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### **Annihilating Caste through Writing: Considering Birendranath Sasmal as a Pioneer in Bengali Dalit Writing**

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#### **Abstract**

*In Bengal, there is a long tradition of raising voice in favour of the Dalits. In 1921, the dalit poet Raicharan Biswas, through the publication of his collection of poetry called Jatiya Jagaran, sought to generate among the dalits awareness about the oppression and hegemony of the Brahminical tradition of Hindu social order. A member of Mahishya community and an ardent freedom fighter in pre-Independence Bengal, Deshapran Birendranath Sasmal adopted a belligerent stance since his early years towards the evil of untouchability. Many of Sasmal's writings embodied his revolt against caste-based social segregation and oppression. Significantly, it happened at a time when protest against this social malady was yet to assume a mature shape in Bengal. By analyzing Sasmal's story "Amal and Ramkrishna", this paper seeks to reveal the literary artist in Sasmal who dexterously used children's story to eliminate the notion of caste-based social inequality from the minds of the young learners. This strategy was adopted by the author as a stepping stone towards the creation of an egalitarian society. Sasmal's story offers a trenchant critique of caste system inherent in Hindu social order and raises awareness about the evil of this inhuman social malady. Sasmal voiced his resentment against caste-based oppression through literature at a point of time when an organized Dalit literary movement was far away from taking a concrete shape in Bengal. Undoubtedly, Sasmal may be placed in one line with other pioneers of Bengali Dalit writings.*

**Key Words:** Birendranath Sasmal, Untouchability, "Amal and Ramkrishna", Bengali Dalit Writing

Deshapran Birendranath Sasmal, professionally a lawyer, is known in the history of Indian Freedom Movement as a renowned patriot who worked for the cause of the nation's liberation from imperial domination and a nationalist leader who participated in the non-violent non-cooperation movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Born in 1881 and called "Deshapran" by his supports, Birendranath Sasmal was one of the most ardent freedom fighters of the then Bengal. Birendranath belonged to a caste which was ascending in the social ladder of Bengal fighting its way against its past status of social untouchability. Sasmal belonged to the Mahishya community who were at the lowest echelons of social hierarchy among the Hindus. "To him untouchability was a sin against humanity" (Mondal 4). Even before Gandhiji launched his movement for the eradication of untouchability, Sasmal, as a student of Ripon College, resisted attempts to separate high caste Hindu students from so-called low caste students. His was the voice for the real establishment of fraternity, solidarity, equality and justice as without it, in his eyes, true freedom of India was impossible. Interestingly, Sasmal, himself a member of Mahishya community, displayed from his childhood a hostile attitude towards the evil of untouchability. A prolific writer, Sasmal wrote many poems, articles, essays and stories which were published in contemporary journals and magazines. Many of Sasmal's writings embodied his revolt against caste-based social segregation and oppression. Significantly, it happened at a time when protest against this social malady was yet to assume a mature shape in Bengal.

Awareness about *dalit* literature in Bengal did not develop early. Of course, in Bengal, there is a long tradition of raising voice in favour of the Dalits. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar succeeded in his attempt to ensure the lower-caste youths' access in Sanskrit College. Earlier this privilege was available

only to the Brahmins and Baidyas. Writers belonging to the upper-caste Hindus like Manik Bandopadhyay, Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Tarashankar and Bibhutibhushan focused on the sorrows and joys of the proletariat in their writings. Tagore transformed a (Dalit) Buddhist legend into a lyrical play called *Chandalika*. However, as it has been observed, “any and every narrative about the marginalised cannot be called dalit literature. In fact, dalit consciousness is the soul of dalit literature. Its identity lies in its very dalitness, in its commitment to the dalit cause, in its pledge to transform the structure of society” (Singha et al. xxv). Dalit literature attempts at an artistic portrayal of the sorrows and sufferings, slavery and degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. In the words of Limbale, “By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness” (19). He also argues that “*Dalit* literature is that literature, which is written by one who is *Dalit* by birth, which is filled with rebellion and rejection, and which gives expression to *Dalit* consciousness” (105).

The voluminous and rhymed text (1916) written by a *dalit* poet named Tarak Chandra Sarkar on the life of Thakur Harichand may be regarded as one of the earliest Bengali *dalit* literary texts. Thakur Harichand of the Motua community himself protested against the caste-based discrimination suffered by *dalits*. In 1921, the *dalit* poet Raicharan Biswas, through the publication of his collection of poetry called *Jatiya Jagaran*, sought to generate among the *dalits* awareness about the oppression and hegemony of the *Brahminical* tradition of social order. “The religious, social and political stance of some of these pre-Independence dalit writers contributed considerably towards the emergence of a distinctive dalit identity among the post-Independence dalit writers of Bengal” (Singha et al. xxvii-xxxviii).

