

# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REMEMBERING:

## MEMORY AS RESISTANCE IN BENGALI DALIT WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

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### INTRODUCTION

My people in Nandigram, in Singur;  
The deceased in Marichjhapi,  
I can do little but sit home,  
Wet my pillow with tears.<sup>1</sup>

I was invited to attend the Second Conference of the Paschimbanga Dalit Sahitya Academy (West Bengal Dalit Literature Academy) at Nildarpan Auditorium, Bongaon on January 3, 2021. It was organized by the Ministry of Information and Culture, Government of West Bengal. On January 3, 2021 Manoranjan Byapari, who is the eminent Bengali Dalit Writer and the President of Paschimbanga Dalit Sahitya Academy, defines Bengali Dalit Literature as Protirodher Sahitya (Literature of Resistance). In this paper, I aim to discuss how the notion of memory works as a tool of resistance and shapes the narratives of Dr. Puspa Bairagya and Kalyani Thakur Charal in the Partitioned Bengal. These narratives not only concentrate on the neglected history of Bengal, but also provide an overview of the Bengali Dalit Women's Literature.

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<sup>1</sup> K.T. Charal, "The Opportunists Steal Your Thunder," in: K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta (eds.), *Dalit Lekhika: Women's Writings from Bengal* (Kolkata: STREE, 2020), p. 134.

## I

Born on March 19, 1964 at Dharampur of Nadia (India) and educated at Kalyani University, West Bengal, Dr. Puspā Bairagya joined Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College as a lecturer on July 1, 2005. As a Dalit writer, Dr. Bairagya has received Sarala Singha Padak (Sarala Singha Award) from Bangladesh in 2018. She is a representative writer of Bangla Dalit Sahitya (Bengali Dalit Literature) and, together with Gopal Biswas, the editor of the literary journal *Surya*. She has done her doctoral degree on “Kabiganer Dharay Bijoy Sarkar” in 2004. What is interesting, she was the first person who completed her PhD in this area.

“The word ‘Dalit’,” as Raj Kumar writes, “is a political term which symbolises the relatively new identity of a group of people who were earlier known as ‘untouchables.’”<sup>2</sup> To quote Professor Kumar again:

Untouchability is a deeply ingrained consequence of the caste system and is an unacceptable and hurtful social practice. It was abolished when the Indian Constitution came into effect in 1950. In spite of its legal abolition, untouchability continues to be practiced in different forms and degrees in almost all parts of India even today. Thus, the term ‘Dalit’ clearly suggests that caste as a social system is still prevalent in India.<sup>3</sup>

In “Dalit Literature and Dalit Identity,” S.P. Punalekar has focused on the emergence of the Dalit Panthers, the Mass Movement, the Bahujan Mahasangh, the Bahujan Samaj Party, Dalit identity assertion, Dalit literature, and others:

Dalit writers themselves are either victims of or witness to social inequities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political, and cultural organisations of Dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and often use literature as a vehicle to propagate their view on Dalit identity and the prevailing social consciousness. Dalit literature does not constitute a homogeneous or unified entity. There are divergent currents and tendencies.<sup>4</sup>

The works of Bengali Dalit women writers were rejected by the mainstream publishers. That is why *Chaturtha Duniya* was founded by the Bengali Dalit writers:

Chaturtha Duniya, the main voice of the Dalit Sahitya Sanstha, is the only publication that has, at various points of time, given an opportunity to Dalit writers and has included writings of Dalit women from Bengal and Tripura.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the caste discrimination, Kalyani Thakur Charal comments:

In Bengal, caste discrimination is concealed under the shroud of class discrimination—as a result, obliterating casteism is well-nigh impossible. However, some efforts have been made at various points of time to alter the

<sup>2</sup> R. Kumar, *DALIT LITERATURE AND CRITICISM* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2019), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> S.P. Punalekar, “Dalit Literature and Dalit Identity,” in: *Dalit Identity and Politics: CULTURAL SUBORDINATION AND THE DALIT CHALLENGE 2*, ed. G. Shah (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), pp. 214–215).

