war against the British Cleaveland and ended his life in 1784. He also provides insight into Saotal Movement that spanned from 1855 to

1885 and sowed the seeds of the present agitation. Raju Das created Panu Master as his spokesperson and gave vent to his detestation for the principles of Brahminism as against the Brahmins by birth, “I respect The Brahmins, but I hate Brahminism” (*Khati Brahman kea mi sraddha kari, ghrina kari bhramanabad ke*) (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 12).

Sanchari, also called as Khenti by her maternal uncles, is another bold creation, quite difficult to even think of in our society. She challenges the traditional system of matrimony where a woman is treated as a commodity in the marriage market and what would seem quite indecent in the eyes of a conventional society, attacks the age-old system of matrimonial prerequisites that a woman is expected to meet, “Namaskar! My name is Khenti Boral. (*Sits on a chair*) see my palm. See my feet. See my hair. I have no makeup on my face. If you can’t believe that, you can touch and see” (Das, *Kolonko* 50) and continues emphatically,

What you people want is that all marriageable girls in the best of their attire and makeup silently and submissively sit before you to answer a series of very foolish but insulting questions? After that you show preference for those women who are either working or their families are ready to pay a good dowry, take them home after marriage with a new promise of a happy married life but reduce them to the state of slaves. Tortures, physical and mental abuse remain as their only share in their new family. Please forget such days. New days will come when women will assess and choose their own life partner. Please remember that. (Das, *Kolonko* 51)

Shanto voices out Raju Das’s angst against the dominant religious notions that determine the position of women in a caste stratified society and attacks it for debasing the position of women and undermining their significance that is otherwise an essential requirement for the existence of a healthy society. Though he does not support Marxist ideology, he criticises Brahmanical patriarchy for its oppressive nature and quotes great philosophers and thinkers

like Karl Marx, “religion is like opium, people who consume it put to sleep their conscience” (Das, *Neel Selam* 3). Through the staunch anti Brahmanism protagonist, Shanto, in *Neel Selam*, Raju Das cites the example of Ramaswami Periyar who believed religion and rationality are complete opposites and observed, “He who created God is a Fool” (Das, *Neel Selam* 3).

Through the character of Shanto, Bani’s friend, Raju Das provided an example of a liberal man for whom caste boundaries are not permanent, rather flexible and can be dissolved when required. He transcends caste boundaries and extends his humble proposal to marry a blind woman. His decision to marry a blind woman, however, is not based on mercy or an eagerness to help the poor helpless family. Rather it is a manifestation of his respect for such bold and confident women like Bani who are ready to challenge the society that tries to cripple all those who are socially and economically disadvantaged. His love for Bani is not based on her physical features but one that has birth in her life affirming qualities of life that is evident in the given conversation between Bani and Shanto:

Bani: Why do you want me to marry? What so special have you seen in me that you thought of marrying me?

Shanto: Your work efficiency, sense of responsibility. Your determination to struggle for a better existence in spite of your blindness is something that creates you as a unique person. (Das, *Neel Selam* 7)

The plays of Raju Das are also marked by his frequent references to those stalwarts whose contributions in Dalit lives have been immense. He often referred to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and his research and analysis of a caste-based society. He showed his indebtedness to the works and contributions of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur in starting and leading the Matua Movement for offering the Dalits the much-needed human dignity. Raju Das celebrated the contribution of these Dalit Bahujan leaders and gurus

in his plays. In most of his plays an elderly person like Pishima in *Ragging*, Bordakanto in *Kolonko*, Panu Master in *Surjo Tonoy* are given an active role of archives of the socio-political and cultural history of the community. Pishima is a strong creation who vocalises the exploitation that the Dalits like them had to suffer from. The suffering that Pishima mentions is not only hers or her family but it is the story of her community. Her reference to Ekalavya's case and the punishment that he had to bear for aspiring to be as skilled as the Pandavas is not just a story from *Mahabharata*. In fact, it reflects the social hierarchy and the resultant subordination and oppression of the powerless by the powerful ones that are prevalent in the society since ages.

Bordakanto in *Kolonko* narrates the political exploitation of the Dalit refugees in Sundanban and Marichjhapi areas. The memories of the physical and sexual abuse that he and other Dalit refugees like him had witnessed at Marichjhapi still disturb him. Evident in his narrative of Marichjhapi massacre is a reference to a strong 'we' feeling. Hence, in his narrative of the Marichjhapi massacre that took away the life of his elder sister like many others, he goes beyond family tragedy to represent the mass suffering of his community.

Since that day many young women, wives and mothers went missing from the land of Marichjhapi. They cannot be traced even today. Some of them unable to bear the shame of physical and sexual assault have committed suicide. My pregnant elder sister, mother of Sanchari whom you have come to see as a prospective bride of your younger brother, was one amongst many such women who was sexually assaulted. Unable to stand the pain and shame of sexual abuse in the hands of the comrades, she committed suicide by hanging herself from the branches of the tree. (Das, *Kolonko*, 49)

Dalit writing that is often marked by a strong sense of solidarity for the community leave no scope of showing abhorrence and utter disgust for the Sanskritized Dalits; the ones who despite being a part of the community fail to identify themselves with the exploited

condition of the community. Mahendranath and Kumaresh are such examples who are content with the fruits they have reaped out of their Dalit identity but do not intend to delve deep into the oppressed condition of their fellow Dalit brothers and sisters. Thus, on realising the death of Dalit consciousness in the newly Sanskritized Dalits like by Mr. Bose, Bordakanto leaves no scope to make the newly Sanskritized Dalits, represented in the play by Mr. Rao, feel ashamed of their ignorance. With utter disgust he observes, “People who in spite of belonging to Shudra caste fail to recognise the contributions made by Guruchand Thakur, Jogen Mondal and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, but instead are aware of Marx, Lenin and Jyoti Basu are stigma in the name of Shudra caste” (Das, *Kolonko* 49)

Dalit aesthetics is characterised by a conscious rejection of form, content and style of the so called conventional main stream literary aesthetics. Dalit literature reflects the extraordinary and ugly experiences of the lowest of the lowest in social ladder. The language, form and style of a piece of writing depend heavily on its choice of content. Hence, Dalit literature that expresses content that is full of agony and humiliation, distressing and frustrating, its medium undoubtedly becomes one that is coarse and smutty, unpleasant to hear but honest. The experiences that are projected, though subjective in tone, represent collective experience and identity.

Raju Das’s plays are typical examples of Dalit writing that showcase neither the verbose use of vocabulary nor the so-called refined language of the mainstream Savarna literature. Rather, the dialects, in which his characters engage themselves are simple but powerfully and realistically vocalise the pent-up agony, frustration and humiliation of the oppressed sections of the society. His characters engage in long dialogue that reflects the disappointment of the individual as well as the community in general as in Pishima’s long dialogues with the hostel girl, Reema:

Brahmin and Khastriya children only had access to education.
The Vaishyas and Shudras were never given the right to

education and that is why the great archer Dronacharya had cut off the thumb of Eklavya as his punishment for secretly learning this art. It is also because of this that Lord Ram dared to cut off the head of Shambhu. The Brahminical system of education and running the society was existing till 18th century, even would have continued for some centuries had not reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, E.V. Ramasami Periyaar, Harichand Thakur, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ram Lohia Manohar and Guruchand Thakur had not contributed to Dalit cause (Das, *Ragging* 5).

The fragmented, incomplete, oft repeated sentences like “I am the illegitimate son, I am the other...” (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 26) spoken by Alok, the victim of illegitimate birth, vocalise his pent up frustration and pain stemming from his identity crisis. Sanchari, on the other hand, engages in a vocabulary that is bereft of intonation or punctuation. She barges into the sitting room where the guests were seated and to everyone’s surprise introduces herself and attacks the intention of her guests in words that the guests who have visited them to fix the matrimonial alliance have ever thought of:

What you people want is that all marriageable girls in the best of their attire and make up silently and submissively sit before you to answer a series of very foolish but insulting questions? After that you show preference for those women who are either working or their families are ready to pay a good dowry, take them home after marriage with a new promise of a happy married life but reduce them to the state of slaves. Tortures, physical and mental abuse remain as their only share in their new family. Please forget such days. New days will come when women will assess and choose their own life partner. Please remember that (Das, *Kolonko* 51).

The words that Sanchari speaks to challenge the traditional practice of assessing a woman’s suitability for marriage, reflect her anger against the system that humiliates the very existence of women and perceives them as commodities in marriage market.

The words of despondency spoken by Alok, the lack of inflection as evident in Khenti's conversation and the confidence exuded in Pishima's well-modulated dialogues reflect the mixed emotions of hopelessness and dejection that define the lives of these marginalised people as well as their determination to vocalise their oppressed condition against the systemic oppression. To rise, rebel and revolt were the ruling words of Raju Das's life that kept him motivated to write plays on Dalit concerns and inspire his audience and readers to raise their voice and rebel against the exploitative systems of a Brahmanical society. In this sense, Raju Das's plays serve the purpose of Dalit literature. Sharan Kumar Limbale characterizes Dalit literature as purposive: revolt, transformation and liberty as its key goals; transforming the condition of Dalit and challenging the caste system are revolutionary causes.

Raju Das's plays are marked by a form and style that do not follow the Brahmanical main stream aesthetics of drama, rather conform to the essentials of a street theatre to some extent. Street theatre, in general, has its roots in Indian folk drama of the masses which is practiced on the streets with the sole objective of changing the society by challenging the people and systems which are 'more powerful' and engages in the exploitation of the powerless. Often perceived as a catalyst of change, awareness, revolution & liberation, street theatre has always been a prized possession of those who wanted to bring a social change and Raju Das is one of them.

The tradition of street theatre in West Bengal is Leftist in nature. However, Raju Das is strongly anti Leftist. According to him, though the objective of Left ideology is to obtain equality for all and to have an egalitarian approach for overall social development, they have blissfully forgotten the need of the Dalits. There is a deliberate attempt to erase the Dalit existence to obliterate them from the history of human existence. Rather, his plays attempt to, what according to Downing should be the objective of a street play, "raise consciousness and mobilize communities" (Downing).

Raju Das's plays under such socio-political scenario serve as a weapon to challenge the corrupt and biased state machinery, the hegemonic people in power and the discriminatory/ casteist social systems. His objective of writing plays was neither to reach the urban elite audience or readers nor for proscenium theatre. Hence, like a conventional street theatre, Raju Das's plays were performed in the narrow lanes and by-lanes of small towns or in remote villages. The themes of his plays complement his choice of staging his plays. Since his plays are revolutionary in nature, urging for a social change, Raju Das staged his plays anywhere and everywhere he finds appropriate to convey his message to the masses through the medium of drama. This has been made possible not only because of his choice of thematic concerns but also because the setting of his plays require bare minimum. The characters in his plays though many in number do not require any special make up or costume. This naturally gives him the convenience of performing or staging his plays at places where he can target a big crowd as his audience. These, in turn allowed him to reach the masses easily and create social awareness and Dalit consciousness on the condition of Dalits in a caste stratified Brahmanical society. However, this has not spared him of any criticism. Though often criticised for his choice of place for his performances, he was quite content with his choice if his objective of arousing and creating consciousness in his audience was achieved.

Raju Das perceived his plays as weapons for social change. No doubt, over a period of two decades even if his plays had not been able to stir the urban lot, they had considerable positive impact on his rural audience, so much so that even before leaving the place after their performance, they had witnessed the first signs of transformation. This, of course, had become possible because of the effectiveness of "Dalit Aesthetics" in which the plays of Raju Das are deeply rooted in and part of it. His commitment to mobilise the socially marginalised had become possible with his judicious choice of the real and simple language of his illiterate as well as culturally and socially marginalized audience. Thus, his plays are truly about the

marginalized people and for the marginalized masses, here and the world over.

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Chapter 13

Women and Caste: *Neel Selam* and *Surjo Tonoy*

Caste and gender constitute two of the most enduring and intersecting structures of oppression in Indian society, shaping lived experience, social mobility, and cultural representation. Within this matrix of inequality, Dalit women occupy a particularly vulnerable position, subjected not only to caste-based violence and exclusion but also to patriarchal control both within and outside their communities. Despite their centrality to social reality, Dalit women have remained historically marginal within mainstream literary, theatrical, and feminist discourses, where caste is often subsumed under class or gender rendered abstracted from material conditions. It is within this critical gap that the theatre of Raju Das acquires profound significance.

Raju Das, one of the most compelling voices in contemporary Dalit theatre in Bengal, consistently foregrounded the intersection of caste and gender as lived, embodied experiences rather than as sociological categories. His plays position Dalit women not as passive victims or symbolic figures of suffering, but as sites where structural violence, resistance, and ethical questioning converge. Through sparse staging, corporeal expressivity, silences, and fragmented narratives, Das exposed how caste oppression is frequently enacted upon the female body—through labour, sexual vulnerability, domestic servitude, and social humiliation. Women in his plays inhabit precarious spaces where survival itself becomes an act of resistance.

Caste system is characterized by hierarchy or gradations according to occupational status. The evaluative standard that places a caste higher than others or lower compared to the rest is rooted in the *Dharmashashtras*. The high and the low are opposed to each other because of their associations with notions of purity and impurity in

terms of the nature of their occupation. Since each caste is regarded as a closed group, special emphasis is put on eating, physical contact and marriage. Out of these three the institution of marriage plays a significant role in the preservation of caste order and hierarchy.

Endogamy or marrying within a caste is central to the maintenance of caste purity. Dr. B R Ambedkar in the *Annihilation of Caste* saw endogamy at the heart of caste and stressed that inter-caste marriage was one way of ridding India of caste. Ghurye, Srinivas, Karve and Dumont perceive endogamy (and hypergamy) as the defining features of caste. Brahmanical patriarchy and endogamy are two important systems which perpetuate caste and gender abuse. Indian society that is structured around Brahmanical patriarchy has power scheme that is based on caste and gender and is perpetuated through marriages between similar caste families. The purity and pollution of a caste is based on a woman's sexual conduct. Endogamy or marriage within the same caste, in that sense, functions as the most significant part of caste system. Hence, a woman is expected to play a vital role in safeguarding the purity of her caste. She is considered as the custodian of caste and family honour. Since she has the greatest responsibility of safeguarding the purity of caste order, her sexuality is always kept under strict vigil.

At the crux of caste lies the structure of marriage, sexuality and reproduction. This also plays a fundamental role in creating and maintaining inequality. The chapter further examines Brahmanical patriarchy and endogamy as two important systems which perpetuate caste and gender abuse and how the purity and pollution of a caste is based on a woman's sexual conduct. Uma Chakravarti while drawing a link between caste and marriage in her book, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, cites *Manu Dharmashastra* and observes:

The terms used in the *Manu Dharmashastra* for the two different types of violations of endogamy are significant. *Anuloma*, going with the direction of the hair, is acceptable —men from higher castes can have wives from the lower castes; *this is the natural order*. In contrast, when a woman from a higher caste has a union

with a lower caste male, it is *pratiloma*—against the direction of the hair, it is unnatural; it is not only reprehensible but it is in the inverse order. The true confusion of castes is a consequence of *pratiloma* marriages/unions. (54)

The main crux of the play *Surjo Tonoy* is hypogamous marriage. Since women are considered “the ‘gateways’ of caste” (Das 135), any woman engaging in hypogamous marriage meets a devastating end as happens with Alok’s mother in *Surjo Tonoy* (Son of Sun). The couple in both these plays are the victims of exogamous marriage. *Surjo Tonoy* depicts hypogamous marriage and its consequences, whereas *Neel Selam* deals with hypergamous marriage. Though hypergamous marriage is considered to be less harmful for a caste stratified society and therefore comparatively a more acceptable form of marriage, women become victims of hypergamous marriages as much as in hypogamous one. *Neel Selam* depicts how Alodebi as a victim of hypergamous marriage lives a life at the mercy of men.

Both these plays that exemplify two different types of exogamous marriages highlight the endorsement of endogamous marriage by Brahmanical society to retain caste hierarchy. To fortify and preserve the homogeneity and purity of caste order, Manu enforces injunctions on both the types of exogamous marriages. In addition to emphasising on the significance of endogamous marriages in Brahmanical society, these plays also attempt to explore how the lines of caste inheritance have been manipulated by the Brahmanical society to restrict the off springs of exogamous marriages to lower caste order. The plays under this section also highlight on the consequences of violation of cultural norms and customary practices of the society through inter-caste marriages. The inexplicable humiliation, inhuman treatment and abuse that these victims face for daring to break the Brahminical code of endogamous marriage and for engaging exogamous marriage of hypergamous or hypogamous nature not only destroy their lives but also leave a deep scar in the lives of their children. Through the interplay of caste and marriage

Raju Das brings out the patriarchal control on women sexuality and marginalization of women who transgress caste boundaries.