Ambedkarite ideology provides Dalit literature with true inspiration. Babasaheb’s ideas and agitations offered Dalit society self-respect. Ambedkar launched a crusade against the caste system in Hinduism that fostered inequality. Ambedkarism aimed at ending the caste system which has exploited the Dalits and imposed painful restrictions on them. Ambedkar felt that “Hindu society must sink unless the untouchability that has become a part of the four-caste system is eradicated” (267). Birendranath Sasmal “wrote Bengali stories and compiled one children’s book named ‘Chhotoder Jnanoday’ . . . where he attempted to eradicate from children’s mind the obnoxious caste system” (Mondal 254). Many of the writings of Sasmal, the great patriot of Bengal, who became victim of the relative indifference of the historians and literary scholars, are not available today. Of late, Swadesh Ranjan Mondal has written a well-documented book on Birendranath Sasmal, which contains one of the stories of Sasmal translated into English by the author. By analyzing this story “Amal and Ramkrishna”, this paper seeks to consider Birendranath Sasmal as a pioneer in Bengali Dalit writing, who dexterously used children’s story to eliminate the notion of caste-based social inequality from the minds of the young learners. This strategy was adopted by the author as a stepping stone towards the creation of an egalitarian society. Sasmal’s works and his stance on untouchability exercised considerable influence on his compatriots.

Sasmal’s story “Amal and Ramkrishna” was published in *Mahishya Samaj, Deshapran Smriti Sankhya*, in the year 1936 (Bengali year 1343, *Agrahayan* issue). Apart from the expression of the author’s literary excellence, the story displays Sasmal’s Dalit consciousness as he pitilessly exposes the falsehood of caste hierarchy maintained by the Hindu society in Bengal. Sasmal’s story offers a trenchant critique of caste system inherent in Hindu society and raises awareness about the evil of this inhuman social malady. As it is represented in the story, prosperous Kulin Brahmins lived with a group of Muchis or cobblers living in penury in one of the city suburbs. Amal and Ramkrishna, two children were of the same age and studied in the same school. Amal belonged to a Brahmin family whereas Ramkrishna was born in a cobbler’s family. But the inquisitive mind of Amal could not understand why Ramkrishna despite being a better student unlike him could not have sacred thread. When asked by her son, Priyambada Devi referred to their respective origins in families of different castes. Sasmal puts in Amal’s mouth words which form the essence of allegations against caste system to be found in the assertions and writings of many early crusaders against caste system in India like Ambedkar, Phule and others: “Ma,



why can't the son of a Muchi become a Brahmin?" or "Then a high caste can never become a low caste" (Sasmal 257)?

The explanation which Amal's mother provides in the story in support of the existing caste system is the basic explanation which Hinduism provides in support of caste system. Amal's mother only reiterates this belief: "Caste always depends upon birth. God creates all men – some are created Brahmins, some are born as Musalmans. How can you and I change that system of caste" (Sasmal 258)? It is also argued by her that "Those who live as good men in this birth, follow the path of religion they become Brahmins in the next birth. And those who indulge in thievery and decoity they are born as Muchis" (Sasmal 258). The conversation between the son and the mother takes the shape of a serious discussion on the appropriateness of caste system. In this story, Sasmal offers us an analysis of different aspects of caste system prevalent in Hindu society. Amal surprisingly noticed that he could invite his friend Rakhal Das to his house for he belonged to high caste but he couldn't invite Ramkrishna. He couldn't understand how, despite having all the moral qualities and physical features of an ideal human being, Ramkrishna could belong to lower caste. The question which Sasmal raises here is that whether it is just to consider a man's worth only on the basis of his origin or caste and not on the basis of his deeds or moral qualities. The same issue is taken up subsequently by many Dalit writers in their writings.

Sasmal's story also unfolds the internal divisions among the Brahmins. Amal curiously noticed how her mother prevented his friend Rakhal from dining with him sitting on the same rug although Rakhal was a Brahmin. The explanation offered is that Rakhal's father was a lower class Brahmin. Amal couldn't understand how, although Rakhal's father earned more than his own father, in caste hierarchy Rakhal's father belonged to lower caste. His mother explained, "Lowness or highness of castes is not determined by the quantum of monthly salary" (Sasmal 259). Amal couldn't realize how a Professor who was more qualified than a police officer could be socially inferior to a police officer only because of his caste. Unable to answer her son's question, Amal's mother slapped him.