<sup>5</sup> K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 15.

equation, sometimes under the guise of communalism, and at other times on the lines of gender discrimination. Various little magazines and tabloids have raised the issue over the last decade or so, though very faintly. The more important of these include *Atoeb*, *Chaturtha Duniya*, *Adal Badal*, *Dalit Kontho*, *Neer Ritupatra*, *Ekhon Tokhon*, *Janajagaran*. *Atoeb* has published a fair number of writings by Dalit women although the quality of the writings has been less than consistent. What is worth noting is that these magazines motivate and encourage women to write.<sup>6</sup>

On November 21, 2020, during the First Conference of Paschimbanga Dalit Sahitya Academy held at Sisir Mancha, Kolkata, Puspa Bairagya declared: “We are Dalits and we are oppressed. Dalits are oppressed due to their caste identity.”<sup>7</sup> Bairagya, a feminist Dalit poet, is a Namasudra woman from West Bengal. Her famous poem “Panigrahan” attempts to criticize the patriarchal society where women are commodified in the marriage-market. She is also a social activist. In 2005, she was invited to recite her poems at Raj Bhavan, Kolkata (and she recited two of them). The Governor at the time was Gopal Krishna Gandhi. One of her poems is “Nari-Prakriti” which has been admired by the famous Bengali poet Nirendranath Chakraborty.

Realizing the need to mention the neglected history of Bengali Dalit women, Puspa Bairagya tries to highlight the troubled history of Bengal and records her life-experiences in “Chinnomul Doridro Dalit Poribarer Meyer Bere Otha” (“Growing Up as a Dalit Woman in the Refugee Family”). Bairagya’s narrative offers a detailed history of the internal and external struggle of Namasudra community in the Partitioned Bengal.

In *Memory in Culture*, Astrid Erll has discussed Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of ‘inter-generational memory’ as she puts it: “Family memory is a typical intergenerational memory. This type of collective memory is constituted through social interaction and communication.”<sup>8</sup> Puspa Bairagya’s parents migrated to India from Bangladesh. Originally, they were the inhabitants of Hatbaria village, Jessore (Bangladesh). In the narrative, the writer recollects her childhood:

The year was 1970. My age was five. Anarchy had already begun in the East and West. The Pakistani Army Razakars had indulged in mass-killing indiscriminately. All the members of my Chotopisi’s family were lined up and shot by the Razakars.<sup>9</sup>

The memory of a traumatic event, which is not found in the textbooks, is revived through Bairagya’s narrative. Many critics are of the opinion that lots of Hindu women were raped by the Razakars. They also claim that most of the raped women were Dalits. Puspa Bairagya’s narrative informs her readers that her village, Dharampur (India), was filled with Muslim Refugees. Halbwachs encapsulates that “general history starts only when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up.”<sup>10</sup> We must remember that the Freedom-fighters attempted to resist the brutal oppression of the Razakars in Bangladesh. It is to be noted that Bairagya’s uncle Binoy Krishna Biswas, who is a highly educated person, was a Freedom-fighter. He receives his pension from the Government of Bangladesh even today.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> P. Bairagya, *Interview*, by P. Mondal (2020).

<sup>8</sup> A. Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. S.B. Young (UK: Palgrave Macmillan Private Limited, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> P. Bairagya “Chinnomul Doridro Dalit Poribarer Meyer Bere Otha,” *Neer Ritupatra*, 18 (2017), p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. F.J. Ditter, V.Y. Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 78.

As her narrative unfolds, we come to know that Puspa Bairagya has focused on various Namasudra rituals like Hyachra Pujo, Kulo Namano, Gasyi Broto which are performed by Namasudra women. Being a Namasudra woman herself, Bairagya plays an active role in these rituals. Her narrative suggests that the Goddess of Panchra is Hyachra and the Goddess was worshipped with wildflowers in the dawn and evening. Bairagya used to enlighten the candles in the morning. They were placed in the corners of her house, temple, and pond. Raj Kumar observes:

The autobiographer tries to make up the forgotten past by inventing things which suit the narration. Thus, the emergence of a self in autobiography is the making of the author. It is quite interesting that out of infinite topics the narrator has choices to choose anything and everything he/she likes. Of course, it is natural that the narrator selects those episodes of his/her life which fit into his/her intended project.<sup>11</sup>

Following the Matua Dharma (Matua Religion), Puspa Bairagya's marriage ceremony was conducted by the Matua priests, Mrinal Gosai and Basudev Bal, in 1991. Her narrative makes it clear that Bairagya's family rejected a Brahmin priest, thus challenging Brahminical hegemony in the Partitioned Bengal.