Brahmanical patriarchy and its power play to achieve complete control on the sexuality of woman form the essence of *Surjo Tonoy*. In addition to this the play also portrays the social stigma attached with unmarried motherhood that victimises unwed mothers like Alok's mother and illegitimate children born out of wedlock, the deplorable social conditions to which they are pushed and rigidity of caste conscious Brahmin families. The play in a way is Raju Das's indictment on the caste conscious upperclass Brahmins and attacks their ideological belief in Brahminism as the main root cause of all the discrimination and oppression in the society.

In a Hindu society both exogamy and unwed motherhood is against the social order. Unwed motherhood is even considered sinful. In a patriarchal society, a woman should safely guard her own chastity. Under such strict social code any woman who dares to flout the codes of social behaviour, irrespective of her caste, class and cultural background, is bound to be punished. In a Brahmanical patriarchy, Alok's mother, a prey of her uncontrollable desire for a man from a lower caste becomes a vulnerable victim of social criticism and excommunication.

Caste and control over women's sexuality in a Hindu Brahmanical society are inextricably linked. As women are considered the "gateways of a caste" (Das 135) and are held responsible for upholding the honour of the family as well the community, any transgression of patriarchal codes by a woman is meted with violence against women. Consequently, in *Surjo Tonoy* the inter caste love between Alok's mother and a twenty-five-year-old handsome artist, photographer and a professional in an advertising company in that gradually turns into a passionate relation leading to her conception of a new life without the wedlock is not received harmoniously by Alok's maternal grandfather and his sons. To secure his position as a true Brahmin and also to punish his daughter for violating the social decorum a young woman should observe, Mr. Rasaraj Chakraborty,

‘excommunicates the young man’ (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 22) and ‘throws out his own daughter from their home’ (Das 22). Through Alok’s mother’s love with a Kshatriya man and consequent marriage that his maternal uncle and aunt tries to arrange but could not materialise because of Mr. Chakraborty’s opposition, Raju Das brings out the complex relationship of gender and caste where upper caste women’s compliance with patriarchal order is considered mandatory.

The relationship of a higher caste woman with a man of lower caste draws a web of troubles for Alok’s parents. The double trouble of inter caste alliance coupled with unwed motherhood, introduces Alok’s mother to a host of hostilities in the hands of the patriarchal, caste conscious society, headed by her own father, Mr. Chakraborty. Alok’s father too becomes a victim for transgressing the caste boundaries and daring to establish a relation with an upper caste woman. Both of them, as victims of caste order, are separated and subjected to a life of humiliation, pain and suffering.

Within upper caste patriarchal society, honour and shame are ideological concepts that are closely linked with the sexuality of a woman. A woman’s transgression of caste boundaries is internalized as a matter of shame. Therefore, to stop the news of an upper caste woman’s physical and sexual relation with a man of a lower caste spreading like wild fire in the society, the girl’s father and brother target the man and accuse him for tarnishing the repute of a Brahmin woman. As a punishment for violating the chastity of their daughter, the father-son duo lynches him in public and ultimately excommunicates him so that he is never able to meet his beloved.

Honour killing is a prevalent way of achieving control over a woman’s sexuality and her right to choose her partner. Though in Indian context, honour of a family as well as of caste is deeply determined by the conduct of women, both men and women embody notions of honour, but quite differently. According to P. Chowdhury, the woman is the repository of honour and the man is the regulator of this honour (197-237). Alok’s mother by engaging in a hypogamous relationship with a Kshatriya man challenges the role of

a woman as a repository of honour. However, since hypogamy is a threat severe than hypergamous marriage, his maternal kinsmen take up the role of regulators of her honour. Hence, her brothers who shared close nexus with a local political party attempt to murder him to remove the last sign of a man who brought social disrepute to their family.

According to Manu, it is the sexuality of women that is the root cause of everything that is evil. It is evident in the derogatory observation that he draws on the character of women and links it with the necessity to control women sexuality, “A woman must particularly be guarded against her evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow onto two families” (qtd. in Buhler 328). The role of male family members as regulators of honour is strengthened by Manu’s expectations on the role of male family members. He argues that male family members are as much responsible in protecting the chastity of a woman as much a woman herself. In fact, Manu in chapter IX, verse iv, puts significant stress on the duty of men as father, husband and son in maintaining the honour of women. According to him, “Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not (his wife in due season), and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after husband has died qtd. in Buhler 328).

Consequently, the custodians of caste, community and family honour, the Chakravartis leave no stones unturned to smother the inter caste love affair and punish the ‘erring’ couple. The love affair that was a bone of contention because of caste difference, takes political turn in the hands of the regulators of honour, Alok’s maternal grandfather and uncle. His uncle, an active party man, gathers goons to murder the man for violating the caste order as well as the chastity of an upper caste woman. If violators of caste order are condemned, the regulators of caste order and women’s honour are celebrated. The society congratulates and appreciates Mr. Chakraborty as ‘a true Brahmin’ (Das 22) for his chivalrous actions

that endorse his sincerity and faithfulness towards his religion. The strict actions taken by Alok's maternal grandfather and uncle against the lower caste man reinforce their position as custodians of social norms and codes of behaviour, especially when caste is at stake, earns them appreciation and respect from their neighbours.

Raju Das as a strong critic of Brahminical ideologies have time and again attacked Brahminism through his spokespersons. In *Surjo Tonoy*, it is through Panu Master that Raju Das speaks out his mind against Brahmanism, "I respect true Brahmin; but I detest spurious Brahminism" (Das, *Surjo Tonoy* 12). A measure of how strong his belief is in his observation is borne by his critique of the hypocrisy of Brahmins through Mr. Chakraborty's actions. The superficial Brahminical ideologies that Brahmins like Mr. Chakraborty embrace to identify themselves as true Brahmins is evident when he vouches to be a true Brahmin by shaving off his head as a penance for his sinful act and retains his image of an 'ideal Brahmin' (Das *Surjo Tonoy* 22) in the society. Thereafter, in order to live up to the expectations of the society as a true Brahmin, he even goes to the extent of disowning his own daughter and excommunicates her, with her growing foetus. They are applauded for their courageous action for protecting the sanctity associated with caste.

The upper caste Brahmins not only have a heightened caste consciousness but also have discriminatory punishment for people belonging to different castes. The concession of punishment in upper caste people is evident in the following conversation between old rickshaw puller, Hari and Panu Master in *Surjo Tonoy*:

HARI: What are you saying master moshai? Religious Rasaraj Chakraborty

murdered an innocent man?

PANU: Yes Thakurmoshai. In your shashtas only it is written that if any Brahmin murders a man and then shaves off his hair, he is cleaned off all his sins. But if a person from any other varna

does the same, will be punished- death is his punishment then.
(Das 26-7)

The conversation between Panu Master and Hari highlights the significance of maintaining caste order and purity in a Brahmanical society.

The power politics of a male dominated society that is closely associated with male ego and sense of superiority over females surfaces as the Chakraborty family, especially as the Chakraborty patriarch, instead of introspecting on their limitations and failures to protect the virginity of their young daughter hold her responsible for everything and blames her for losing her dignity. Alok's maternal grandfather fails to observe his duty as a responsible father protecting the chastity and dignity of her unmarried daughter. However, he camouflages his failure as a responsible father protecting the honour of his virgin daughter by projecting himself as a custodian of religion and caste. Instead of blaming himself and his inability to live up to the expectations of the society as a father of a maiden woman, he targets the erring couple for violating the caste norms of a Brahmanical society

The caste fixation of the Brahmin Chakraborty patriarch comes to the fore once more when his religious piety and honesty towards religion weighs down the human values of love and affection, especially humanity towards a new born baby. The significance of caste and class over filial love becomes more glaring when Alok's mother returns home after a couple of months with the new born baby in her arms asking for help, the hard-hearted old patriarch instead of getting overwhelmed with the innocence of a new born infant, makes him the victim of caste. He refuses to accept the baby, snatches him from his daughter's arms and hurls him down on the courtyard with detestation and annoyance. Bereft of help and financial security, Alok's mother with the child becomes the victim of a life long suffering and exploitation because of her chauvinistic and caste conscious family.

Alok's predicament as an illegitimate child registers the fate of a child born out of exogamous marriage. His life, like his parents, is one of anxiety, tension and oppression. Alok is a social outcaste. Born out of the union of a Brahmin unwed mother and Kshatriya father, Alok was neither received by the dead father's family nor by his mother's orthodox, caste conscious Brahmin family. When Alok's mother returns home after a couple of months with the new born baby in her arms asking for help, Mr. Chakraborty instead of extending his helping hand and carrying out the responsibilities of a dutiful father, sticks to his caste conscious orthodox ideologies and refuses to accept her daughter for committing the sin of transgressing the caste boundaries. In fact, the hard-hearted old Brahmin hurls down his grandson and makes it clear to his family that a son born out of the union of a Brahmin woman and a Kshatriya man without marriage is a sinful creation, and therefore, cannot be welcomed by him. Since his birth, Alok had suffered social rejection, which had a deep impact on his personality. Though as an infant of only six months age he did not feel the pain of familial rejection when his paternal grandfather hurled him down on the ground, yet the consequences of this unsympathetic act of his grandfather and later to be repeated by the society left him disillusioned forever. The trauma of social rejection can be best understood when Alok vocalises his feelings in the given lines:

But I did not die that day when my maternal grandfather hurled me down onto the courtyard. In fact from that day I am burdened with a heart full of emotions; I am still living with the pain of dejection and disillusionment. But is that how a person can live? Is that called a life? (Das 22)

According to *Gautama Sutras* (28:33-34), "the son of an unmarried damsel, the son of a pregnant bride, the son of a twice-married woman, the son of an appointed daughter, a son self-given, and a son bought belong to the family of their fathers" (Jayaram par 6). Thus, as a pure Brahmin he strongly vouches on the shashtras and smritis and refuses to accept the son born of a maiden woman as an heir to

his family. However, *Manavdharmashastra* has altogether a different opinion on children born of inter caste marriages. Manu dictates, “From a Sudra man and a Vaisya, Kshatriya, and Brahmana woman are born Ayogava, a Kshattri, and a Chandala respectively, the lowest of men (sons who owe their origin to) a confusion of the castes” (qtd. in Buhler 276).

The child born to a maiden, according to the sastras can be claimed by the father’s family. But in Alok’s case, since the father is dead, his father’s family never claims him as their heir. Therefore, he grows up with no family name and identity. This complicates the situation in his life and he blames and traces the roots of his identity crisis to the discriminating caste system that confines man to its limited boundaries and punishes him for transgressing its norms. Raju Das also interrogates the validity of Brahminical ideologies which to uphold its beliefs, practices and expectations in the society strangulates human values of love and affection. His attitude towards Brahmins has been put forth through spokesperson, Alok, who says, “I am not against Brahmins but I detest spurious Brahminism” (Das 12).

The social stigma attached to Alok’s life as an illegitimate son of an unmarried mother makes his life a suffocating one. He is socially marginalized because of the absence of a father’s identity in his life. The social stigma attached with unmarried motherhood shadows Alok’s life as well. Raju Das effectively depicts the marginalized condition of Alok by drawing a parallel story of social outcast Karna from the epic *Mahabharata*. Karna had been the victim of caste discrimination as well as of his birth as an illegitimate son of Kunti. Thus, when Alok receives the role of Karna for the drama *Karna Kuntir Sambad*, he identifies himself with Karna and breaks down as he realises his life an exact mirror image of Karna; a socially marginalised like Karna living with the burden of illegitimate son of an unwed mother.

Karna’s birth is the outcome of divine intervention but born to a maiden woman. According to the narrative in the epic *Mahabharata*,

Kunti used a magical formula given to her by a sage to summon the sun-god, Surya. As Surya met her he was compelled to give her a child. Fearful that a child conceived before marriage might ruin her reputation, Kunti placed the child born with natural armour and divine earrings in a wicker basket and left him afloat in a river. The river decided the journey of the child's life. It took Karna, the son of a princess, into the house of a charioteer transforming a Kshatriya, member of the ruling varna, into a Shudra varna.

Rejected by his natural mother, this foundling, Karna, refused to submit to his enforced destiny. In his heart he was a warrior. He was at war with himself as well as with the society, trying to find his true identity, his caste and his role in the society. Because Karna's real lineage was untraceable, he was given the shudra caste of his adopted father, a charioteer by occupation.

Alok's life symbolises the curse of illegitimate birth and consequent identity crisis and social marginalization in a patriarchal society. The pain of a life lived like an orphan has always forced him to live in a state of conflict. The conflict too is very idealistic in nature. It is a conflict between his present state of unemployment and unfulfilled love that is a result of orthodox and superstitious Hindu religion and the one he is striving to see, free from all caste, class and religious distinctions. His life that is constituted of personal failures and social victimisation can be best summed in the words of Rabindranath Tagore in *Karna Kuntir Sangbad*, "Let me remain, as ever with those who yield no fruit, nor know success" (*nimikhrabindranath*, par. 2). Raju Das introduces the technique of play within a play to address the social marginalization of children of unwed mothers. The selection of *Karna-Kuntir Sangbad* by his theatre group creates the right opportunity for Alok to vent out his frustrated emotions over his identity crisis and social marginalisation.

Karna-Kuntir Sangbad is an episode composed by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore based on *Mahabharata's* scene where before the epic war between the Kauravas and Pandavas, Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, pleads and tries to convince the great warrior Karna

not to fight against the Pandavas, his real brothers born out of the same mother. Ultimately Karna decides, though reluctantly, to sacrifice his life to keep the request of his real mother. In heroic words, Karna forfeits his winning position in the war to keep the request of his natural mother. Karna's words of sacrifice, "Joy houk amar houk pandobo sontan, Ami robo nishfoler hotasher dole" (Let the son of Pandu be victorious and live forever, I choose to stay with the hopeless desperate one)" symbolise the dejection and hopelessness of his life that he has internalised.

Alok's lineage like that of Karna is one of conflict. His stigmatised existence as the son of an unmarried mother has an adverse effect on his life. His caste attached to him is that of his adopted father, a shudra. His life as a social recluse marginalizes him despite his good educational background. Like Karna who was always subjected to humiliation because of his caste identity, Alok too faces caste discrimination in society. Raju Das draws similarities between Karna and Alok to emphasise on the age-old discriminations made on the grounds of one's birth. Like Karna, Alok's life is one of rejection and dejection. Karna was rejected by the great archer and teacher of Kshatriya Pandavas, Dronacharya. Dronacharya refused to accept Karna as his student because of his caste identity. Dronacharya reminded him of his caste and warned him to restrict his desires within the limit of his caste. Karna as a Shudra was reminded that he had no rights to learn the art of the Kshatriyas. His caste identity again played a key role in his personal life. He was spurned by Draupadi, the bride herself for his low origin at the archery contest organized by the king of Panchala for the hand of his daughter, Draupadi.

Alok's life even after centuries is like that of Karna. Alok's life, like Karna, is one of humiliation, pain and suffering. Through the similarities between Karna and Alok, Raju Das emphasises the impact of caste identity on one's life. Time has changed but caste discrimination continues in the society that divides human beings on the grounds of their birth and their profession. Alok's stigmatised life

can be traced back to two main factors: illegitimate birth and caste of his adopted parents. However, according to him, the main reasons for his present state are not only these two factors, but it is spurious Brahminism. Accusing Brahminism as the root cause of all the social injustice he remarks, “Brahminism is the religion embraced by a handful of literate, witty people who in order to meet their selfish demands cheat the ignorant lot in the name of religion” (Das12). According to Alok, it is Brahminical ideology that plays a key role in the construction of one’s identity. Hence, Alok’s social position as a victim of exogamous relationship explicates the significance and the sincerity with which Brahmanical ideologies on marriage and inheritance of caste identity are observed and practised in the society.

