

## **THE REMONSTRATIVE VOICE IN KALYANI THAKUR CHARAL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AMI KANO CHARAL LIKHI**

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What makes Dalit writing in Bengal different? The state, known to have brought forth many reformative movements involving women, like widow marriage and abolishing Sati, was late in giving voice to its Dalit writers. The Renaissance and the humanistic impulse that reached the shores of India with the advent of the British rule influenced Bengali writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyaya, Shankar, Sunil Gangopadhyaya and more recently Mahasweta Devi and Amitav Ghosh. These writers included the plight of the marginalised in their works and addressed issues that were never raised before. But these were not writings that emerged out of experience of an empty gut and the blood and sweat of generations forming a collective memory of the oppressed. The reformist Brahmo Samaj was joined by the elite and well to do Bengalis and while they looked into the plight of the women, there is no record of any dalit woman ever becoming a Brahmo. Dalit existence remained largely unrecognised in Bengal, so much so that when the dalit movement started in here it was difficult for the Bengalis to acknowledge their presence in the society. But a language that was strewn with class differences, there had to be someone with a strong voice of remonstrations to bring it up and fight for their right.

Born in 1965 in a small village called Bagula, of Nadia district, West Bengal, Kalyani Thakur Charal has been the most vocal Dalit Feminist writer from Bengal. Four books of poetry, a collection of short stories, a collection of essays, a Journal 'Nir' and her autobiography *Ami Kano Charal Likhi* published in 2016, constitute her bulk of work so far. Out of these, her autobiography grabs special attention because of its defiant title *Ami Kano Charal Likhi*. Kalyani Thakur makes it clear to her readers that she has chosen to add Charal to her name as a protest against the casteist mindset and will not be shamed for it. She proudly owns it and tells us in her autobiography how stunned it left her oppressors in the railway office, when she loudly proclaimed it. But her autobiography is not just a tale of Dalit oppression and suffering. It is the story of a dalit woman who faced discrimination not only because of her caste but also because of her colour and gender. Dalit discrimination in India is far more entrenched in our society since the last 2000 years and cannot be compared with the black discrimination in the west.

Kalyani Thakur begins her autobiography by describing her childhood spent in Bagula, then her transition in life when she travelled to Kolkata at the age of fifteen, life in the hostels of Kolkata and her experience as an employee of the railways. Small incidents make up her story and they are neatly built-up to call out to the deep-seated bias that still continues to be ingrained in the Bengali society. The terms Bhadrolok (elite) and Chotolok (low caste) so often used during speaking, don't just emphasise the economic divide between the rich and the poor but are a testament to structural oppression which the people of Bengal refuse to acknowledge.

There aren't many women Dalit writers in Bengal. It is only in recent times that women writers both from the dalit (Namashudra) and tribal communities have started expressing themselves through their writings. Women writers like Sushma Moitra Sarkar's compilation of essays about her work and movement is entitled *Monmukure* (Mirror of the Mind), Bina Ray Sarkar's book of essays is "Jago Nari Jago" (Arise Women, Awake). Other writers like Kiran Talukdar, Lily Halder, Manju Bala, Smritikana Hawlader, Sujata Biswas, etc. have written poetry, fiction and essays. While none of them have written autobiographies, they have written about their

experiences and their plights and are slowly forming a legacy of their own. In her interview with me recorded over the phone she said that during a literary meet few years ago she was told that there are autobiographies from the women dalit writers of Bengal and no information available on the internet either. She was requested to write her autobiography so that it could be a record of the present era of women writers and could be taken up in future for reference.

In Bengal, writing was the prerogative of the upper caste Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas just as formal education was. Yet there were dalit voices rising in the form of biographies of Harichand Thakur (1812), written by Tarak Chandra Sarkar (1853-1913) and the biography of Guru Chand Thakur (1946) written by Mahananda Halder (1899-1972). Kalyani was deeply influenced by both. The Matua dharma formed by Harishchandra Thakur, a sect Vaushnavite Hinduism adopted by the Namashudra community (Chandals) further inspired her towards writing. In her autobiography she credits her rebelliousness to the influences of Harichand Thakur, Guru Chand Thakur and Babasaheb Ambedkar.

What makes Kalyani Thankur Charal's autobiography important is the history of dalit movement in Bengal? Why is Dalit writing in Bengal different from the rest of India? The reasons are many. In his article "Is there Dalit Writing in Bangla" published in Economic and Political Weekly Oct 13, 2007, Manoranjan Byapari says:

In West Bengal Dalit writing began 20 years after Maharashtra although the central figure of the dalit movement Babasaheb Ambedkar had a close relationship with this eastern region. The Bengalis are a politically conscious people, but to understand the late emergence of the dalit movement here one has to examine closely a certain sequence of socio-political movement. (Byapari 2)

Tracing the history of the Namashrudas of Bengal (who were earlier known as Chandals) he says that their dislocation from East Bengal where 90 percent of them lived, to West Bengal during partition was a major cause. They were rehabilitated in different parts of India from Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh to the uninhabited islands of Andaman, due to which they were constantly struggling to find a livelihood and survive. He writes:

For decades after independence the dalit community in Bengal was so completely demoralised and scattered (some of them stayed on in East Pakistan) that there was no collective life to speak of. In their unrelenting struggle for survival and security, creative activities like writing were unaffordable luxuries. Dalits in other states did not have to lead such a precarious existence and they could organise themselves to initiate social and literary movements. (Byapari 2)

Yet there is no doubt that finally the voices have emerged. Stall number 22 in College Street called Chaturtha Duniya (Fourth World) is run passionately by Kalyani Thakur and Manohar Mouli Biswas. It exclusively holds the collection of books by only Dalit writers. Opening only once a week for a few hours it is a struggle to keep it going just like the struggle to keep up their identity is, in the world which is still dominated by non-dalit writings. With no support from any publisher, Kalyani Thakur had to publish all her books on her own.