Reviewing "Chinnomul Doridro Dalit Poribarar Meyer Bere Otha" Kartik Choudhary in *Yuba Shakti* (dated October 17, 2020) has pointed out that Puspa Bairagya had faced many difficulties in her life, but she never loses her self-respect. Bairagya exposes the hypocrisies of Indian caste system in her narrative. She started her first job as an assistant teacher in Maldanga Rajendra Memorial Institution Higher Secondary School, Burdwan. She became a victim of the caste system in the school as her colleagues started abusing her due to her Dalit identity. When she joined at Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College, she questioned the authority regarding the quota system as the College did not follow the rules of SC/ST quota during the admission. In fact, the College had no SC/ST cell at all. The authority not only humiliated Bairagya, but also delayed her promotion. In her interview, Puspa Bairagya is explicit in this matter:

When I was alone fighting against the injustice, no colleague supported me. The principal constantly insulted me. That time I was traumatized. I had to consult Dr. Amitabha Mukherjee who is a famous psychiatrist in Kolkata. I am taking the medicines. Now I am writing my own story. I am better.<sup>12</sup>

For Caruth, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> R. Kumar, *DALIT PERSONAL NARRATIVES: READING CASTE, NATION AND IDENTITY* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> P. Bairagya, *Interview...*, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

## II

Keeping in view the focus of this paper, I would like to turn my attention to Puspa Bairagya's association with the Matua Movement. She devoted herself to the Matua community and echoed Harichand Thakur's teachings in her narratives. Bairagya's parents, Dhirendranath Bairagya and Kalidasi Bairagya, were Matuas. One cannot deny Harichand Thakur's contribution to the Matua society. In his book, *Lord Harichand and Guruchand*, Naresh Chandra Das has pointed out the crucial role of Harichand Thakur for the upliftment of Matuas:

He at this time began to spread harinam at the village of Orakandi, Ghritakandi, Aruakandi, Routhkhamar, and Mallakandi. Many people began to call his devotees as haribola or matua. In this way the term matua was developed.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure I:** Harichand Thakur  
Photo Taken by Purbasha Mondal

When interviewed Puspa Bairagya's, she commented:

I'm Matua and I'm proud of my identity. Matua is a religion that allows you to practice spirituality any time. You don't need to be a Sanyasi for that. We worship Harichand Thakur, Shantimata Debi, Guruchand Thakur, Satyabhama Debi. In my village, Dharampur, we observe the Mahotsav in February every year. Matuaism is a philosophy which believes in equality. A Muslim man can be a Matua. This religion believes in humanity. This is the uniqueness of Matua religion.<sup>15</sup>

The word we need to look at here is 'Matua religion.' It is generally believed that the Matua Dharma is a part of Hindu religion. Unlike Hindu religion, Matua Dharma voices against the practice of untouchability. It is interesting to note what the eminent critic, Birat Bairagya, observes: "At first, the primary influence of Harichand Thakur and the Matua Dharma was confined only to Namasudra community."<sup>16</sup> Puspa Bairagya's attitude to Matua Dharma is best summed up in her article, "Matua Dharme Nari" ("Women in Matua Religion") published in *Surya*:

<sup>14</sup> N.C. Das, *Lord Harichand and Guruchand* (Kolkata: Biswas Printing House, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> P. Bairagya, *Interview...*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> B. Bairagya, *MATUA SAHITYA PARIKRAMA* (Kolkata: Bibhuti Printing Works, 2020), p. 105.

On January 14, 1994 Arundhuti Roychowdhury was reading the Veda of Sarada Pith. In Puri, Shankaracharya Achalanandaji forced and stopped her to read the Veda. Because according to Hindu religion, women are the doors of hell and they do not have any right to practice the dharma. She is from a Brahmin family but still she cannot read the Veda. Veda means knowledge or Vidya. This doctrine has taken the right of Vidya. Here lies the distinction between Brahminical Manusmriti, old Hindu religion, and Matua religion. If we read *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*, we see Matua Dharma Sadhikas, Malabati, Sadhana Debi, Kanchan Debi, Janki Debi, and others, play an important role in the Matua religious movement.<sup>17</sup>

In Matua Dharma, man and woman have the same rights in every sphere of life. The motto of Guruchand Thakur was to educate the Dalit women of Bengal. In this context, I would like to quote Raj Kumar who observes that “women’s movement in India has generally been concerned with issues related to the upper caste and class women and it has never had any programme to deal with liberation of Dalit women from their oppressive livelihoods.”<sup>18</sup>