Raju Das’s another play *Neel Selam*, gives another very interesting picture of exogamous marriage, in which the victimisation of a woman in the institution of marriage that is hypergamous in nature gains prominence. In addition to it, the play also pinpoints the social position of the children who are born out of inter caste marriage especially that of hypergamous marriage, also known as *anuloma* type of marriage. The inter caste marriage between an upper caste Brahmin man, Mr. Chatterjee and a Shudra woman, Alodebi is another instance of exogamous marriage, but not as threatening as *pratiloma* or hypogamous marriage. Through the instance of a form of marriage that enjoys moderate social acceptance, Raju Das interrogates and contests the position of women in the institution of marriage.

The Chatterjee couple in the play *Neel Selam* had a peaceful married life till the peace and happiness of the family is disrupted by the birth of two consecutive blind children. Though the couple patiently and calmly withstood the sudden misfortune in their family in the birth of their partially blind daughter, Bani; the birth of a completely blind son shattered all the hopes and aspirations of the family. The hope of gaining back the sight of their partially blind daughter that kept the family going comes to a standstill with the birth of a completely blind son.

The birth of a son is a significant milestone for a family in a patriarchal society. The son is regarded as a promise for a better future, one who can shoulder all the responsibilities of his aging parents and through him the branching of the family seems possible. It is an age-old belief that son helps his parents to gain moksha and is the gateway to their place in heaven (Jayaram Par 5). Ironically the birth of their second child, a male blind child shatters Mr. Chatterjee's hopes of an ideal complete future and out of frustration, anger and sadness he accuses his wife, Alodebi, for his tragic fate. He holds her responsible for his and children's fate and hurls abuse on her, "You are an unlucky woman. You are only responsible for my blind children" (Das 16). Instead of taking the responsibility of his family and giving financial support for the medical treatment of his children, he abandons the family to escape the crisis and remains untraceable forever.

Marriage, in Hindu religion has a deep significant meaning. It is considered more of a sacrament that adheres to the principles of caste and religion than as a contract of human relationship. Sociologists too, have proclaimed that social order rests on strong conservative elements. According to Hindu mythology, *vivaha* or marriage is not merely a holy union or a communion, but it is a *sareera sanskara* i.e. a sacrament sanctifying the body. Hindu marriage joins two individuals for life, so that they can pursue together *dharma* (duty), *artha* (material possessions), *kama* (physical desires) and *moksha* (ultimate spiritual release). The union of two individuals as husband and wife in the institution of marriage is recognized by law. It is not just a contract between two individuals or relationship of convenience but a moral expediency, in which the couple agrees to live together and share their lives, doing their respective duties, to keep the divine order and the institution of family.

Ironically, a man's responsibility towards his family does not always form a part of his moral integrity. Thus, in *Neel Selam* Mr. Chatterjee's sudden decision to flee from his responsibilities towards his family not only proves his failure to keep his familial

obligations but also his moral degeneration. However, the irony of a patriarchal society lies in the fact that for all the moral and ethical lapses of a man, it is the woman who ultimately suffers. Thus, it is Alodebi as an abandoned woman with two very young and handicapped children bears the consequences of her husband's callousness.

Mr. Chatterjee is a typical example of a chauvinist and selfish man who ignores the *dharma* of *grhastha* phase as well as the vows of marriage. As the head of a family, he is supposed to carry out his role as the provider and protector of his family. In a traditional set up, the man as a head of the family bears all the responsibilities of the family and this in turn gives him a position of authority. The couple shares the responsibility of keeping the marriage vows of treading the paths of life together in all its ups and downs as husband and wife and of bringing up two blind children. However, the financial independence that earns a man a superior position in the family often works towards taking advantage of the other subordinate and financially dependent members of the family. Ironically, Mr. Chatterjee fails to take the responsibility of bringing up two blind children. In turn he also fails to keep the marriage vows of treading the paths of ups and downs of life together as husband and wife.

The seven steps taken during marriage keeping the Fire God a witness, captures the essence of marriage. After completing the seven steps the bridegroom proclaims "Having completed the seven steps be thou my lifelong companion. May thou be my associate and helper in the successful performance of the duties that now devolve upon me as householder" (qtd. in Pande 8). However, in *Neel Selam*, Mr. Chatterjee fails to do justice to the seven vows of marriage. Through Mr. Chatterjee's decision to run away from familial responsibilities, Raju Das challenges the principle of togetherness that forms the main crux of the social institution of marriage. He interrogates the superiority of man over woman in a husband-wife relation that allows him to be the sole decision maker of the family. Bani's father not only fails to do his duty as a husband and father, he also destabilizes

the concept of patriarchal head of the family. For him marriage is not a social contract of mutual understanding rather it is a union of two bodies for convenience. Thus, the moment he is burdened with two handicapped children, he fails to conduct his familial and social duties as father and patriarchal head and like a coward runs away from it. His callousness brings out his insensitivity towards the institution of marriage as “(marriage is) not a plain and simple contract but is part of a larger human relationship. . . something more than desire, a feeling of understanding, of acceptance and belongingness, of a shared experience” (Jain 79).

The superiority of male over female is also established through the process of biological reproduction that is often expressed in metaphorical terms as the ‘seed’ and the ‘earth’. According to Dube, “The seed symbolizes the father’s contribution and the field represents the part of the mother. Man provides the seed-the essence-for the creation of the offspring. The seed determines the kind: the child’s identity is derived, thus, from the father in so far as group placement is concerned (22). The symbolic significance of the seed and the earth in a way highlights the sexual asymmetry evident in biological reproduction. Leela Dube further links this sexual asymmetry to “structural rules which govern ownership control and use of productive resources and in the structure and functioning of domestic organizations” (23).

Procreation with a distinct emphasis on reproduction of a male progeny is considered as the main objective of marriage in any human civilization. Its emphasis on the special significance of male seed is noteworthy. The prerequisites for a male progeny is given a detailed expression in *Narada Smriti* too, “Women are created for off springs; a woman is the field and a man is the processor of the seed; a man without the seed does not deserve a girl” (quoted in Pandey 197).

The symbolic significance of seed and earth in human reproduction is also found in Hindu law books. Manu in chapter IX, verse 34 of *Manusmriti* observes, “In some cases the seed is more distinguished,

and in some the womb of the female; but when both are equal, the offspring is most highly esteemed” (qtd. in Buhler 333). Further, in his discourse on the function of seed and soil in the same chapter of *Manusmriti*, he establishes the relative significance of the seed over the soil and observes, “On comparing the seed and the receptacle (of the seed), the seed is declared to be more important for the offspring of all created beings is marked by the characteristics of the seed” (qtd. in Buhler 333). Manu’s reiteration on the significance of seed is further evident when he says, “Whatever kind on seed is sown in a field, prepared in due season, (a plant) of that same kind, marked with the peculiar qualities of the seed, springs up in it” (qtd. in Buhler 333).

However, the seed loses its exact significance in off springs of inter caste marriages that include both hypergamous as well as hypogamous types. In such cases the male superiority in the seed is tainted by the characteristics of the earth in which it is planted. Thus, in Chapter X, verse 6 of *Manusmriti*, he categorically identifies the types as follows:

Sons begotten by twice born men on wives of the next lower castes, they declare to be similar (to their fathers, but) blamed on account of the fault (inherent) in their mothers. Such is the eternal law concerning children born of wives one degree lower than their husbands... (qtd. in Buhler 403).

Interestingly, the twist that Manu incorporates in *anuloma* or hypergamous marriage by combining this form of marriage with *matra-savarnya* (inheritance of the mother’s varna) instead of the prevalent system of inheriting the father’s caste “serves to reveal the differential rules of mating and lineage for men and women of different castes” (Rege 145). It also reflects Manu’s sole intention of restricting the off spring to the lower caste.

Tambiah, an eminent social anthropologist, in this context argues that though some critics give the progeny the social status of his father, some refuse to do so. Though the offspring of a hypergamous or

pratiloma marriage is socially accepted as a part of their father's caste, the offspring of hypogamous marriage is received neither by the father's family nor by the mother's family. Hence, he attempts to explain the paradox existing in hypogamous and hypergamous marriages in the given words:

It seems to me that *pratiloma* is a convenient intellectual device for generating various disapproved categories, assigning them degraded positions and ideologically explaining, and rationalizing, why so many groups in the caste hierarchy are placed in low or downtrodden positions...though caste society may or may not in its actual demographic composition constitute a pyramid, its evaluation of statuses, ritual and occupational roles must necessarily be pyramidal. The pure statuses are few, the impure are legion. The [political] economy of purity and pollution makes this inevitable. (207)

Consequently, the sufferings of the off springs of inter caste marriages start with the discriminatory practices perpetrated by their own families. Unfortunately, it is the child who bears the brunt of seed and earth dichotomy of exogamous marriages and he is oppressed as a social outcast.

Birth and lineage play a key role in Brahmanical patriarchy. It is evident in the stigmatised lives of Alok in *Surjo Tonoy* and Bani and her brother in *Neel Selam*. His identity as the son of an unmarried mother is a matter of disgrace for him. Hence, he is a social outcast. In spite of his good educational background, he lives a life of social recluse, neither he is accepted in social circles like in his work place nor in his private life one of happiness and peace. Like Karna who was always subjected to humiliation because of his lower caste identity, Alok too faces caste discrimination in society. He is neither accepted well at his workplace nor by his fiancée. In *Neel Selam*, the blind children in spite of their uncontrollable desire for education and heightened optimism are not allowed to prosper by the various apparatuses of state machinery.

In *Neel Selam* Raju Das not only emphasised on the significance of family lineage but also challenges the patriarchal image and role of man as the head of the family. The Chatterjee family bereft of family head goes through all kinds of stress; financial, emotional as well as socio-cultural. Alodebi, however turns out to be a strong woman. She is accused by her husband as the source of all their misfortune, a wretched woman that she is, she is held responsible for the birth of her blind son. Hence, she is blamed for her failure to meet the primary duty of an ideal wife; to give birth to a son who can be the rightful heir to the family and carry it further. As a punishment for her carrying bad luck for their family, she is abandoned by her husband. However, after a few months of initial distress and helplessness, with no alternative to support her family, gradually Alodebi gathers courage to challenge the ideal image of a woman as a submissive, docile homemaker. She takes up a job to fend for herself and her family. By taking up a job to financially support her family, Alodebi also challenges the traditional role of a father as a breadwinner and manages, though with all difficulties, to strike a balance between her role as a mother, a caregiver and nurturer, showering affection and love and father, as an earning member of the family.

In this whole process, that marks the beginning of a new phase for Alodebi she also challenges and even subverts the orthodox patriarchal ideals of wifhood or *pativrata*. A *pativrata* woman in a patriarchal society is expected to be loyal to her husband, never to speak ill of him, whether during his lifetime or post death. *Manusmriti* strongly holds, “Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife” (qtd. in Buhler 196). Also “A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead” (qtd. in Buhler 196). However, Raju Das, through the character of Alodebi interrogates the validity of such parameters in a patriarchal society, especially when the upholders of such codes of conduct blatantly flout them. Alodebi

turns away from moral injunctions thrust upon women and liberates herself from such claustrophobic, self denial for the sake of her family's survival. The play subtly hints at "the importance of institutional support" and how its absence forces a woman to transgress her role as an ideal wife, serving the family from within the four walls of her home. Unlike an ideal wife, as expected by the patriarchal society, Alodebi liberates herself from the patriarchal ideology of a *pativrata* and sets herself as an example of a liberated woman, not touched ever by the infidelity of her husband. The driving force behind her new life, obviously, had been her responsibility to give her blind children a better future.

However, the road chosen by Alodebi did not turn out to be a smooth one. It was full of unexpected bends and potholes. As she takes up a job in the nursing home run by Dr. Banerjee, she becomes a victim of workplace harassment and abuses. As an abandoned and separated woman her life becomes more vulnerable. Her presence in a man's world is exploited by her employee. Dr. Banerjee, Alodebi's employer, takes full advantage of her financial and emotional crisis and subjects her to sexual harassments. In *Neel Selam*, Alodebi's recollection of painful memories that forced her to live a life of a mistress of Dr. Banerjee, bring to the fore her helplessness that forced her to bear her sexual exploitation at the workplace:

After six months of surviving on the existing savings, when I was frantically looking for a job, Dr. Banerjee gave me a job in his nursing home. However, as long as the widower Dr. Banerjee was alive, I was forced to live as his mistress. Only because of my two helpless children; to provide financial support to my family that consisted of two innocent children. (Das 18)

The social conditioning of a woman, from very childhood teaches her to sacrifice herself for others. Hence, Alodebi does not break down or feel defeated in a man's world. Instead of being cowed down by her condition, she keeps herself emotionally and mentally strong to fight her desolation and exploitation to give her children a better life. Alodebi's condition signifies the condition of deserted women, who

under the pressures of their situation become “silently labouring beast(s)” (Baker 247). Nevertheless, her experience from her exploitation and oppressed situation makes her a strong woman to challenge the empty ego of patriarchal society that is by large responsible for her plight.

Gautam Bhadra, while discussing the primary elements that define a Dalit observes, “Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute subaltern mentality” (63). Raju Das’s Alodebi prominently manifests defiance as the only way to seek independence from the clutches of gender-based oppression in a patriarchal society. She defies the patriarchal image of an ideal woman, devoting her life as a wife and mother and takes up a job in a man’s world.

A woman’s chastity is regarded as her greatest virtue. Hence, when Bani’s mother takes up a job, her life does not become without miseries, rather it makes her life more pathetic as she becomes a prey to sexual exploitation at work place. In fact, under such circumstances, the burden of proving her integrity of character doubles. As per *Manavdharmashashtra* a woman’s integrity is of prime importance. Manu believes and therefore recommends, “Until death let her be patient (of hardships), self-controlled, and chaste, and strive (to fulfil) that most excellent duty which (is prescribed) for wives who have one husband only” (qtd. in Buhler 196). He also lays down a set of strict actions as punishments for women who violate the expected behavioural norms. In this context Manu observes, “By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin” (qtd. in Buhler 197). However, a patriarchal society is based on the premises of gender inequity; the punishments for men are comparatively lenient than that of women. A man can go scot free even after violating his social responsibility of providing emotional and financial support to his family. Therefore, Mr. Chatterjee, ignores his duties and obligations towards his family but Alodebi, in spite of no fault of hers, has to

bear the consequences of her husband's callousness and lack of courage to support a family consisting of two blind children.

A bold woman as Alodebi is, she is not intimidated by such helpless and unfair situation. Rather, she upholds her decision to work as a nurse in Dr. Banerjee's nursing home and defending it as a response to the humane instinct of a mother and says, "That man, even after being a father, could be heartless so easily. But, I am a mother. I cannot deny my handicapped children a living" (Das 17). Torn between social expectations and her personal requirements to help her family, Alodebi takes up the job as a nurse at Dr. Banerjee's hospital, where she becomes more of her employee's mistress than his employee. Conditioned to the social values that a woman is expected to follow and observe in a patriarchal society, Alodebi is compelled to hide from the society as well as from her children her position as a mistress of Dr. Banerjee and yet strive to support the family. The pressure of providing financial support to the family compels her to confide within her the pain of regular sexual systematic sexual exploitation in the hands of her employer.

However, the conflict in her as an abandoned, socially marginalized woman and her decision to work against the social expectations of a woman is evident when on one hand she defends her decision to work but is torn apart for not being able to keep up to the image of an ideal woman and mother. Eventually, she vents out, to her daughter and her friend, Shanto, her pent-up emotions of dejection and pain for choosing such an obnoxious path to provide the much-needed financial support to her children and cries out, "Now you tell me Bani, will you address me as your Ma? Won't you feel ashamed to recognise me as your Ma" (Das 18)? Clearly evident in her volley of questions to her daughter, Bani, is her helplessness but a strong sense of shame for taking up a job that her conscience probably did not approve of but as a victim of unimaginable circumstances had to take up. The path of life chosen by Alodebi can be easily debated as one that shows the death of her moral conscience. However, given the hard situation that she had to go through to financially support her

family, it is the motherly instinct of protecting her children that gained priority over any other concern. The tenderness coupled with desperateness of a mother to save her children enabled her to sale her body for the sake of money.