After nearly thirty years, Ramkrishna became a Deputy Magistrate. Thus the invincibility of Ramkrishna's Dalit spirit is established as his caste identity fails to prevent him from acquiring the most dignified social position through labour and perseverance. Yet when he returned to his paternal village, nobody agreed to dine with him. None agreed to drink water touched by him. His economic and administrative position had failed to erase his caste identity. Frustrated for not being able to change the situation, one day he disappeared from the village without any notice. In the meantime, Amal became a clerk in the Eastern Railways. To fulfill his mother's desire, Amal took her on a pilgrimage to Hrishikesh and Lachhmanjholi defying the risk associated with the perilous journey of predatory animals. After visiting the temple of Laxman in the evening, they tried to return through the jungle to the *dharamsala* of Swargashram by lighting a hurricane for taking shelter at night. When they confronted a tiger in the jungle, Amal lost consciousness. Her mother shouted abusive languages at the tiger and challenged it. But after some time, she also fell senseless. A tall braided haired Sannyasi hit the tiger with a wooden pole and it escaped. Other *sannyasis* came and joined him. The other sannyasis took them to the Ashram and helped them regain their consciousness and normal health. They became anxious to meet their life-giver. Priyambada met him, conveyed her pranams to him and thanked the sannyasi for saving her son's life. When the Sannyasi learnt that they had eaten the rice cooked by the Sannyasis, he asked, "Priyambada Debi, Amal have you not lost your caste? You are also Brahmins of high castes. Do you know what is my caste and that of my Sannyasi sons" (Sasmal 262)? Priyambada Debi replied: "What is the value of caste? You have saved our lives – how can your caste have any meaning for us" (Sasmal 262)? The Sannyasi said in a solemn voice: "You may forsake the question of caste for two ordinary lives but for the sake of the unity and harmony of thirty three millions of men and women of India for their swaraj and for their social and spiritual upliftment you cannot forsake it. Is the worth of thirty three millions of lives less valuable than that of two ordinary lives" (Sasmal 262-263). The question which the

Sanyasi raises here is the most pertinent question which perturbed many patriots during the freedom movement of India as they perceived the caste system and untouchability in India as the major obstacle in the way of the national unity and independence.

Amal and his mother identified the Sanyasi as Ramkrishna of their village. A repentant and ashamed Priyambada acknowledged her mistake and asked for forgiveness. She declared: "From today we forget the question of caste" (Sasmal 263). Ramkrishna was requested by Priyambada to go back to their village where lots of works were yet to be accomplished by him. Ramkrishna expressed his despair over the situation in rural India where illiterate and low caste people had been kept cornered and subjugated due to the hegemony of caste system and untouchability.

Thus it is manifest that through his literary works and political activities, Sasmal raised his voice against the evil of untouchability and caste system in Bengal society at a point of time when an organized Dalit literary movement was far away from taking a concrete shape in Bengal. Most importantly, very few Bengali authors of the period directly condemned the obnoxious caste system or untouchability in the manner Sasmal did in his writings. Birendranath Sasmal was an active politician and a professional lawyer. Apart from fighting the battle against caste system politically, Sasmal found the arena of literature more effective in increasing awareness against this inhuman practice and eliminating it. Sasmal did not remain contented by only depicting the anguish of Dalits in his works, but called for a rejection of and revolt against this unequal social system.

Sasmal's writings were aimed at generating awareness among both higher and lower castes of the dangerous consequence of caste system, the abolition of which he found indispensable for establishing social harmony and the unity of the millions of Indians. In this respect, Sasmal had close resemblance with Dr. Ambedkar whose influence on Sasmal demands special investigation. Unlike Gandhi who was reluctant to consider the crusade against untouchability as an essential component of India's struggle for Independence and like Dr. Ambedkar, Sasmal viewed the abolition of caste system and untouchability as an indispensable step towards establishment of social and economic equality, national integration and attainment of independence from imperial domination. For him, annihilation of caste was integral to social and spiritual development of all Indians. To sum up, a writer with tremendous social commitment and Dalit consciousness, Birendranath Sasmal may be regarded as one of the pioneers in Bengali Dalit writing.

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