According to Halbwachs, history is related to the past. Puspa Bairagya writes about the reading habits of her family in the narrative. She has mentioned *Sri Sri Harililamrita* and *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit*—two books which are not much discussed in the textbooks of India. Pierre Nora in *Between Memory and History* observes: “There are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory.”<sup>19</sup>

### III

Kalyani Thakur Charal achieved popularity with her autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (“Why I Call Myself Charal”) which was published on August 16, 2016. It is worth remarking that 16th August is observed as the Chuni Kotal Day by the Dalit people of Bengal. Chuni Kotal (1965–1992), student of MSc in Anthropology at Vidyasagar University, was the first woman to graduate from the Lodha community who was repeatedly abused by professor Falguni Chakraborty. Thus, Kotal, the superintendent of a Scheduled Castes and Tribes Students’ Hostel, became a victim of the caste system and committed suicide on August 16, 1992. It is important to quote A.K. Biswas’s opinion on Chuni Kotal’s suicide:

According to published reports in some leading dailies, in a seminar which Chuni attended three days before the fateful day in the Anthropology Department of the university, the said culprit had intentionally described the Lodhas as “hard criminal” to inflict further injuries out of vengeance. It was no longer possible for Chuni to bear the constant stream of vitriolic and disparaging comments from her teacher inside and outside the classroom. This generated predictable notification in her.<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Biswas also observed:

She committed suicide in the teeth of unrelenting and humiliating persecution on the campus by her teacher, Falguni Chakraborty. Chuni had protested in writing to the authorities of the University against her harassment and her abuser. Nobody

<sup>17</sup> P. Bairagya, G. Biswas (eds.), “Matua Dharme Nari,” *Surya*, 3 (2001), p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> R. Kumar, *DALIT PERSONAL NARRATIVES...*, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations*, 26 (1989), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> A.K. Biswas, “Requiem for a tribal girl,” *THE HINDUSTAN TIMES*, November 29 (1992), p. 1.



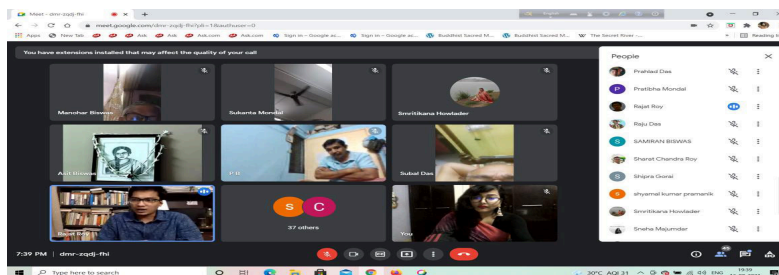
heeded her pleas perhaps on the pretension that they were above caste, tribe, faith, etc. Her death unleashed an uproar, obliging the Left Front Government to institute the Commission of Enquiry with retired Justice S.S. Gangopadhyay of the Calcutta High Court ... the abuser got a clean chit as “trivialities” that had occurred between him and his victim were not the reasons to cause intense pain for Chuni Kotal to commit suicide! A news report subsequently appeared in the media to suggest that Lodha children had started dropping out of schools as that fate of Chuni held out lingering clouds of threats on their future if educated like their first graduate! No elucidation as such is perhaps necessary! How sad “trivialities” of her teacher in the University cost her life and there was a harrowing outburst of the Inquiry Commission for the tragedy!<sup>21</sup>

In his essay entitled “Namasudra Itihas Charchar Bhumika” (“The Importance of Practice of Namasudra History”), Biswas has quoted the Census of India (1911, vol. V, Part 1, Report of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Calcutta): “The largest number of Hindu criminals are Kayasthas and Brahmans.”<sup>22</sup>

In Bengal, the suicide of Chuni Kotal gave birth to the Dalit Sahitya Sanstha which “became the main platform for Bengali Dalit writers.”<sup>23</sup> In “PROTEST” (translated by Asit Biswas), Chuni Kotal writes:

The blood of Lodhas redden barren field  
All around sound, catch, let they be killed.  
Someone rush to jungle path, crossing ditch, aside  
Feeble old man rolls down to cross plot divide.<sup>24</sup>

In 2021, the Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture organized by *Chaturtha Duniya* was delivered by Rajat Roy who is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Presidency University. Roy spoke on “Ganatantrik Rajniti o Samajik Nyay.”