On the role and ideals that a woman is expected to perform, motherhood proves to be one of the most challenging and demanding one. Regarding the significance attached with the institution of motherhood, Mrinalini Sinha observes, ‘motherhood is a glorification without empowerment’ (49-57). However, Raju Das courageously challenges this notion through the character of Alodebi. Alodebi through her determination to work against all odds to support her family proves that a woman’s emancipation does not depend on any external agent but it lies within. A woman herself must force herself out of the cocoon of submissive, docile image of a homemaker to support herself for a better emancipated life. In fact Raju Das upholds the position of a woman as a mother. Alodebi is a perfect blend of a rebellious woman who challenges the patriarchal ideal of a *pativrata* woman to sacrifice herself for the future of her children. However, all her sacrifices and hard work are overshadowed by the apathetic patriarchal institutions of the society.

Besides the patriarchal society, Alodebi and her family is victimised by the state machineries as well. The state apparatus marginalises Alodebi’s children as the ‘other’ for their physical disability. It is because of partial and complete blindness of Bani and her brother and unavailability of proper state help for the physically disabled that the family continues to live under the dark shadow of poverty and social marginalization. Despite their mother’s relentless efforts to give her blind children higher education, it is far from getting completely materialised. Lack of sufficient provisions in the state higher education system and employment of the visually challenged, both Bani and her brother had to settle down with a paltry income generated through giving music lessons to the children in the neighbourhood or selling small stationary items in local trains.

However, Alodebi is a strong and undefeatable woman. She exploits the lessons she learnt from her hardship and bitter experiences and develops her conviction to change their state through hard work and honesty. This in turn brings an inextinguishable new light in their life; a vision in her blind children. Undeterred by the ineffective and partial state machinery that adds to the woes of Alodebi and her children, the mother daughter duo pursue their desire for higher education but could not reach their ultimate objective of getting a job for their self-empowerment. By focusing on the double marginalization of Alodebi as a victim of gender and exogamous marriage and on Bani as a product of exogamous marriage coupled with her physical disability, Raju Das critiques the Brahmanical society and its strict adherence to its narrow ideology of keeping women under strict control to preserve its caste purity. Also evident in his plays is his sharp appraisal of the state authorities and its various apparatuses that deliberately make unattainable provisions to keep the underprivileged from getting the benefits of higher education.

Raju Das's dramaturgy articulates a distinctly Dalit feminist aesthetic that challenges both dominant patriarchal norms and upper-caste theatrical conventions. His representation of women disrupts the sentimentalisation often found in mainstream social theatre, replacing it with an unflinching realism that demands ethical engagement from the spectator. Rather than offering redemptive arcs or heroic resolutions, Das's plays reveal how Dalit women negotiate power through endurance, refusal, memory, and collective presence. Their agency emerges not through spectacle but through everyday acts of resilience—silence as protest, labour as testimony, and the body as archive.

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Chapter 14

Kolonko: A Rejection of Brahmanical Patriarchy and Assertion of the Self

The play *Kolonko* is a very sensitive and a multilayered play that serves as a vehicle to interrogate the practice of match making as one of the mechanisms of the Brahminical patriarchy to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it. The play also provides a glimpse into the workings of the apathetic state machinery against the Dalit refugees of East Bengal that ultimately led to Marchijjhapi massacre. Also hidden within the narrative of the play is the slow but steady process of Sanskritization that engulfs Dalit consciousness of opportunist Dalits. The plot of the play also hints at the cold war that exists since the time of partition of Bengal between the original residents of West Bengal and the immigrated people of East Bengal who are commonly known as refugees.

Though the story line of the play *Kolonko* is quite scattered and digressive, touching different issues, yet the main storyline revolves around the undue significance given to Brahmanical practice of fixing matrimonial alliances. The humiliating and insulting sessions of match making where a woman is constantly weighed against different parameters that help to establish her suitability as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother is nothing new in a Brahmanical society that functions according to the codes of behaviour laid down by the Hindu shashtras (Hindu law books). However, it is interesting to note that it has its impact felt even in the lower castes like Shudras; probably where the stringency with which it is observed is more nerve wrecking than in the upper caste Brahmin families.

The play under consideration is an indictment on the customary practise of match making in Indian societies based on the superficial physical qualities like complexion, height and weight of the prospective brides and grooms. The importance of the family,

educational and cultural background of the bride has been emphasised since ages. Since Vedic times, the need to have good natured and meritorious women as wives have been reiterated for the better functioning of the household. During the Vedic Age young men entertained hopes of marrying women with abilities and talents that would enable them to “gain knowledge and skill regarding administration of domestic matters in her parental home earlier” (Subbamma 46). Also, the woman as wife of her husband was called ‘jaya’ that signifies that the husband is born again in the wife. Therefore, the bride should possess healthy and good features. Yama’s list of qualifications that a prospective bride should meet consisted of “good character, physical beauty, learning, wealth and abundant number of relative sons the part of the bride” (Subbamma 46). Manu, the Hindu Law giver, besides emphasising on the physical features, health and merit of the bride, strongly emphasised on the need of a ‘good family’ as one of the chief prerequisites of a marriage alliance (Subbamma 46). Hence, in a brahmanical society, the much sought after alliances are those that fit appropriately into these parameters. However, the young girl, Sanchari in *Kolonko* is an unfortunate black sheep in the matrimonial alliance list who is neither blessed with upper caste birth nor is in possession of good facial and physical features. Through this play, Raju Das makes a clarion call to bring an end to the system of match making that leaves a human soul humiliated and dejected forever.

Women are considered as the repositories of caste identity and purity; marriage is the tool employed to achieve it. Since the primary function of marriage is procreation, children born of normative marriages “maintain and reproduce the social order” (Chakravarti 32). Hence, it is the responsibility of the family and the Brahmanical society to select women who would be able to keep up to the expectations of the Brahmanical patriarchy. Therefore, a disciplined, docile and submissive woman who fits into the model of an ideal woman is sought for. Subsequently, match making or judicious

selection of a woman to be the bride of a man forms the ruling principle of an endogamous marriage.

However, the whole process of meeting families for fixing matrimonial alliances involves interaction with the bride's family interrogating the prospective bride and her family on their family background to gauge their socio-economic status in the society quite often become a pain staking task; nevertheless, giving rise to a sense of humiliation and disappointment. At the backdrop of seeking appropriate matrimonial alliances, where Mahandranath Mandal and his friend Kumaresh Basu visit Bordakanto with a marriage proposal for the former's younger brother with Bordakanto's niece, Sanchari, also known as Khenti, Raju Das brings to the fore the age-old cold war between the East Bengal refugees and the original residents of West Bengal. This conflict, however, can be traced back to the refugee status of the people who emigrated from East Bengal to West Bengal during the partition of Bengal leaving their property, cattle, farm lands and all other property.

Historically, post partition of Bengal, the migrants from East Bengal who moved into the newly formed state of West Bengal found themselves in the refugee camps organised by the state government. Most of them, especially the poor ones had to literally beg for work and food to survive. Eventually, they found their shelter, one of utter humiliation in refugee camps; and were relegated to the margins because of their economic degradation. The *Adi* (original) residents of Bengal who mostly failed to comprehend and hence, empathize with their fellow brothers and sisters from the other side of the border, developed a notion of detestation and abhorrence for these refugees. These refugees who were marginalized because of their economic position also became the victims of double marginalization because of their lower caste identity. However, to make a living in the foreign land, these refugees tried their hands in every odd thing; they successfully managed to meet their daily requirements, but could hardly reach the socio-economic standards of the natives of the land. The socio-economic gap that defined the identities of the people

across the border, gave birth to a cold wave between the two communities; the pulsating impact of which can still be felt in the lives of its people.

The heated conversation between Kumaresh and Mahendranath on politics and social issues bring out the latent tension between the residents of West Bengal (commonly known as 'ghati') and the East Bengal (commonly known as 'bati'). Mahendranath, though a native of West Bengal, while defending their status and position in erstwhile Bengal, acknowledges the contribution of eminent scientists, politicians and writers from East Bengal for their present socio-cultural, literary and scientific heritage of Bengal, but condescends the condition of its people. Bordakanto interferes in this *ghati-bati* conflict and while trying to mitigate their tension, observes, "In this country the policy of divide and rule was not introduced by the British rulers. In fact since last five thousand years the system of divide and rule is existing in our country and it is the contribution of the Brahmins" (Das 40).

Implicit in the ignorance of Mahendranath and his friend Kumaresh about the condition of the Dalit refugees and state machinery is the impact of sanskritization of Dalits. The play registers Raju Das's abhorrence for sanskritization. He attacks sanskritization of Dalits as an attempt to voluntarily erase cultural history of social humiliation of Dalit existence. According to M. N. Srinivas, Sanskritization is a process by which "a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, "twice-born" caste" (Srinivas 6). In the play, *Kolonko*, this aspect has been represented by Kumaresh and Mahendranath. Though Mahendranath Mondal is a Shudra by caste, he is a classic example of all those Shudra Dalits who are the beneficiaries of educational and job opportunities made by the Government as a result of Dr. Ambedkar's revolution against Dalit condition and reforms for the same. Hence, he is in possession of good education and job. He has even managed to secure a job in reserved category. However, he feels ashamed of revealing his actual

caste identity. Therefore, he tries to hide his caste that has helped him to earn a position of professional success, which in the words of his friend Kumaresh, “he has received a number of promotions because of reservation” (Das 42). Also evident in his efforts to climb the social ladder is his attempt to erase the cultural history of his caste. Therefore, he does not know great revolutionary leaders and reformers of the Dalit Movement like Jogendranath Mondal and asks with great inquisitiveness, “By the by whose photo is that mounted on the wall” (Das 42).

It is a lived experience of the oppressed that erasure of unpleasant truths brings a promise of better and peaceful life. The urban, educated group of people belonging to schedule caste and tribes who have been able to make some kind of space within the socially recognised groups believe that painful memories of caste discrimination and marginalization is yesteryear’s experience, the baggage of which should be left behind for a better future. Hence, it becomes a deliberate attempt on the part of people like Mahendranath Mondal to erase his Dalit identity for a better assimilation in the mainstream cultural group. Consequently, he is an uprooted Dalit, with no knowledge of the leaders and reformers who endeavoured towards an egalitarian society. On the contrary his inclination for the socially and culturally upward moving section of the society is evident in his knowledge of Marx, Lenin, Jyoti Basu can be regarded as a deliberate move towards cultural assimilation. Though Mahendranath and Kumaresh are content with their newly adopted ideologies of the Left Government, Bardakanto and his family are quite shocked on realising the death of Dalit consciousness in them and hence their ignorance of Dalit experience. It is evident when with utter disgust he observes, “People who in spite of belonging to shudra caste fail to recognise the contributions made by Guruchand Thakur, Jogen Mondal and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, but instead are aware of Marx, Lenin and Jyoti Basu are stigma in the name of shudra caste” (Das 49). Sunil, Bardakanto’s younger brother, further points out that he feels ashamed of identifying themselves with such people in

whom Dalit consciousness has dried up and has met its early death, “Shame! Shame! To identify ourselves with you and include you in us makes me feel wretched” (Das 49). Hence, Bordakanto accuses them as “man eaters of Shudra caste” (Das 49) for showing tendencies of sanskritization that has ultimately made them individuals belonging to ‘nowhere’; neither do they belong to upper castes whom they are imitating nor to their own Shudra castes that they have tried to relinquish forever in search for a better social life.

In their confrontation over political exploitation of the refugee Dalits in West Bengal, especially the Dalit refugees at Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi, Bordakanto unveils the hidden atrocities and inexplicable tortures that the comrades of the Left Government carried out on the Dalit refugees, including the children and women in Marichjhapi. Bordakanto and his younger brother, Sunil, serve as the main spokespersons of Raju Das in *Kolonko*. They have been employed as the vehicles to spread the hidden truths about government sponsored unspeakable tortures and exploitation on the people in the refugee camps. The trauma that they have survived and the injustice that they had faced are best brought out through Bordakanto’s narrative of the pain and hardship that they faced. Bordakanto’s vivid description of the situation that is quoted below aptly brings out the hardships and tortures that the Bengali Dalit refugees had experienced post partition of Bengal:

The refugees from East Bengal were given rehabilitation in the inhabitable areas of Dandakarnya hills and in the dense forests and jungles where existence of life was unimaginable. In spite of such situation, the refugees worked hard day and night and turned the barren rocky lands into lands where some crops can be grown, which in turn aided them in improving their living condition. However, they had to leave behind all the fruits of their hard work when the Left government of West Bengal once more evicted them from there and tried to resettle them at Marichjhapi in the Sunderban areas. (Das 48)

In *Kolonko* Raju Das also provides a rare but true picture of the sexual exploitation and mass rape of women irrespective of their age in the hands of communist comrades at Dandakaranya. The refugee women at Dandyakarnya hills were triple marginalized; firstly because of their refugee condition, secondly because of their low caste identity and lastly because of their gender. The pathetic condition that these women were subjected to and the impending fear and trauma that the incident gave rise to can be best comprehended from the description that Sunil, a witness to the eviction and brutality, gives:

It was not just eviction. It would be wrong to use the word eviction. It was not just eviction. In the light of the day as the comrades of the Left government started attacking the refugees at Dandyakarnya they not only tortured the refugees and tried evicting them from their settlements. Also sexually assaulted the women and even brutally raped many of the women in the presence of their family members; a sight which no one can ever forget. (Das 48)

With heavy heart and uncontrollable grief Sunil describes the wretched condition of refugee women at Dandyakarnya hills that clearly pinpoints how women are always the worst victim of any situation, whether it is politically or socially motivated:

Since that day many young women, wives and mothers went missing from the land of Marichjapi. They cannot be traced even today. Some of them unable to bear the shame of physical and sexual assault have committed suicide. My pregnant elder sister, mother of Sanchari whom you have come to see as a prospective bride of your younger brother, was one amongst many such women who was sexually assaulted. Unable to stand the pain and shame of sexual abuse in the hands of the comrades, she committed suicide by hanging herself from the branches of the tree. (Das 49)

The unforgettable memories of Marichjapi massacre, the abject and stirring conditions of the refugee camps, the agitated and vehement

slogans, slaughtering human beings in the name of caste and origin haunt the existence of people like Bardakanto and his family.

Raju Das in this play interrogates the Left government's Rehabilitation schemes and politicises it to give an insight into the ruling political party's apathetic treatment of helpless lower caste Hindu East Bengal refugees in the early 1970s in the forests of Sunderban region as prospective vote catching agencies. Through Sanchari's elder and younger maternal uncles, Bordakanto and Sunil respectively that Raju Das also reveals the changing strategies of the government's rehabilitation policies that resulted in the pathetic condition of the lower caste Hindu East Bengal refugees in the early 1970s in the forests of Sunderban region. The early migrants were able to settle them well in their new land but the lower caste Hindu migrants had a tough time countering resistance from the upper-class refugees. Gradually they were forcibly relocated to "rocky inhospitable land" of Dandakaranya (parts of then Orissa and Madhya Pradesh). (Chowdhury 664-82). However, the changes in the government's rehabilitation schemes left these migrants from Dandakaranya to settle at Marichjapi in Sunderban region, only to be evicted from the place under Act 144 on the grounds of endangering forest land and life of Sunderban.

The inhuman treatment at refugee camps left a deep scar in the minds of the victims of Marichjapi massacre. Bordakanta's family including his niece Sanchari cannot forget such uncouth, barbarous exploitations meted out to women by hired goons of the political party in power. The memories of such heinous days had affected thousands of families, including Bordakanto's family and his niece who fail to come out of the trauma of violence. This grossly wronged lot of people want justice for women and are against any kind of exploitation of women.

The discussion over Marichjhapi politics soon opens the Pandora's Box over Sanchari's parental lineage and her mother's suicide after she was raped by the Left comrades. Since a woman is assumed to be the custodian of the hierarchical order of the caste system, her lineage

holds utmost significance in her marriage. However, in Sanchari's case her family background is one of disrepute. She is the daughter of an unmarried mother, an offspring of a rape victim, who after giving birth to her child commits suicide. Yet neither she nor her maternal uncle tries to hide this incident. Rather Bordakanto interrogates the system that on one hand assumes women as the greatest custodians of purity of caste and Brahminical patriarchal. He uninhibitedly discusses the exploitation of women in Marichjhapi massacre and traces the tragic end of her sister to the brutality of the newly elected government. The groom's party is shocked to know about Sanchari's background but before they could express their astonishment, the bold Sanchari barges into their room and attacks them for their complete ignorance on the state politics.