'*Why do I Write Charal?*' is the story of a little dalit girl, brought up by parents who in spite of being uneducated themselves, believed in educating their children. With two elder brothers and two elder sisters, Kalyani Thakur was youngest of the five siblings. Her book opens with her earliest memories as a child in Bagula, spent like any other child in a village, roaming, playing and frolicking with her brothers and sisters. Like any normal child of her age, her main concern was not to get caught for playing too long and being scolded and spanked by her mother. More than the school the playgrounds and ponds were her favourite places. Her maternal uncle's place which was close by provided a safe hide out from her mother's wrath. She recalls going to school with books and her own mat she yet doesn't recall much discrimination during her childhood. Life was hard and she and her sister had to sell vegetables in the nearby markets and railway station. Her father who was also the caretaker of the school ensured that his children studied. When her elder

brother got a job in merchant navy raising the family's economic condition, her father decided to send her to Kolkata to study further. At the age of 15 she travelled to Kolkata then Calcutta, and stayed in a hostel to finish her 12<sup>th</sup> in 1980 from Ramkrishna Ananda Ashram. She then also completed her BCom Honours degree in accountancy. She realised early on that education was the only way to beat the tirades of casetism and she continued her studies in Calcutta University to do her M.Com taking classes that were in the evening. All this while, she stayed in a working women's hostel which had appalling conditions. During this period, she was also in a lookout for a job to support herself. She writes in her autobiography:

I was taking several exams for a government job as I knew in order to continue my education I have to earn money. In the second year itself I got through Indian Railways Group C's clerical post. My office was in Sealdah and I stayed at the working women's hostel. The initial few years were a trying time for me as I could hardly get some food and was working in the day and studying in the night. This was between 1987 and 1990. (Ghosh 3)

The poor conditions of the hostel brought out the rebel in her and she raised her voice against her landlord. It was not an easy task to convince the other girls too as they were afraid of losing the only abode they had and in those days there weren't many working women's hostels in Kolkata. But Kalyani continued her protest forcing her landlord to make repairs of the dilapidated building and that was just the beginning. She started a wall magazine 'Nir' during this period of living in the hostel, which is now a full-fledged magazine and has contributions from eminent dalit and tribal writers of Bengal.

During my interview with Kalyani Thakur Charal she revealed why she chose the name 'Nir'. In spite of having deep affection for a gentleman who ran a magazine called 'Nest', she decided not to get involved when he asked her to join his magazine. She withdrew from it with a deep sense of hurt as it made her feel that she was being manipulated. But the impact of the relationship was so strong that she named her wall magazine *Nir*.

Kalyani's real encounter with discrimination happened when she was employed with the railways. In an interview given to Scroll on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2018, International Women's Day, Kalyani said:

First, I was not given any table or chair and was only allowed to sit on a bench lying in a corner of the office. Later, I was given a chair and a small table and was pushed to the furthest corner of the room, where there were no fans. Kolkata's humid weather did not affect me as much as my so-called colleagues who plagued my sense of existence. I soon started taking medicines to fall asleep as soon as office got over each day. (Ghosh 3)

In her autobiography she compared her time working in a traditional government office with Sita's *agnipariksha*. She had to prove her worth to people who looked down upon her because of her caste. When there were too many questions regarding her surname and her caste in her workplace she decided to keep her community name as her surname and started to call herself Kalyani Thakur Charal. To adopt the Caste (Chandal) that was revoked by the community itself in 1911 by a petition given to the British government was her way of confronting the casteist mindset of the society. But the story of any woman does not and cannot end with caste.

She writes about how she was asked not to wear orange saree as the colour wouldn't suit her. She admits that this is also when she realised that there was a gendered exploitation too that was happening with her. The way people looked at her and commented on her skin colour was not just because she was a dalit, but because she was a woman and a dalit. In her autobiography she explicitly speaks of these experiences of body politics while she was working in the railways. It is ironical that the experiences of such extreme patriarchy eluded her in the small village Bagula where her parents, especially her father ensured equal opportunities for his children and the City of Joy made her realise that there is also a gendered perspective to the comments made to her.

Changes came in to her life only after she shifted to Kolkata. She was an adolescent when she left Bagula and spent her formative years in Kolkata. Tragedy hit her family when her mother

passed away and she has to return to Bagula to take care of her father. But she never stopped writing. She has written both poems of love and revolt.

Martin Luther King who visited in India February in 1959 called it his pilgrimage to pay respects to the land of the man who fought for the rights of Untouchables, was deeply impressed by the steps taken by the then political leaders like Ambedkar to redress the oppression of the scheduled castes and tribes. The Indian constitution officially abolished discrimination based on caste and untouchability in 1950. King went back to his country with praises for the newly formed government which resolved to weaken the caste system by ensuring education for low caste people to schools and universities and creating space in Government jobs. But Charal's autobiography tells us that while changes have happened and a certain section of the Dalit community has been able to rise up with the benefits, (they now are termed as the 'creamy layer') most of the Dalits continue to be identified as people meant to serve the society as maids and cleaners, and that the struggle to create a respectable niche is still on.

The ossified model of caste system was based on birth, a heritable hierarchy, but the castes Charal, Chamar, Dom etc. continue to be used to call out names, as an abuse. Kalyani's fight is against this social reality, which has to change for the sake of the country's growth. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak) will continue to remain because even today their voices are struggling to gain recognition in the academic syllabus.

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