**Figure II.** Chuni Kotal Memorial Lecture (2021)  
Screenshot taken by Purbasha Mondal

<sup>21</sup> A.K. Biswas, “Saraswati Karketta: Latest Victim of Caste Slur and Harassment in Rabindra Bharati University, Calcutta,” <https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article8913.html> [accessed 19.08.2021].

<sup>22</sup> A.K. Biswas, “Namasudra Itihas Charchar Bhumika,” in: ed., K.K. Thakur, *Banglar Namasudra* (Kolkata: Bibhuti Printing Works, 2021), p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p.15.

<sup>24</sup> C. Kotal, “PROTEST,” in: eds. A. Biswas, S.B. Sarkar, *Dalit Poems, Songs and Dialogues from Bengal in English Translation* (Kolkata: Ababil Books, 2019), p. 82.

Kalyani Thakur Charal was highly anxious about the reception *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* would get. Later she realized that the autobiography made her a popular face of Bangla Dalit Sahitya. She has dedicated her autobiography to Usharanjan Mazumder who is one of the pillars of Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sanstha (Bengali Dalit Literature Association). In “Bhumika” (“Introduction”) Kalyani Thakur Charal notes:

I had a childhood, adolescence too. I almost did not realize my youth. I got the news that Bengali Dalit Women’s Autobiographies are not available on the internet.<sup>25</sup>

She expressed her fears regarding the publication of her autobiography as she received the enormous pressure from various political parties. In an interview with Kartik Choudhary, Kalyani Thakur Charal observes:

Dalit Literature is the literature of self-respect and pride. It is the literature of those who were oppressed and deprived for centuries. When we talk about this reprehensible hatred towards us, clearly, love won’t ooze from our words, only anger will. This anger is sort of a building block of Dalit Literature.<sup>26</sup>

Kalyani was born in 1965 at Bagula, Nadia. She is the chief editor of *Neer Ritupatra*. In “My Childhood” (translated by Suchetana Ghosh Dastidar), she writes:

During my childhood I saw my mother exhibit a strong passion for reading. But we had no books other than the *Sri Sri Harileelamrita* and the *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* at home. Ma would read books in breaks between sewing a kantha. She would sometimes borrow *Prabhas Khanda* from our neighbour Minadi’s mother to read. At times like these, the elders of our neighbourhood—my grandmother, Lakkhimashi’s mother, Bengipishi—would sit around and listen to her reading aloud.<sup>27</sup>

Pierre Nora contends: “*Lieux de memoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination.”<sup>28</sup> Kalyani Thakur Charal in “My Childhood” offers the traumatized history of Bangladesh:

This old woman would tell us many stories of Bangladesh. They left Bangladesh after 1971 to settle permanently in this country. To flee from the Razakars, they would lie submerged in ponds choked with weeds for hours with only their noses above the water level. She told us stories of how village after village was set ablaze.<sup>29</sup>

According to Halbwachs, “each memory is a viewpoint on the collective memory.”<sup>30</sup> Kalyani Thakur Charal’s poem, “AUNT BASINI, THE JHUMUR DANCER” depicts the tragic life of Jhumur dancers in Bengal:

<sup>25</sup> K.T. Charal, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (Kolkata: Bibhuti Printing Works, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> K.T. Charal, “Kalyani Thakur ‘Chandal’: Depiction of Dalits’ Struggles is the Beauty of Dalit Literature,” Interview by Kartik Choudhary, *Forward Press*, March 1 (2021).

<sup>27</sup> K.T. Charal, “My Childhood,” in: K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>28</sup> P. Nora, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> K.T. Charal, “My Childhood” ..., op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>30</sup> M. Halbwachs, op. cit., p. 48.



Do all Basinis find divine resort,  
If they dance to the Jhumur note?  
Babu Sridhar is her 'ustad' master  
When she dies, the kites will eat her.<sup>31</sup>

In "Autobiographical Memory," H.L. Williams and M.A. Conway observe that autobiographical memory is related to episodic memory and semantic memory. It cannot be denied that Kalyani Thakur Charal writes about the Andhar Beel, a site of memory:

My favourite spot in the village was the beel. It was called Andhar Beel, or the Dark Lake. It was very deep and thus the water was quite dark in colour—hence the name.<sup>32</sup>

The beel acts as a memory-metaphor which has inspired her to write more on the local history. In the month of Chaitra, they sang:

O Queen of Clouds,  
Wash the leaves with your showers,  
The leaves stink, now fill the sink,  
A land has four corners,  
Kaley dear is planting the rice.  
My dear, your bullocks and plough  
Are scorching in the sun.  
They get scorched in the sun.  
O rain, come upon us in torrents.<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note here that this ritual is basically observed by the Namasudra women. Kalyani Thakur Charal's narrative, which attempts to provide a counterculture of Bengal, highlights the rich culture of Namasudras.