Sanchari's unexpected and unconventional behaviour with strangers, especially when the strangers are their guests, is rooted in the seething anger of the physically and mentally abused refugees against the state apparatus and social systems. The agony and humiliation that she is subjected to because of her mother's sexual abuse and consequent suicide coupled with the embarrassment that an unmarried woman like her goes through as a commodity in marriage market stir the rebellion in her. Consequently, she is determined to stand against the patriarchal society that degrades women's position. Sanchari's grit to challenge the male dominated society is further strengthened when she overhears the conversation of the guests with her maternal uncles and is shell shocked to know about the sanskritized Dalits' ignorance of government schemes and artificiality that undermine their privileges and rights. She is so full of abhorrence for such ignorant sanskritized people that when she is introduced to the relatives of her prospective alliance, she throws away the socially refined, decent behaviour expected of a woman like her. Instead, she shows the urgency to reply to their staple interrogatory session and cuts them short as she does not find them suitable enough to match her sensibilities.

Sanchari's bold rejection of the conventional question answer session that takes place during a match making meetings reflects her desire to challenge the system of marriage in a patriarchal society. Marriage which signifies coming together of two souls, does not however, in a patriarchal society always ensure love, respect and equal treatment of both. Rather it serves as a tool to subordinate women and cage her in the family responsibilities and duties. As Khenti retaliates against the question-and-answer session where a girl is measured against the value of her family's caste, socio-cultural position, bank balance and her complexion, height, weight, her skills in household chores, she right away rejects a match that is based on superficial contours and neglects most important qualities like human love, solidarity and respect. She shoes her desire to terminate the topic of match making by her deliberate interference. Even before she is asked to introduce herself, she speaks out vehemently:

Namaskar! My name is Khenti Boral. (*Sits on a chair*) see my palm. See my feet. See my hair. I have no makeup on my face. If you can't believe that, you can touch and see. (Translation: Nnamaskar. Amar naam Khenti Boral. Ei dekhun amar haath, amar paa, amaar chul. Ami kono make up diyni mukhe. Jadi bishshash na hoi, haath diye dekhun) (Das 50).

The traumatic historical experience of her family that Sanchari has been hearing since her birth has given rise to an inexplicable detestation for the government and brought unparallel maturity in her. She rejects social customs and rituals and stands against exploitation of women. She is not even scared in voicing out her opinions on commoditisation of women in marriage market. She stands against the system where a woman, like a commodity, is examined from different angles to determine her suitability in marriage market. She attacks the dowry system prevalent in our society and argues that it is one of the techniques of extracting money and other valuables from the bride's family in the name of accepting an unsuitable bride for marriage. Criticising the system of dowry practised by both literate and illiterate she observes:

What you people want is that all marriageable girls in the best of their attire and make up silently and submissively sit before you to answer a series of very foolish but insulting questions? After that you show preference for those women who are either working or their families are ready to pay a good dowry, take them home after marriage with a new promise of a happy married life but reduce them to the state of slaves. Tortures, physical and mental abuse remain as their only share in their new family. Please forget such days. New days will come when women will assess and choose their own life partner. Please remember that. (Das 51)

Thus like the Dalit autobiographies which are often known as narratives of pain and humiliation, Raju Das's plays focus on the abject condition of his protagonists and other untouchables and marginalized individuals. In his involvement with and treatment of the ostracised isolation, he tries to focus on the manmade lack in the lives of the underdogs that prevent them to be "fully integrated with the *bhadralok* (cultured) society" (Das 5).

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Chapter 15

Ragging: Caste and the Monopoly of Knowledge

Education has long been projected in India as a primary instrument of social mobility and emancipation. From colonial reformist discourse to post-Independence constitutional ideals, schooling and literacy have been invested with the promise of equality and progress. However, for Dalit communities, access to education has historically been mediated by caste hierarchies that regulate entry, knowledge, language, and institutional belonging. Schools and colleges, rather than functioning as neutral spaces of learning, often reproduce caste-based exclusions through everyday practices of humiliation, silence, and structural neglect. It is this paradox of education—as both a site of aspiration and a mechanism of marginalization—that finds a powerful articulation in the theatre of Raju Das.

Raju Das repeatedly engaged with education as a contested social space where caste oppression is enacted and normalised. His plays expose how Dalit students encounter discrimination not only through overt acts of exclusion but also through subtler forms of symbolic violence—teacher bias, curricular erasure, linguistic hierarchies, and institutional indifference. Education in Das's dramaturgy is rarely depicted as liberatory in itself; instead, it becomes a terrain of struggle where caste identities are marked, disciplined, and often punished. Classrooms, hostels, and examination halls emerge as extensions of caste society rather than its antithesis. *Ragging*, is a symbolic representation of the Brahmanical monopoly over learning and knowledge. Though education is no more restricted only for boys, yet the play brings home the fact that women are yet not welcomed into advanced fields of knowledge and learning. Though education is no more restricted only for boys, yet the play brings

home the fact that women are yet not welcomed into advanced fields of knowledge and learning.

Set at the backdrop of the suicide story of the first tribal graduate woman, Chuni Kotal of Lodha tribe, *Ragging* exemplifies the consequences of violating the knowledge boundaries marked for each caste. The play is the story of a brilliant girl, Reema, whose parents commit the sin of dreaming to educate their daughter and give her higher education. The play depicts how Reema's caste identity becomes the greatest obstacle in her student life. Belonging to a Shudra caste, Reema is exposed to an ugly situation on the very first day of her college to make her realise the consequences of transgressing the boundary lines of knowledge acquisition drawn for each caste. Implicit in Reema's ragging in the college is the working of the state machinery in a Brahmanical society to create a gap between the socially and economically privileged and under privileged classes of people.

Ragging also meets the objective of tracing the far-reaching impact of caste discrimination that without any excuse engulfs education system. Through this play Raju Das also aimed at activating the dormant Dalit community in West Bengal to wake it up from its dormant state, stand against caste discrimination, and work together towards its eradication. The main corpus of the play consists of a plea for equal opportunities to higher studies for all irrespective of caste, class and gender.

The practise of ragging in higher educational institutions is not a new phenomenon. New entrants for advanced studies in medical and engineering streams often become the subject of the oppression meted out by their senior students. The real objectives of ragging in educational institutions are varied. Sometimes the new entrants are targeted for ragging by the senior students just for fun, as an ice breaking session, though often it becomes violent and life threatening. Besides this, many a times ragging is also triggered by socio-political and communal issues. Caste too plays a vital role in catalysing ragging in educational institutions. In such situations Dalit

students are the primary targets since Dalit children's intelligence is always undervalued and the Dalits' "prospect of assimilation... is fraught with potential failure, shame and humiliation, not to mention the threatening indictment of self-denial and self-beratement" (Cheng 69). The play under consideration depicts how caste discrimination intrudes in the field of higher education and stands as an obstacle for the socially underprivileged.

Implicit in the play, *Ragging*, is the power politics in Education Reformation in West Bengal and its consequences on the culturally deprived and lower income groups of the society. It also throws light on the reception of Education Reformation in the state by the Left Government. The anti-Dalit Leftist government of West Bengal played a heinous trick with the socially aspiring backward classes of the state, especially the scheduled castes and tribes. The reformation that was initiated with an apparently positive objective of mass literacy and overall betterment of the socially backward classes made the state language, Bengali, mandatory in the primary, secondary as well as in the higher secondary levels of the state education system. But very soon the socio-culturally underprivileged section of the society realised that more than a positive development they were pushed into a darkness of ignorance. The lack of knowledge of English deprived the students from socio-culturally under privileged background from opportunities to higher education, as the medium of instruction in higher education, irrespective of stream and specialisation, has been always English. Thus, very subtly the government managed to keep the under privileged backward classes in a state of ignorance and through their lack of access to higher education ensured their state of perpetual subservience to the upper classes. (Biswas par. 5)

Raju Das's *Ragging* is the story of a scheduled caste family that is driven by the unbeatable desire to give the light of higher education to their daughter, Reema. Reema too is a hardworking, intelligent, sincere girl who leaves no stones unturned to materialise her poor parents' dream of achieving higher education, that too technical

education in one of the vocational courses. However, because of her low socio-economic and cultural position in the society, the road to success was not very smooth. Besides, her caste and class standing as big obstacles in her higher education, her gender too brings a couple of problems in her way to technical education in a vocational course.

The play opens with the arrival of a poor child Reema at her hostel and how immediately after her arrival she becomes the prey to her senior student Nirupama's ragging. Through the conversation of Reema, her mother, aunt Nirupama and other hostel colleagues Krishna and Jhuma Raju Das hints at the wide spectrum of mental temperament that people of different sections of the society exhibit. Such strong detestation of upper-class people toward those who belong to the lower or weaker socio-economic classes, often lead to mental and emotional uneasiness, pain and humiliation. *Ragging* addresses this unbridgeable gap between the advantaged sections of the society and the disadvantaged ones.

The chief protagonist of the play, Reema, goes through a subtle but ugly and unexpected ragging session in her first few days of her engineering college. She is mentally harassed by one of her seniors, Nirupama, from the moment she steps into the college premises. She is picked up for small and silly things to irritate Reema. First in the series of such irritatingly foolish things was Reema's use of English words while speaking in her mother tongue. Nirupama chastises Reema for her ignorance of an efficient use of her mother tongue, "Ta Janbi keno? English school e porechis bujhi?" (You don't know Bengali? Of course, why will you know? Must have been educated in an English medium school!) (Das 2) and abuses her for neglecting her mother tongue in public places. She orders her to use pure Bengali in the college premises and puts up an open challenge to Reema of replying only in Bangla, even if that required translating technical terms to Bangla. Reema, to please her for comfortable living in the hostel tries her best to accommodate all her demands,

though at times she faces it extremely difficult to control her anger for such stupid questions.

Gautam Bhadra while analysing the characteristics that define Dalits observes that it is not only defiance, disobedience and willingness to resist that always create Dalit identity but the oppressed are also identified by their submissiveness to their superior, “Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute subaltern mentality” (63). Reema explicates this typical identity of a subaltern that Gautam Bhadra observes. Being a victim of Neerupama’s constant humiliating words and gestures, Reema feels the urge to retaliate against her. Yet she refrains from raising her voice against her senior. Rather with her sheer presence of mind, integrity of character and honesty beautifully handles the challenges that she faces and emerges as a confident fighter who battled the inhuman humiliations and mental and physical tortures to assert her social class and position in her college.

Ragging is a disturbing reality in the higher education system of our country. Even though over the years ragging has claimed hundreds of innocent lives and has ruined careers of thousands of bright students, the practice is still perceived by many as a way of ‘familiarization’ and an ‘initiation into the real world’ for young college- going students. The etymological meaning of ragging indicates it as a practice in educational institutions that involves existing students baiting or bullying new students. It often takes a malignant form wherein the newcomers may be subjected to psychological or physical torture that adversely affect the physique or psyche of a fresher or a junior student. (Ragging: Humiliation, rivalry or icebreaking? Par. 5).

In the play, *Ragging*, the meaning and objective of ragging is best drawn out through the character of Reema’s senior, Neerupama. According to her ragging plays a formative role that immensely benefits the students. She observes:

In the fields of science and technology ragging has the objective of transforming the new brilliant, intelligent, studious, promising but dependent and emotionally weak candidates to more dependent, hardworking, and emotionally strong individuals. Most of the students have led a secure, protected and dependent life, where all the major decisions of life were taken by their parents. Thus, as they come to stay in hostel, their attitude and approach towards life should undergo a radical change to adjust and adapt themselves to the new environment where majority of their work and decisions must be done or taken independently. Therefore, to make the newcomers more self-reliant and independent ragging is deliberately organized. (Das 3)

Neerupama even adds that such ragging acts as tough training that enables them to become 'able administrator and decision makers of their own life' (Das 3). She thinks that even the state and educationists of the state too support such informal training programme to meet their own objectives of churning out able, independent individuals which mere education system cannot achieve.

No doubt Neerupama defends the practise of ragging in college premises. Yet the hard-core truth is that it is not easy for a new comer to withstand the emotional and physical abuses carried out in this process. Consequently, ragging leaves such a deep impact on the psyche of an individual that the person carries the baggage of humiliation forever. Also often ragging proves fatal, so much so that it leads to suicides. Instances of deaths during ragging sessions are also not uncommon. Students like Reema are the worst victims of ragging mostly because of their caste and class. However, because of her mental strength and strong desire to fulfil her poor parents' desire to see their daughter successfully completing and acquiring the degree of higher education that she patiently and silently withstands the torturous phase of her college life. Gradually she gathers courage to stand against the malicious practice of ragging to stop it forever.

Neerupama's series of questions to Reema and like her to other new comers, as a part of her ragging session reflect her resistance towards women's education and emancipation. She is a typical perpetrator of patriarchal ideology that perceives woman's emancipation through education needless. Her ideological belief reflects her internalisation of the popular patriarchal idea that education and emancipation of women might lead them astray. By ragging she tries to mentally and emotionally break down the confidence of those girls who desire to enlighten themselves through education and work towards their liberation.

However, Reema is Raju Das's heroic woman. Like Bani in *Neel Selam* and Khenti in *Kolonko*, and unlike Chuni Kotal, she does not succumb to the humiliations associated with caste discriminations practised in educational institutions. Raju Das sketches her character with utmost care and precision to set her as a role model for other exploited and under privileged classes. She is an example for others to gather courage and mental strength to rebel against any evil system, especially caste discrimination to liberate all from the shackles of caste, class and gender discriminations.

In all his major plays, Raju Das relentlessly fights against the Brahmanical patriarchy of a caste stratified Hindu society. The play *Ragging* is not an exception to it. Through the character of Pishima (Reema's paternal aunt), Raju Das attacks Brahminism that is mainly responsible in creating the gulf between the socially and economically privileged and underprivileged sections of the society. Ragging as a phenomenon of observing socio-cultural, religious, educational and ethical differences amongst individuals had been prevalent in Hindu society since ages. The discrimination, subjugation and oppression that caste stratified Hindu society practices to maintain caste hierarchy and celebrate their superiority over other lower castes are nothing less than ragging. Since ancient times ragging exists as a weapon to maintain caste stratification. Pishima equates present day ragging in higher educational institutions with age old practise of caste-based discrimination.

Subjected to such discriminations since childhood Pishima launches into a tirade against the Brahminical system that deliberately always kept the shudras and atishudras from education system and observes:

Brahmin and Khasatriya children only had access to education. The Vaishyas and Shudras were never given the right to education and that is why the great archer Dronacharya had cut off the thumb of Eklavya as his punishment for secretly learning this art. It is also because of this that Lord Ram dared to cut off the head of Shambhu. The Brahminical system of education and running the society was existing till 18th century, even would have continued for some centuries had not reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, E.V. Ramasami Periyar, Harichand Thakur, Dr.Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ram Lohia Manohar and Guruchand Thakur had not contributed to Dalit cause. (Das 5)

The play, *Ragging*, is an interesting study of the playwright's intention of bringing out the hidden agenda behind ragging. According to ragging expert Neeru, Reema's senior in college, ragging is a way of enhancing the mental and emotional strength of the new comers. Also it has the objective of making the students more independent and mature. But according to Reema's aunt, "ragging is a strategic step meted out at different stages of life on the powerless and disadvantaged by the comparatively more powerful in the area" (Das 6). Hence, Reema as a new comer is subjected to ragging by her seniors in the hostel and her caste adds to her woe.

Reema is the victim of caste discrimination practised by caste conscious upper caste Neeru. While probing into Reema's background, her family history and financial condition, to gauge the urgency of her higher education, she subjects her to nasty verbal and physical abuse to maintain and keep the jurisdiction of higher education in the hands of creamy upper caste people. But Reema's life had not been always so rosy like many of her privileged friends thus she patiently bears with all physical and mental tortures only to come out victorious and is able to befriend Neeru. Raju Das hinted at oppression that an individual faces as an outcome of a series of other

oppressions perpetuated in the society. This oppression is the offshoot of an unbridgeable gap between caste, class or gender but the result is same uncouth oppression and subjugation of the less advantaged people. It also hints at the failure of the constitutional laws and rights of individuals. In this context the words of Uma Chakravorti bring out the reality behind the constitutional laws:

The constitution has formally ended caste-based discrimination in public spaces, but it has neither broken the hold of the upper castes on material resources, nor their hold over the state machinery. Consequently, the enforcement of the non-discriminatory provisions in public spaces remains a dead letter because the enforcers themselves, in many cases, subscribe to the ideology of caste. (207)

In fact, Raju Das sketches the character of Neeru as a representative of the Brahminical thoughts and ways of living. Implicit in her ragging is the typical Brahmanical tendency of reserving education and knowledge only in the hands of upper caste and thereby keep the lower castes away from the light of knowledge. To confine the opportunities of higher education only to the socially privileged groups of people, she cites financial crisis as one of the main issues behind why lower caste people do not get access to higher education. Indirectly drawing the inevitable link between caste and economy, she establishes the fact that poor economic conditions become one of the main obstacles to higher education for people belonging to lower castes.

Neeru, like the ancient Brahmin Gurus, shows her preference to keep higher education reserved for the upper castes with sound financial background. According to Neeru, people belonging to the upper castes have monopoly on the right to education. However, she defends her selfish motive by camouflaging it with other issues like financial problems of the poor sections of the society. She scares Reema by citing examples of students who fail to complete the course either because of financial crisis or for their inability to stand ragging. In fact, Neeru tries to kill two birds with one stone through her

discourse on ragging. She not only makes it clear that poor students should abstain from pursuing engineering but also manages to maintain the gap between the rich and the poor in educational institutions.

Neeru's dialogic engagement does prove that ragging is a systematic and strategic way of humiliating, embarrassing, and inflicting physical and mental pain to create, develop and maintain the gap between the powerful and powerless. It is a strategic exercise to widen the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed, subjugator and subjugated. The desire and necessity to humiliate, embarrass and inflict pain on the subalterns can be traced back to Hindu caste system and the notion of untouchability that it harboured within itself.

According to the Varna system each varna has been designated specific profession to practise. The categorisation was aimed at meeting specific requirements of the society, like education, warfare, trade and commerce and since did not want to mess with their assigned job or profession, categorization was strictly followed. This classification on the basis of profession gradually gave rise to casting away the menial job holders to the outskirts of the village to avoid any possibility of getting polluted and eventually gave rise to the avarnas as the 'other'.

In Raju Das's *Ragging* the new comers in medical and engineering colleges are the 'others', who do not know the ways of life and hardships one has to go through in a hostel life. Having conditioned to a very comfortable life, children at the age of eighteen and nineteen have no idea of the real life outside the secured cocoon of their family life. So people like Neerupama identify such candidates as the 'others' as opposed to their own lives which they find more mature and trained to experience and handle any crisis in their life. Also, like the varna system through this difference they try to secure respect and honour as seniors in the eyes of their juniors.

The apathy of people like Neeru can be perceived in the way she tries to defend her practise of ragging without the ability to understand the

consequences of ragging. Neeru belonging to a snob, upper class section of the society fails to realise the mental and physical torture which give rise to a huge number of students' suicides and drop outs. Reema's mother brings out the tension and disturbance that ragging and its consequences on the family members of the victims of ragging. She represents total acceptance of their oppression, despite being aware of its consequences. Her timid desire to rebel against their hapless situation by providing education to her daughter is lost in the fear of losing her life. She is the victim of artificial fear created by upper caste people like Reema to keep higher education in the pockets of only a few; people belonging to the rich upper class. She exemplifies those subjugated subalterns who are ready to accept their subjugated position instead of challenging it. As a result, she is ready to denounce her dream of educating her daughter in the latest technology that would bring her new rays of light for better future, rather reports on ragging has made her believe, "this kind of education in engineering and medical field is not meant for girls of poor families. We should not even dream of these" (Das 23).

However, Jhuma, Neeru's classmate, idealises ragging and tries to make Roma Debi, Reema's mother, understand the need for better, higher and job-oriented education for people from poor, backward families. Instead of abandoning dreams of better future, she supports suffering that promises new beginning. She puts forward the opinions of her father who always defended suffering of the lower and under privileged sections of the society, consequent rebel and counter suffering for a new change. Thus she quotes her father and says, "You know aunt, my father says one section of the society for ages has been ragging another bigger section of the society, and the only way to liberate one from this is to have good higher education" (Das 23).

Reema, too is a bold and confident woman. She does not want to write the story of another underprivileged sufferer. Rather her confidence and enlightenment that she gained in few hours in college pushes her to fight against ragging and create a new world for herself and for other women like her. Thus, she resists her mother who insists

her to return home and promises saying, “No, no. I will fight against ragging. In the fear of ragging I don’t want to prove myself a defeated person. Rather I will fight against it. Myself. Jhuma and many others will rebel against it and change the society” (Das 3).

The pain of living at the margins, the agony of constantly becoming the victims of humiliation weaves all his major plays. Humiliation and embarrassment are common motifs that link all the characters in Raju Das’s plays. However, Raju Das’s characters are subjected to a humiliating and mortifying life for different reasons. If in *Mahesh* it is because of the minority religion of Islam that Gafur and Amina profess in a Hindu Brahmin village that they are discriminated and are constantly subjected to physical and verbal abuses, for Alok it is his illegitimate birth that makes him the ‘other’ in the society. Alodebi and Alok’s mother are doubly marginalized because of their gender and caste whereas Bani is subjected to triple layered marginalisation based on gender, caste and physical disability.

In *Ragging*, it is the same humiliation and the life of a deprived that drive Reema’s determination to pursue higher education against all odds to carve out a space for themselves, for people who are constantly the victims of the class-conscious society. Her fight is also against the patriarchal society that has always confines in the four walls of their houses. In the name of giving a better and secured life to the women, the more powerful men have always denied them the rays of light. She is all determined to fight not only ragging but also the patriarchal system that has strategized in many ways to keep the women from enlightenment and liberty. She sees the necessity for higher education only to liberate the society from its several mal practises like caste and gender discriminations for a better future.

Nirupama, in *Ragging*, is the representative of Brahminic tradition that scorns the lower castes pursuing education and would do all that is necessary to dissuade and ultimately stop them from having institutionalised education which is the first step towards self-enlightenment. However, Reema, her aunt and mother uphold Ramabai’s views on the importance of education to resist the

Brahminic tradition that scorns the lower castes and women from acquiring education to further their targets of suppressing and oppressing what they called the weaker section of the society.

Pandita Ramabai in her significant book, *Stree Purush Tula* observes that the only way of resisting the traditional upper-caste Hindu society which mandated pre-pubertal marriage and immediate post-pubertal consummation of marriage for girls and which denied education to women, both to stress their unprivileged status and to curb their freedom of communication was through female education. Reema's stoic patience to bear the mental and physical torture and humiliation and Pishima's fiery arguments against calculated moves of the Brahmanical society to deprive the Shudras from education echo Pandita Ramabai's belief that education of women is the key to their emancipation.

Nicely merged with the main text of emotional, physical and verbal abuse in the form of ragging of fresh college students, especially of the under privileged and downtrodden ones, Raju Das weaves in the subtext of exploitation of socio-economically and culturally upper middle-class girls in the confines of their home by their family members. The personal life of Neerupama within the confines of her rich, upper-class family is no less abusive than that of Reema in college. Both are helpless victims of their class and caste. If Reema is the victim of her situation because of her low social caste and economic position in the society, Neerupama's upper-class lineage with educated, cultured, affluent working parents subject her to an oppressive life that cannot even be perceived by an outsider in his/her wildest dreams. Through these two women characters, Reema and Neerupama, belonging to different social and economic class, Raju Das depicts exploitation of women in numerable ways that often lead to frustration and loneliness, feelings of dejection and insignificance as in Neerupama or humiliation and angst against socially rich upper caste people evident in Reema.

Raju Das makes a very beautiful but poignant observation that isolation, seclusion, loneliness, humiliation and dejection are some

experiences that people irrespective of social position suffer from and ragging is nothing but an outcome of this psychological discomfort. However, because class difference gives rise to powerful and powerless individuals, ragging that exists as a game between powerful and the powerless, often ends in subjugation of the powerless by the people in power. Surprisingly, *Ragging* does not fall in the beaten tracks; rather it depicts the rise of a rebel trying to protest against the set tradition of ragging of the newcomers by their seniors and vehemently establishes the fact that the oppressed are the greatest oppressors in the society.

Raju Das's creation of the character of Neerupama is one of close observation of the psychological workings of the oppressed people. Neerupama is a well-known figure when it comes to ragging the new entrants. She has an unnatural record of ragging highest number of students. She takes ragging as a game and rags students to break the drab monotonous hostel life. However, deftly hidden under Neerupama's image of an arrogant and violent oppressor is the silent victim of domestic abuses and violence. *Ragging*, thus, in Nirupama's life becomes an avenue of achieving new experience and new taste of life. However, behind her newly found engagement as an entertainment there lies a deep-seated lack in Nirupama's life that leads her to seek self-satisfaction and gratification through ragging.

In socio- psychological terms ragging is a manifestation of the sadistic and even masochistic nature of its practisers. The desire to achieve the most sought-after position of authority, camouflaging weaknesses or suppression and substitution of emotions can be some reasons of exercising ragging on others. In short, it aims at creating a position of domination and authority by the superior over the inferior. In postmodern context it also gives rise to binaries like dominant-subservient, advantaged-disadvantaged, strong-weak. Neerupama's habit of ragging and the expertise that she has achieved over a period, does prove her objective of ragging. Therefore, ragging for Neerupama, is not only teasing the newcomers or scaring and discouraging the under privileged children, but it is also a medium

that provides a scope to satisfy her sadistic desires of hurting others to compensate for her hurt ego.

Ragging besides depicting the negative impact of Education Reformation and far-reaching effects of caste system, also throws light on the negative impact of urban middle class working families. Neerupama is the only child of an urban educated, cultured and working couple. The highly stressed life of working couples in cities might lead to financial security but emotionally they are ruined. Neerupama's childhood had been that of a loner, with no company of family or friends. The only thing that gave her company from time to time was the nasty fights between her father and mother, their series of accusations and blame game. The disputes between the couples that would often become violent have left deep scars in the mind of Neerupama. Unconsciously hatred and disgust start developing in her sub conscious mind for all the educated, cultured and financially stable people who call themselves civilized. Devoid of love, affection and family ties she becomes the 'other' in her own family.

Through the context of ragging in colleges and universities, Raju Das makes a deliberate attempt to bring out ragging in human life that takes place at every stage of human life. Neerupama's present life is a consequence of her deprived childhood. Constantly been exposed to cruelty, humiliation and verbal abuses from a very tender age, Neerupama has grown up with a thirst for inflicting pain, humiliation and pain onto others. Thus, the sight of any new girl in the hostel reminds her of her busy working mother. The image of a mother in Neerupama's mind because of her childhood experiences is not a pleasant one. Rather, it is the image of a monstrous mother that rules her mind. Neerupama's abhorrence for a self-centric and busy working mother reflects the demand for an ideal mother as a loving, sacrificing, always available and stay-at-home that the patriarchy has constructed. Hence, ambitious and promising young girls remind her of monstrous mothers like her mother, who after giving birth to children will subject them to loneliness and a life devoid of love,

affection, care and sibling bonds. This in turn creates in her angst against the young women entrants and therefore deliberately subjects them to ragging to break their confidence and clip their wings of emancipation.

The condition of women that Raju Das depicts in his plays is an honest portrayal of the bare truth prevailing in a patriarchal society but often goes unnoticed. Women have always been doubly marginalized in a patriarchal society. The impact of caste and gender in a stratified society like India has hardly allowed women to enjoy her life as a woman. Her life is always pitched against measuring rods and yardsticks of ideal images and virtues. Raju Das, a sensitive Dalit as he was reached out to those very subtle issues that often go unnoticed but leave undeniable mark in the subjects' lives.

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Chapter 16

Feudalism: An Oppressive System of the Landed Rich

The height of subjugation and oppression, inexplicable human pain and suffering that the Dalits experience find its beautiful but touching artistic revelation in the depiction of Gafur and his pet bull, Mahesh in Raju Das's adapted play of the same name *Mahesh*. A wretched life of hopelessness and disillusionment that deny Alodebi, Bani, Reema and Khenti a beautiful, peaceful and integrated social life become one of unbearable humiliation and oppression that ultimately result in uprooting poor Muslim Peasant Gafur and her little daughter Ameena from their Hindu dominated village.

The play, *Mahesh*, is an adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya's short story of the same name. Through the abject poverty of its protagonist, Gafur Mia and his family, the play explores the interweaving of the dynamics of rural poverty that is escalated by the machinations of feudal system, represented by the feudal land lord, Shibu Babu and his associates in a caste based Hindu society. It addresses the double trouble of exploitative feudal system and the stigma of untouchability in a typical Hindu village. *Mahesh* is essentially a social play in which Raju Das has attempted to give an artistic expression to the sufferings of the under privileged in their confrontation with the powerful exploitative mechanism, which according to Samik Bandyopadhyay:

Operates beyond the law and with the tacit acquiescence of an exploited class held in thrall by a load of conventional role obligations. Legal reforms or legal defences or the exploited have rarely affected the exploitative mechanism sustained by the illiteracy/ignorance of the exploited. (xv)

The original story that was written at the backdrop of great famine that struck the land of Bengal, in the year 1943. Raju Das had restructured it in the form of a street theatre to address the extensive exploitation that Operation Barga¹⁹ or Land Reformation in West Bengal. Operation Barga was a land reform movement throughout rural West Bengal or recording the names of sharecroppers (bargadars) while avoiding the time-consuming method of recording through the settlement machinery. It bestowed on the bargadars the legal protection against eviction by the landlords, and entitled them to the due share of the produce. Operation Barga was launched in 1978 and concluded by the mid-1980s. It received legal backing in 1979 and 1980 and became a popular but controversial measure for land reforms. The aim of these land reforms was to facilitate the conversion of the state's bargadars into landowners (Biswas par. 4)

Mahesh reflects the pathetic situation of the victims of the Reformation, caught in a web of helpless resentment that had no means of expression but only widened the difference in the society as the rich grew richer and the poor poorer. Cast against such a reformative background, the play centres round a more empathetic than sympathetic bond between Mahesh, the bull and its poor owner, Gafur Mia. As it mirrors the exploitative feudal system prevalent in the society, it also reflects how the ideology of purity-pollution that produces a kind of total rejection and forms the crux of the discriminatory caste system, push the untouchables to the margins of social framework and render them “unseeable, unapproachable and untouchable” (Guru 212).

The story that revolves round Mahesh and Gafur Mia takes place in a village that is strongly feudal and stratified in its structure with

¹⁹ Operation Barga was a 1978 land reform initiative in West Bengal, India, designed to record the rights of sharecroppers (bargadars) and provide them with legal security against eviction by landowners. This program, implemented by the Left Front government, aimed to protect these farmers by officially recognizing their right to cultivate the land, which significantly improved their socio-economic conditions and boosted agricultural productivity.

Hindu Brahmin, Shibu Babu, as the zamindar. It is a complex social as well as rural reality which is uttered through the sufferings of Gafur under unbearable oppression of the zamindar's people in the village. The abject condition to which Gafur and his family consisting of his stoic daughter Ameena and his old but shockingly assertive and rebellious bull Mahesh are subjected to is the consequence of artificially created famine by the *jotedars* (wealthy peasants who formed a layer of social strata in the early 19th century agrarian Bengal) under a feudal zamindar head. The exploitative feudal system that extorts money from the poor farmers and endlessly makes them work under them to pay off the loans that they had taken from the zamindars' stands out as one of the major reasons for Gofur's suffering.

Gafur is only an example of many such poor peasants who were oppressed by calamities that were actually manmade than natural. These poor peasants lived their life under the burden of high debts that not only snatched away their peace of mind but also the humiliation and pain that they are inflicted to. The oppressed life of the socially under privileged people under exploitative feudal system forms the crux of Raju Das's play *Mahesh*.

Mahesh is a startling picture of the crippling effects of poverty, misery and untouchability on the long suffering and socially excluded section of the society. Gafur's unbearable poverty coupled with his religious minority in the Hindu village doubles his oppression in the village of Kashipur.

The discriminatory practices of a caste based stratified society in a feudal set up is best captured through the miserable life of Gafur. The decision of Gafur, who is by religion a Muslim, professing and practicing Islam, to have a shelter in a Hindu village, Kashipur, under the control of Brahmin feudal landlord becomes one of the most significant reasons for his pathetic plight. People of other religions are never treated at par with the Hindu peasants. Gafur like many other Ati Shudras is regarded as untouchable and therefore, his touch, even shadow is polluting. Hence, he is forced to have his residence

at the outskirts of the village. Full of detestation against the lowest of the lowest, Gafur, Tarakaratna warns him for his maltreatment of the holy animal, “This in a Hindu village. The zamindar is a Hindu. Do you remember that? ... you bastard do you know that if your bull dies, the landlord will punish you. He is a hardcore Hindu” (Das, *Mahesh* 16).