#### IV

Kalyani Thakur Charal is the most widely read Dalit poet whose popularity can be found outside Bengal. Kalyani Thakur's poem, "Nepora Doi Mare Chirokal" has been translated into English as "The Opportunists Steal Your Thunder" by Srishti Dutta Chowdhury. In this text, the speaker expresses Kalyani Thakur Charal's view on Nandigram, a place where many Dalit men and women were shot in 2007:

Revolution comes when you permit it.  
But the Nandigram dwellers are the ones who get shot.  
The same people of Nandigram are jailed.  
The bhadroloks have never been hit by bullets and  
Will never be.  
They are awarded medals, when necessary.<sup>34</sup>

These lines refer to the Nandigram violence (occurred in East Midnapore, West Bengal) which throws some light on the traumatic past of Bengal. Rothberg observes:

<sup>31</sup> K.T. Charal, "AUNT BASINI, THE JHUMUR DANCER," in: A. Biswas, S.B. Sarkar, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>32</sup> K.T. Charal, "My Childhood" ..., op. cit., p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 134.

The traumatic realist project is an attempt not to reflect the event mimetically but to produce it as an object of knowledge and to transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to posttraumatic culture.<sup>35</sup>

In one of her autobiographical poems, “THE POEM OF THE DOWNTRODDEN” (translated by Sudipta Mondal), Kalyani Thakur Charal recalls the experiences of her ancestors:

My grandfather  
Was not allowed entry to the perimeter of Sanskrit school  
My father had to learn, on fan-palm leaf with  
great hardship,  
To write his name in lampblack.<sup>36</sup>

These above quoted lines suggest that Kalyani’s grandfather was not allowed to read Sanskrit as he was from Namasudra community. The Dalit people had no right to read Sanskrit language because they were labelled as ‘Untouchables.’ The poet expresses the detailed images of her father’s struggle in the Partitioned Bengal. She articulates her mother’s experiences in the following lines:

My mother had to carry cow-dung in her left hand  
While going to bring prasad from Thakurbari  
Did you not understand?  
With the cow-dung held in the left hand,  
Had to smear the spot where she stood.  
Alas! Cow-dung was purer than the touch of the  
Feet of Dalit.<sup>37</sup>

The word, ‘cow-dung’ leaves a hint that the poet belongs to an agricultural family in Bengal. In *My Childhood*, Kalyani Thakur Chandal writes:

We had many cows. They were called Lakkhi, Shyamali, Sonali, Rupali. They were like our siblings. We would cut the grass growing on the levees, separating two fields of jute or paddy, to feed them. The first time I experienced the sorrow of death was when one of our cows died. My mother could not even get up to cook a meal that day.<sup>38</sup>

Caruth opines:

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 140.

<sup>36</sup> K.T. Charal, “THE POEM OF THE DOWNTRODDEN,” in: A. Biswas, S.B. Sarkar, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>38</sup> K.T. Charal, “My Childhood”..., op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>39</sup> C. Caruth, op. cit., p. 92.

In “THE POEM OF THE DOWNTRODDEN,” Kalyani Thakur Charal’s use of irony indicates the memory of her traumatic past:

I am bound to hear from my office colleagues  
 Words like Chandal, Chamar, Dom  
 Being used as abuses  
 All these are names of a clan or community  
 My educated colleagues are oblivious of it.  
 Still I remember  
 Dalits do not exist in Bengal  
 Dalits can exist all over the world, but not here  
 Casteism exists all over India  
 Not here.<sup>40</sup>

In the workplace, Kalyani has been abused by her ‘educated’ colleagues who are the caste-Hindus, and the poem suggests that her colleagues believe that ‘casteism’ does not exist in Bengal.