Coupled with Gafur’s religious minority, his decision to keep a bull for ploughing his small agricultural plot, but inability to feed it because of his poverty adds to his wretched condition. Though Gafur loves his pet bull, probably even little more than his daughter, yet his inability to provide its share of food at proper time becomes a heinous crime that can never avoid the eyes of the autocratic, Hindu zamindar and the equally exploitative men under him. He accuses Gafur of torturing the bull and warns him of the consequences if the bull dies of starvation. Therefore, he advises Gafur to take money from the zamindar’s aid fund as loan to feed the bull. However, when he asks some help from Tarkaratna as a loan to feed his bull he completely refuses to give it as Gafur does not have the means to repay. Instead, Tarkaratna, the zamindar’s confidante, out of anger, calls Gafur as an ‘atheist’ and ‘savage’ and warns him for inflicting pain on the bull, a religious symbol associated with Lord Shiva and gives him the ultimatum, “Take care of Mahesh. Don’t starve the innocent bull. Don’t forget you are living in a Hindu village!” (Das, *Mahesh* 3)

Gafur who is a non-Hindu resident in a Hindu village, therefore, is the eye sore of the villagers including Tarkaratna and the landlord. His presence anyway is unacceptable and owning a bull makes his position even more vulnerable. Hindu religion also believes that cows should never be given unto those whose residence they are likely to suffer from fire or sun. Cows should always be given away accompanied by their calves. (Swami Vedanta Varaha) Therefore, Tarakaratna alleges Gafur of attempting to kill Mahesh by starving it in the parched land in the heat of summer days. He feels it is his responsibility to rescue Mahesh from its abuser at the earliest and punish Gafur for his laxity in taking proper care of Mahesh. The

clever Brahmin, Tarakanath, by putting Gafur under the pressure of committing an unpardonable sin in Hindu village, exploits his helplessness to take the bull in his custody. His decision though motivated by his greediness, however, is not unacceptable in a Hindu society. Hence, the greedy Tarakaratna draws the inference that at least for the sake of religion Gafur should relinquish his desire of keeping Mahesh.

Ironically, the man who really loves Mahesh is accused of torturing and even killing it by keeping it away from its primary requirement, that is, a handful of fodder. The perpetual silence to which subjugated people like Gafur are pushed to do not even allow them to defend their position and therefore, though Gafur tries to explain to the authorities that the reason behind his failure to provide Mahesh with food and shelter, was his long sickness go unheard. Rather he is warned for his audacity of trying to defend himself before the higher authorities.

The power politics of caste and religion that is embedded in the silencing of the downtrodden is what Raju Das had tried to focus in this play through the depiction of muted love and interdependence of Gafur and Mahesh. Though Tarakaratna blames Gafur for ill-treating his Mahesh, he is very much aware of his unconditional love for Mahesh. Yet he turns a deaf ear and blind eye to their mutual love and understanding only to fan his hurt religious sentiment that a Muslim peasant should not even think of keeping a Hindu pious animal to serve his life as a peasant. To prove the irresponsibility of Gafur towards his Mahesh, the despotic Tarakaratna seizes Gafur's plan of striking a deal with the village butcher as a breach of religious belief and produces him to the zamindar to be punished.

The politics of caste and religion becomes glaring when Tarakaratna tries to capitalise on Gafur's decision to handover Mahesh to a local butcher and deliberately misinterprets his meek and benign decision of providing Mahesh a better caretaker who can provide him with fodder as a malicious hidden agenda and exploits it further to uproot him from their Hindu village. Tarakaratna's words are pregnant with

his intensions of capitalising religion to instil fear in Gafur and exploit him as much as possible, “You bastard Muslim! You are secretly trying to sell the bull to a Muslim butcher in a Hindu village? Do you know the consequences of such actions?” (Das, *Mahesh* 23)

However, Gafur’s social class and religion make his position in the Hindu village more vulnerable and victimise him in the land of Hindu Brahmin landlord. Though he tries his best to explain his good intention, his pleadings go unheard. Instead, the Hindu Zamindar and his associates take advantage of his situation to subject him to mental and physical torture to ultimately evict him from a predominantly Hindu village. The irony of religious discriminations that the guardians of religion delve into is that though the high caste Hindu people try to maintain a distance from non-Hindus and complain of their shadow as sinful leave no opportunity to physically assault him. Rather physically touching an untouchable and beating him to death is completely pardonable and justified on the grounds of seeking justice for an untouchable Hindu who defies religious ethos and domesticates a pious animal.

Caste discrimination that is completely based on the concepts of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ takes a more intensified picture as the villagers victimise Gafur and his daughter, Ameena, for being untouchables in a Hindu village. So much so that when Gafur is badly gasping for breath and Ameena strives to fetch some water for her almost dying father, the cruel, inhuman upper caste men and women at the well keep her waiting because of her polluting touch. Ameena is ordered to wait patiently at a distance till all of them finish fetching their quota of water so that her polluting shadow does not pollute their life saving water. Ameena, a meek, young girl, however, could show no resistance and follows their instructions obediently. The cruelty and hard-hearted inhuman nature of the villagers become more appalling when despite seeing the girl almost fainting while waiting in the scorching sun, did not feel pity for the girl. Ironically, when she manages to fetch water for her badly beaten father, Gafur,

their bull, attacks her with its horn, breaks the pitcher and spills the water to quench its own thirst.

Gafur's predicament as a victim of his fate, religion and class is also a testimony of the oppression that the exploitative feudal system breeds over its subjects. Raju Das's bold depiction of the cruel treatment of the untouchables by the upper castes also brings home the chain effect of torture and humiliation that the oppressed are subjected to. Gafur who was already a victim of injustice and cruelty of upper caste zamindar's men could not control his rage over his Mahesh when he comes to know that Mahesh had attacked Amina to quench his thirst for water. Out of uncontrollable rage he screams at Mahesh, "You unfaithful bull! You attacked my Amina to quench your thirst? Was it so unbearable?" (Das, *Mahesh* 23) and takes the wooden plough in his hands and starts hitting Mahesh at his head. Unable to bear the pain, in few minutes time Mahesh succumbs to death. An already existing victim of feudal oppression, Gafur, despite his ability to empathise with the deplorable condition of Mahesh, makes him the victim of his frustration, humiliation and rage. Mahesh's death adds another point to the list of charges that the zamindar has enlisted against Gafur. His uncontrollable rage digs his own grave and as a punishment for killing the pious animal he is finally excommunicated and ostracised from the village.

Through the case of Gafur, Sarat Chandra and later Raju Das present the unfortunate peasants who are always mysteriously trapped in a vicious circle of inescapable and ever-increasing debt, so much so that they do not even have the food to eat and to feed their pets. People like Tarakaratna and the Zamindar who are in position of power in society depend wholly on their subject, live a parasitic life; but in time of their need, nobody even pays pay attention to them. Religion and caste become the reasons for cornering them.

Gafur is a victim of his religion, caste and class in a Hindu village under a Brahmin feudal lord. Gafur is ignored as a human and reduced to inhuman state of living; sometimes even to that of things. His identity is at threat as people like him are not even addressed by

their names. Throughout the story, Gafur is called by different names like 'scoundrel', 'ape', 'callous' etc. Gafur's pitiable condition is not of any concern for his oppressors, because his existence is deliberately made invisible by the elite upper-class people. Thus, even when the emaciated Gafur, because of his prolonged sickness, fails to catch the attention of his oppressors, the Holy animal of the Hindus, Mahesh, becomes a matter of prime concern. Though the Hindu upper caste people in Shibu Babu's village manage to show fake sympathy for Mahesh, they remain completely oblivious of Gafur's wretched condition. The Hindu zamindar and his consorts, despite being able to help Gafur by waiving off his debt or reducing its rate, deliberately refrains from doing so. Rather, he exploits illiterate and poor people like Gofur for his convenience and selfish ends and forces him to continue with his debt. Ironically for a hypocrite Brahmin like Tarakanath, the wretched condition of the bull is more grave a concern than the miserable plight of the marginalized like Gafur. Instead, he is constantly reminded by Tarakaratna and very religious Manik Ghosh that he should take it as a priority to feed his Mahesh before feeding themselves.

Ameena too is the victim of religion, caste and class like her father. But in addition to it she is the victim of her gender too. Her life as an untouchable Muslim girl is doubly marginalized and she is prey to all forms of oppression both at home and in the society. In the absence of her mother, as a girl child she is thrust with all the responsibilities of Gafur's household. Ameena is the victim of her father's wrath and frustration as well. When after returning from work, he finds no water and rice to eat, her body becomes the site for Gafur to vent his frustration stemming from their poverty. He blames and beats her for not cooking anything for him but immediately repents for his cruel behaviour towards his daughter.

In Gafur's interaction with Ameena, Gafur unconsciously tries to assert his supremacy over Ameena, though he is a subaltern in the village. Gafur represents what Connell calls the hegemonic masculinity and it is reflected in the dominant position of men and

the subordination of women, and furthermore, the dominant position of certain men over other men. Connell defines such marginalisation as “the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups” (80-1). As a subaltern, he is a kind and loving father who blames himself as an inefficient father who failed to give the primary requirements of food, clothing and shelter to his daughter Ameena and his ‘son’, Mahesh. But as a representative of hegemonic masculinity, the other facade of Gafur comes out in his ill treatment of his daughter and later even in killing his subordinate companion, Mahesh.

Ameena had been an indirect victim of gender discrimination by her mother as well. Though Ameena was immensely loved by her mother, she had been the reason of her mother’s depression and distress after her birth. Listening to their pet bird that continuously assured Ameena’s mother that she would have a son, her birth brought failed to bring any joy in her mother’s life. Though Ameena’s mother was aware of her responsibilities as a mother of Ameena and was never devoid of love and concern for the wellbeing of her daughter, yet the burden of a girl child along with their abject poverty introduced into her life lifelong companies of frustration and depression.

Such is the plight of the poor and untouchables in feudalistic caste conscious villages that many a times these poor people like Gafur and his family would die out of hunger or unavailability of medicines and care. Ameena’s mother was subjected to same apathetic treatment by the society when she was suffering from ‘kalajaar, an epidemic fever that claimed many lives. She had not only failed to have treatment because of their utter poverty but also had nothing to eat during her illness. Gafur’s helplessness and guilt for his failure to support his wife during her last few days show how the farmers like Gafur had to survive. Though he had a few small patches of land and a couple of cows as his property, yet he failed to provide treatment to his wife for the sole reason that all his lands and cattle were

mortgaged with the zamindar to pay off his loans that he had taken from the Zamindar.

Oppression always gives birth to protest. Both Gafur and Mahesh rebel against their oppressor to protest their exploitation. Gafur silently reacts to the inhuman ways of the zamindar and his feudal system. For once, Gafur gathers all courage to break the silence and protests the punishment pronounced against him. Gafur's retaliation to Shibcharan babu and Tarakaratna's punishment of excommunication however shows the sincere courage and commitment of Gafur, a Dalit, to assert his right to live in the village. Gafur's search of justice gives him the strength to bear inhuman lynching in the hands of the feudal lord and his people but not to submit to their demand of leaving the Hindu village for his allegedly impious act of torturing a bull by not feeding it.

Even Mahesh stands against all those Hindu villagers who claim to revere and safeguard it as a Holy animal. Mahesh rebels against the zamindar's confidante, Manik Ghosh and all those who in a famine struck Hindu village left not a single patch of land for it to graze. Mahesh as a protest move forced itself into others' cultivated lands and ate their vegetables and fruits to satisfy its long unbearable hunger. Mahesh gores Manik Ghosh for complaining against him to Gafur. Like Gafur, his master, Mahesh not only boldly stands against his tormentors but also goes an extra mile and even challenges its own master by attacking Ameena with its horns to quench its thirst. Through their combined efforts to show complete disapproval of their inexplicable oppression and exploitation, Raju Das depicts an organised assertion of the oppressed to mobilise themselves out of the vicious atmosphere of systematic and structured inhuman treatment and abuse by the privileged sections of the society, what can be recognised as "shared democratization of oppression" (Sandoval 33).

The unfathomable suffering, mild resistance and even a slow rebel that is visible in the play, however, do not give rise to the victory of the sufferers against their tormentors. Raju Das does show that

sometimes the burden of caste and religion is too heavy to find justice and poor Gafur's case is an apt example of the same. Therefore, the relentless fight of the socially marginalised is often forced to silent acceptance of their fate.

In the play Gafur and his Mahesh did fight boldly against the exploitative feudal system yet one's life, yet they lose in this perpetual game of power. Mahesh succumbing to his injuries loses the battle by dying and Gafur accepts his defeat by leaving the village with his daughter. But the pain with which he leaves the village at the dead of night can be understood through his loud scream and his last few words that he uttered addressing Allah, "Punish me as much as you can- but remember, Mahesh died with his hunger and thirst. Not a tinniest bit of land was left for him to graze. Pray, never forgive those, who denied Mahesh the grass to eat, water to drink, which you provided for all on this earth" (Das, *Mahesh* 24).

Raju Das as a Dalit playwright deals with Dalit concerns, their pathetic situation and living conditions in their inhuman world. But it is the physical state of Dalits that he deals with. Mentally, his characters are far from being Dalits. The greatness of his characters lies in their self-awareness as in Bani in *Neel Selam* and Alok in *Surjo Tonoy*, in their desire to move out of their wretched condition as in Reema in *Ragging* and the relentless fight against their lost self-esteem and dignity of their existence is a universal presence in all his characters.

Gafur as a Dalit character transcends his physical and economical position as a Dalit and manifests his broad mindedness in accepting his greatest mistake of his life, unintended of killing Mahesh, as a sin. As soon as he realises the heinous crime that he committed by killing Mahesh, he accepts his sin. As an act of atonement he does not even take his belongings that consisted of few utensils and household things that he had in his small hut. Rather, repenting for his impulsive act that took away the life of his loving, Mahesh, he says:

Let us not take those household things as a penance for the crime I committed by killing my Mahesh. (*Turns back while walking out of their courtyard and breaks down crying*) he screams and cries out to Allah, Give me punishment as much as you want. But my Mahesh has died with his thirst. All those who have always resisted him from quenching his thirst let them be punished forever. Never forgive them, never, never! (Das, *Mahesh* 24)

The playwright Raju Das through his spokesperson Gafur had successfully depicted the horrendous systemic oppression and humiliation that the socially under privileged go through in a society that is based on the social structures of caste, class and religion. Through the play Raju Das had also attempted to move the ignorant lot to challenge the feudal exploitative system that becomes even more appalling when it follows caste and class discrimination.

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Chapter 17

Towards a Living Aesthetic of Resistance

This book set out to examine Dalit aesthetics in Bengal not as a derivative or supplementary category within Indian literary and theatrical traditions, but as a radical epistemological framework rooted in lived experience, collective memory, and embodied resistance. Through a sustained engagement with the plays of Raju Das, the study has demonstrated how Dalit theatre in Bengal emerges from histories of caste oppression, displacement, labour, and humiliation, while simultaneously forging new aesthetic languages capable of articulating dissent, survival, and hope.

Raju Das's theatre resists conventional dramaturgical norms and bourgeois aesthetic expectations by foregrounding minimalism, raw emotionality, and the expressive capacities of the Dalit body. His plays do not seek aesthetic pleasure in harmony or resolution; instead, they cultivate discomfort, rupture, and ethical confrontation. Silence, fragmented dialogue, repetitive gestures, and the strategic use of space operate not merely as theatrical devices but as political statements that expose the structural violence embedded within everyday social relations. In this sense, Raju Das reclaims theatre as a site of testimony—where pain is neither aestheticized nor sentimentalised but rendered visible as historical truth.

The analysis has also shown that Dalit aesthetics in Bengal is deeply intertwined with folk performance traditions, oral narratives, and community memory. Rather than treating folk forms as static cultural artefacts, Raju Das reactivates them as living archives of resistance. Songs, chants, bodily rhythms, and collective movements disrupt the dominance of written texts and elite theatrical conventions, thereby challenging Brahmanical modes of cultural production. This performative reliance on orality and corporeality underscores the fact

that Dalit aesthetics is not merely representational but experiential—produced through participation, proximity, and shared vulnerability.