In *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, Kalyani voiced for the Promotional Reservation. This is what she says:

In 2011–12, I wrote a lot of letters regarding the Promotional Reservation. I informed everything to the Commission and DOPT. Absolutely alone. I used to run to the Head-Office.<sup>41</sup>

She seems to point out that the Promotional Reservation is very important for the Dalits as the caste-Hindus are responsible for the marginalization of Dalits in Bengal. It is evident that Thakur’s narrative provides a hint that the caste-Hindus did not allow the Dalits to get their promotion.

Kalyani Thakur Charal was deeply influenced by Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, and other Matua Sadhaks. Her father, Krishna Chandra Thakur (born in Jessore), was one of the prominent Matua Sadhaks in the Partitioned Bengal. In “THE CASTE WITHOUT A KING” (translated by Shubh Brat Sarkar), she depicts the great figures of Matua Movement, Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur:

Striving to erase through two hundred years  
 Of those very names  
 Harichand, Guruchand  
 Now among the crowd of their followers  
 Your vote-begging, out-stretched arms  
 The sight makes me nauseate  
 How long would they be cheated thus.<sup>42</sup>

She also adds:

Stay, O Matua brothers, in the name of Thakur  
 Not a single vote be cast for anyone else  
 Go fast, rush from door to door and spread this message  
 We don’t need plough and farmland

<sup>40</sup> K.T. Charal, “THE POEM OF THE DOWNTRODDEN”..., op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> K.T. Charal, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*..., op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>42</sup> K.T. Charal, “THE CASTE WITHOUT A KING,” in: A. Biswas, S.B. Sarkar, op. cit., p. 119.

First we need King; Your clarion call would be  
 'Our votes, King for us.'<sup>43</sup>

In "MIDDAY MEAL COOK," Kalyani expresses the tale of a Dalit girl who belongs to Bauri caste:

The daughter of a Bauri,  
 I am nothing but a mere cook  
 Of midday meal.<sup>44</sup>

The poet seems to suggest the Manubadis are "Manu's offspring," and it should be understood that Manu is a symbol of tyranny, Satan. One must remember that 25<sup>th</sup> December is celebrated as Manusmriti Dahan Divas by the Dalit people of India. This day is also celebrated as Stri Mukti Dibas. In 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with his associates had burnt the Hindu religious text *Manusmriti* which has shown women as sexual objects. On December 25, 2020 Bahujan Yuba Chatra Sangathan planned to celebrate Manusmriti Dahan Divas. However, ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) and VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) wanted to stop the event and demanded the intervention of local police at Naugaon. The administration declared to cancel the event, and the Section 144 was imposed in Naugaon Bazaar.

## CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that the concept of memory plays a crucial role as a tool of resistance in both Puspa Bairagya and Kalyani Thakur Charal's narratives:

It is difficult for Dalit women writers to make themselves heard, but they have tried to their best ability to do so. Dalits usually have to publish at their own expense. It is only when Dalit women become independent and self-reliant and learn to write and publish that we will get a glimpse of their reality.<sup>45</sup>

What we need to understand is that Puspa Bairagya and Kalyani Thakur Charal's narratives can be seen as therapeutic and healing narratives. The discussion may conclude with Manju Bala's poem "Barred" (translated by Laboni Chatterjee). I would like to quote some lines from the text:

Come! You people of the soil!  
 Break free from oppression and turmoil.  
 Heat your iron-resolution  
 In the embers of the fire  
 That glows fiercely in your hearts.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> K.T. Charal, "MIDDAY MEAL COOK," in: A. Biswas, S.B. Sarkar, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> M. Bala, "Barred," in: K.T. Charal, S. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 126.

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## SUMMARY

This paper makes an attempt to explore how the concept of memory works as a tool of resistance in the narratives of the Bengali Dalit women writers in the Partitioned Bengal. The Bengali Dalit women have been marginalized in different ways, and the history of these women has been neglected. But the *atma-katha* (life-story) of the Bengali Dalit women seeks to question the accepted official historical record of Bengal. In this paper, I propose to examine the narratives of Dr. Puspa Bairagya and Kalyani Thakur Charal which were chiefly produced in the twenty-first century Bengal and were anti-caste narratives and thereby provide an insight into the counter-memories of the Bengali Dalit women. I would like to apply the autobiographical memory theory to the narratives of these writers. My prospective paper endeavors to illuminate personal agency and healing and would hope to generate a new understanding of the texts in the Indian context.

## KEYWORDS

memory, resistance, Bengali Dalit Women, healing, partitioned Bengal