Importantly, this book has argued that Dalit aesthetics cannot be reduced to thematic representations of suffering alone. While suffering remains central, it is inseparable from acts of defiance, humour, irony, and moral refusal. Raju Das's characters, even in moments of extreme marginalisation, assert their agency by refusing silence, by occupying public space, and by unsettling dominant narratives of social order. His theatre thus envisions resistance not as heroic spectacle but as everyday persistence—a slow, collective struggle inscribed in bodies and voices long denied legitimacy.

In mapping the contours of Dalit aesthetics in Bengal, this study has also contributed to a broader rethinking of Indian theatre historiography. It challenges the marginal placement of Dalit performance within academic discourse and calls for its recognition as a foundational component of modern and contemporary theatre in the region. The plays of Raju Das compel scholars, practitioners, and audiences alike to reconsider entrenched notions of aesthetics, politics, and spectatorship, urging a shift from detached appreciation to ethical engagement.

Ultimately, Dalit aesthetics, as articulated through Raju Das's theatrical praxis, is seen as a dynamic and unfinished project—one that evolves in response to changing social realities while remaining anchored in the struggle for dignity and justice. It is an aesthetics that refuses closure, mirroring the ongoing nature of Dalit resistance itself. By foregrounding the voices, bodies, and memories of the oppressed, this book hopes to affirm Dalit theatre in Bengal not merely as a cultural expression but as a vital political force—one that continues to reimagine the possibilities of theatre, community, and freedom.

Snippets from an Interview with Raju Das

At his daughter's residence in Pune, August 2018.

Not much moved with his insignificant space in Dalit writing, Raju Das's only aim was to make an inspirational contribution to the masses in both urban and rural Bengal, through his writings and performances of his plays as street theatre. He pronounces his main objective as a playwright to see the underprivileged waking up to his clarion call to rebel and fight for their rights. In this context an interview with Dalit dramatist Raju Das aims to know the different facets of Dalit experiences that he had as a child and a refugee in West Bengal refugee camps as well as a Dalit writer and social activist. The interview also attempts to find out his observations and opinions on the slow growth and development of Bengali Dalit literature and the challenges that he faces as a dramatist.

MM. The name Raju Das, a Bengali Dalit playwright, is a new name that is making a space in Dalit writing in West Bengal. How would you like to introduce yourself?

RD: I am honoured to know that I have been able to make some space in Dalit writing in Bengal, among the writers and research scholars. However, believe me, my intention is not to have a name and recognition as a Dalit playwright. Rather I want to make my space in the heart and soul of the Dalits, the underprivileged and marginalized ones and bring a change in them. Since as a Dalit writer I write on Dalit issues and their love for me motivates me to continue with my writing, I would love to introduce myself as a "Dalit writer, for the Dalits, of the Dalits, by the Dalits. My experiences as a Dalit are as same as of the Dalits I am writing. My only motive is to bring a fruitful change in the condition of the Dalit community.

MM. You are originally from Bangladesh, the then East Bengal. When did you migrate to West Bengal?

RD: During the riot in 1964, my family at the darkness of night left our native place, Ramnagar, a small place in Dhaka district in Bangladesh with a few belongings in the form of 'Potlis' and moved towards the present West Bengal in the hope of some shelter.

MM. Will you please share your memories of Bengal partition that upsets you even now?

RD: I was not a witness to the first partition of Bengal. I was not even born then. During the second Bengal partition, in 1971-72, as a victim of the then religious unrest, my family that consisted of my mother and two sisters, one elder and the other younger, and myself migrated out of current Bangladesh in search of a place to live. During my stay there I have been a witness to many Hindus and Dalits been put on fire forcefully, have seen series of lives taken away by firing. I have also seen the plight of helpless women and children, pulled out of their homes, beaten on the streets; some even raped in public and left on the streets. I have also seen thousands of Dalits becoming homeless and driven by fear and helplessness, how they joined and blindly followed the homeless Hindus to West Bengal as refugees. All these events are still very much alive in my mind. These events have grown roots in my mind in such a way, that I could think of nothing but the inhuman treatment of the humans in the partition of states. This mental unrest had achieved a literary expression in one of my first dramas, a one act drama, *Shapath Nilam (I take a Promise)* in 1971 that later on was staged on several occasions and was very well received.

MM. As a native of East Bengal and a Dalit, you might have had a varied range of experiences. How do you think these experiences might have changed the course of your life?

RD: My childhood in East Bengal had a series of bitter experiences, experiences that have always left me clueless. Brahmins, Kayasthas and Karmakars would keep Namasudras like us always at arms distance. They would neither allow us to enter their houses nor would they enter into ours. If ever we asked for water, no tumbler was used.

Rather they would pour water into our joined cupped fists. If ever we were invited for any function or ceremony, we Dalits had to sit separately in the courtyard. But since the time I have migrated to West Bengal, I have not seen any more such humiliating days. Now I have many Brahmin and other upper caste friends, neighbours, and acquaintances but such awful, embarrassing, and humiliating experiences are not there.

MM. Any memory of your Dalit childhood that has significantly influenced your thoughts, opinions and perspective of life and bears its reflection in any of your dramas or other writings?

RD: As a child we were made very aware of our caste. We were known by our Caste, not as individuals. Caste distinctions were very strong and the only thing that ruled our existence was “we belong to lower castes; they are of higher castes.”

MM. Who or what has influenced and brought you into the world of writing?

RD: A lot of my school days have been spent in the company of my uncle and aunties (Pishima) and even my elder brother, who were all book worms and voracious readers. They imbibed in me the habit of reading and i gradually developed the flair of writing short stories. Besides this, in 1965 Sudipto Chakraborty introduced me to the philosophy of Marx and Lenin. Marxism and Leninism opened my eyes to the vast gap between the rich and poor, the haves and have not. Probably this sowed the seeds of writing on social issues in me.

MM. Bengali Dalit Literature, no doubt has not yet been able to reach the height of success that other regional Dalit literature has done and therefore, Dalit drama seems to be even more at a budding stage and quite ignored. What is your objective on the same? Yet what inspired you to take this medium for propagating the cause of Dalit issues?

RD: In every culture, drama has proved to be a successful medium for raising social awareness and consciousness. So too is the scene in

Bengal as well. However, due to lack of well organised funds and proper financial support, Dalit drama is suffering.

I have grown up in a family where from my childhood I have been exposed to drama. My father and elder brother had great inclination for acting and would take up acting whenever there were opportunities in our village. Later on, I started getting hooked to listening radio plays which helped me realise the significance of drama in creating social and cultural awareness. However, the biggest influence on me had been the group theatres of Left Government. I had always been sincere and very attentive audience of any group theatre and gradually realised the significant role of drama and it can be regarded as the turning point in my life.

MM. As an active Dalit playwright and performer most of your work centre round women, besides other issues. All your works are with the aim of empowering women, have you achieved what you set out for?

RD: I believe and quite proud to differ from what Manu thinks of women. Quoite. My women are not the silent, timid suffers. But I strongly believe that they possess the real potential to bring a change. Alodebi, Bani, Khenti, Reema, Pishima are my strong women characters who are my spokespersons. In fact, in my personal life too I feel the contribution of my wife, Namita towards a positive change in the Dalit condition both at home and outside had been immense. Through my women characters I want to prove women are not shudranis as Manu believed and the hegemonized groups propagate but they are the most powerful and active agents of social and cultural change.

MM. Many of your plays actively voice out lapses of the state machineries and allegations against mainstream political parties an that they never make moves to redress the issues in a proactive manner. What, according to you, is the heart of this matter?

RD: The answer is very simple – the main stream political parties and organizations have been well-fed by the hegemonized groups.

All of them exploit the marginalised and the minorities to meet their objectives. They make empty promises to win elections and then turn against the marginalized. Instead of allowing the voiceless to voice out their demands, the people in power buttress the more powerful hegemonized groups to silence the marginalized forever. My plays like *Neel Selam* and *Ragging* are an attack on the flawed educational systems of the hegemonized government that indirectly wanted to keep the Dalits from the light of knowledge. Even *Kolonko* is another example of the cruelties of Government against the refugees, especially the low caste refugees taking shelter in Sundarban areas.

MM. As a Dalit writer, probably many of your thoughts and opinions are like other Dalit writers. How would you compare yourself with other Dalit dramatists? What makes your contribution to Dalit literature unique?

RD: You have placed a very good question. Your observation is also correct. As a Dalit, my stream of thoughts may be same as the other Dalit writers. But most of them exhibit a more polished approach in expressing their alit concerns and opinions. Their accomplishments of course can be attributed to their higher education from which I am forever deprived. In fact, even after five attempts I have not been able to pass matriculation examination. The quality and style of my writing will reflect this lack. I have worked as a watchman at night for years after years and pulled a rickshaw for several hours in a day to earn a livelihood. Therefore, the pain and sufferings that are expressed in my writing come from within; it has a personal touch, which I doubt can be found in others' work. My work might lack the finesse of more educated Dalit writers, but it is an honest depiction of my pain and suffering, my endless struggle that not only I have gone through but many untouchables like me have experienced and are still going through these traumatic experiences. I am sure this makes my work a unique one compared to other Dalit writers. I do not think any other Dalit dramatist has ever written so many dramas for stage performance like me. In this the contribution of my co-actors, especially my wife, Smt. Namita Das, is worth mentioning. I

would have never achieved the objectives of my life as a Dalit dramatist without the support that my wife constantly provided for 41 years. She is the main driving force behind my success as a Dalit dramatist and the recognition that my drama unit, *Shantikunj*, has received. I am pretty sure nobody has ever tried to stage struggles of a Dalit existence with physically handicapped actors. I take pride to tell that it is only me who has dared to stage a drama on the struggles of Dalit with 14-15 blind and other physically handicapped actors.

MM. In *An Autobiography of a Rickshawpuller* you have captured your experiences, feelings, and opinions as a Dalit refugee. What really motivated you to try your hand in writing an autobiography?

RD: The series of experiences that pushed me to the margins and my constant efforts to counter this gave rise to my autobiography. Yes, it was a deliberate attempt to try writing an autobiography. The main objective of it was to gauge my contribution in countering the dominant forces of the Brahmanical society that writes our marginality as well as to inspire and motivate my Dalit fellowmen to draw inspiration from my life story and stand against their exploitation.

MM. You are a Dalit and you write about Dalit issues and problems. Do you think because of your Dalit status you have not been able to achieve the recognition and success that you should have received as a dramatist?

RD: In a span of six decades, i.e. from 1969 till date I have written 50 short stories, 73 dramas (all published) on the miserable plight of Dalits and their everyday struggle. Therefore, I think that even if I have not received recognition and success as a Dalit short story writer, I have been well received and earned quite a success as a Dalit dramatist and Dalit actor. My Drama unit, *Shantikunj*, is evidence of my success as a Dalit dramatist. Of course, I have received recognition from the Dalit population that have seen my dramas and read my plays. It includes Dalit people from both rural areas as well as urban ones. My dramas reflect Dalit consciousness very strongly

and that is what pulls Dalit readers for my written work and audiences for my stage performances and has given me continuous success for more than 45 years. I am the only one Dalit dramatist and performer who with whole family have been continuously putting up shows on Dalit issues to create awareness and consciousness. Probably it is only me who have staged dramas on the lives and contribution of eminent leaders and missionaries of Dalit cause like Savitribai Phule, Jyotirao Phule, Dr. Ambedkar, Sri Harichand Thakur and his son Sri Guruchand Thakur, Jogendranath Mondal, Birsha Munda at different places like Nagpur, Patna, Gaya, Ranchi and even in Mumbai. This month we have a performance in Pune and then in Kurushetra. I have even worked with 14- 15 blind and physically handicapped actors on stage to create awareness about the pathetic situation of these people.

MM. Who are the other Dalit dramatists whom you think are your strong contenders?

RD: Bengali Dalit dramatist Sri Samudra Biswas (has almost 30-40 dramas in credit), Sri Nakul Mallick (8-10 dramas), Sri Kapil Krishna Thakur (6 dramas), Smt. Manju Bala (1 drama) Smt. Sritikana Hawaldar, Jatin Bala and Manohar Biswas are some of the dramatists who have made significant contribution in this field. Others who have written in other magazines and journals are Namita Das, Harshavandan Choudhury, Sunil Das, Pranogobindo Biswas, Amal Kumar Mondal, Satyaranjan Rai, Basanta Mondal. Dalit revolutionary writer and leader Surendranath Sikdar have staged five dramas in Mumbai and the best part is that almost all of their dramas are published individually by their respective authors in anthologies.

MM. How would you like to describe the relationship between Dalit writers and publishers, especially in Kolkata?

RD: Dalit writers are 'Dalits' and therefore they are relegated to the margins of even in the field of writing and publication. The publishers in Kolkata do not entertain minor Dalit writers like me. Even the more established Dalit writers have failed to get their work published from renowned publishers in Kolkata. We Dalit writers

publish our work at our own cost from a publishing unit called *Chaturtha Duniya* established by Dalit writers in Kolkata.

MM. What are your views on state patronage for culture?

RD: Of course, state patronises culture and that is why Kolkata has a rich heritage of culture and tradition. However, only the culture of hegemonized group is recognised as a true culture.

MM. What is your analysis of the media all over the world about their responses against the atrocities levelled against the marginalized and the minorities?

RD: Media plays fiddle to the reigning government. It is quite sad but a hard-core truth that media has become a puppet in the hands of a ruling government. It does cover atrocities against marginalized and minorities, but most of the time it is coloured in different shades of half-truths or truths hidden to cater to government interests.

MM. Literary Critics are of the opinion that Bengali Dalit Movement and literature is in its nascent stage. What is your opinion on the same?

RD: In a Dalit conference in Hyderabad a very renowned critic had mentioned that in the state of West Bengal neither Dalit movement nor any literature specialising on Dalit life is existing. Against this observation Meenakshi Mukherjee in an article named, 'Dalit Literature in Bengal', published in Economic and Political Weekly wrote about Dalit movement in Bengal and it also mentioned about the non-elite Dalit, Raju Das. It is then that critics and sociologists came to know about its spread. After this I came into the observation of a reputed researcher Dr. Rajesh Karankal, Professor in the University of Mumbai, who introduced me to you and gradually other researchers and writers like Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, Dr. Pragyadevi Chatterjee and many more.

Despite all these literatures on Dalit writing on Bengal, of course, there are critics who still believe Bengali Dalit literature is in nascent stage. I must say they have not yet read one of the seminal books on

Bengali Dalit literature and writers called *History of Hundred Years of Dalit literature* (Shoto Barsher Dalit Sahitya), otherwise they would have not commented like this. This comment reflects their lack of knowledge on Bengali Dalit literature. Or it can be they do not want to know about us or despite knowing, do not want to discuss about us. Besides this I must also confess it is our weak publicity that has kept it in the shadow of Dalit literature developed in other states. The major reason behind this weak publicity is of course our lack of proper financial support.

Moreover, technology based you tube can also provide further information on Dalit writing in Bengal. I request all to refer to *Dalit Literature and Dramatists in Bengal* on you tube that can provide immense information on more than 367 Dalit writers and their books. I also strongly feel that Bengali Dalit writers lack unity which is strongly felt in Maharashtra and that is why the latter are more organized in approach and can make a strong impression on public in general.

MM. How do you conceive the future of Bengali Dalit drama?

RD: Bengali Dalit drama is not too far from reaching the height of its success. The influence of Dalit drama on the Dalit community especially, the rural folks, is visible in its transition from silent suffers to one who show the courage to demand for their legitimate right of equal treatment as humans. However, I feel that contributions from urban, educated Dalits can help to accelerate the process of creating awareness in the Dalit community as well as Dalit drama.

MM. Your journey from Bangladesh to West Bengal as a Dalit refugee rickshawpuller in the evening and a grade four staff with Airport Authority to that of a Dalit playwright, activist and performer had been a long and of varied experience. How do you see this transition?

RD: Yes, my journey had been long but it is not yet complete. I would like to quote the famous line of Robert Frost, “And miles to go before I sleep.” My life’s journey will be complete only when the society

will be rid of social evils like caste-based discrimination and all will have justice and equality irrespective of caste, creed, and gender.

MM: Thank you, Mr. Raju Das, for taking out time for this interview session. It had been an enlightening session indeed.

RD: Thank you to you as well for considering me for this interview.

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