

Book Review: Interrogating My Chandal Life (An Autobiography by Manoranjan Byapari)

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Abstract: *The autobiography of a Dalit from Bengali named Itibritte Chandal Jivan initially appeared in Bengali as Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit (2018) by Manoranjan Byapari and translated by Sipra Mukherjee. The book is primarily written in the first person as an autobiography that examines Manoranjan Byapari's life and journey, who was destined to encounter numerous challenges throughout his life. His life was the subject of a documentary made by Rajya Sabha TV. Being a member of the lower caste Namashudra or Chandal, in Bengal, also called as a "casteless society" Byapari often expresses the most agonizing pain of being a Dalit and destitute, where caste and poverty end up dictating his tragic fate at every turn of life. The book details the oppression and marginalization Dalits undergo. According to Gaytri Spivak's essay, Can a subaltern speak? The meaning of the term Subaltern has not limited meaning but is widened to include the various oppressed, marginalized, exploited groups of society on account of class, caste, poverty and gender. This autobiography accelerates our thought process and enables the consciousness of the readers, critics and academicians to be thoughtful with the sentiments of dalit and dalit literature.*

Keywords: dalit, poverty, destitute, marginalization, exploitation

1. Introduction

Author, politician, and social and political activist Manoranjan Byapari is of Indian Bengali descent. In the Indian state of West Bengal, he is one of the earliest Dalit writers of Bengali literature. He may be the only former convict - turned - rickshaw - puller to have authored a dozen novels and more than one hundred short stories. He was chosen to represent the Balagarh (Vidhan Sabha) constituency as an MLA in the West Bengal Legislative Assembly election of 2021. Byapari was a member of the Namashudra caste when he was born in the Bangladeshi city of Barisal. When he was three years old, his family relocated to West Bengal. By the time he was fourteen, the young Byapari had already left home and had been employed in a number of low - paying occupations in the unorganised sector in Assam, Lucknow, Delhi, and Allahabad. Before relocating to Kolkata in 1973, he spent two years living in Dandakaranya. He briefly lived with the Naxals in central India. During his time in jail, he learned himself to read. Meenakshi Mukherjee's translation of his influential article Is there a Dalit writing in Bangla?, which was published in the journal Economic and Political Weekly, propelled him to renown. While pulling rickshaws, he accidentally ran upon Mahasweta Devi, who asked him to write for her "Bartika" journal. He has made it apparent that when East Bengal's higher caste migrants are resettled in Kolkata, West Bengal's upper caste officials provide them preferential treatment.

2. Book Review

Manoranjan Byapari's early life and his battles for survival are covered in the first six chapters of the book, *East Bengal, Partition and West Bengal, Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Project, Food Riots and Calcutta, I Run Away from Home, My Lone Travels across East and North India, On the Road for Five Years, and Return to Calcutta*. Manoranjan Byapari was born into a low - income Dalit family in the nearby village of Pirichpur in the hamlet of Turuk - khali, which was originally a part of the Barisal district in the long - gone

East Pakistan. Due to his father's employment as a contract worker, the boy in the family did not receive a healthy diet. He writes, "My life has not been sweet. I have lived my life as the ill - fated Dalit son of an ill - fated Dalit father, condemned to a life of bitterness." (Page 5) Byapari's family struggled to afford even the most basic comforts during his upbringing. He introduces his caste, the Namashuddurs of the Kashyapgotra, He was regarded as a member of the Chandals community. According to Byapari, his caste has managed to survive by using its own resources, proving its resilience and fortitude despite the ongoing suffering and miseries that were inflicted upon it. When the Upper - caste colonial officials referred to them as Chandals during the first census, they repeated the designation. Officials were obliged to rename the community in the census records from Chandals to Namashudra as a result of ongoing protests. However, Byapari asserts that attitudes towards this population have not improved. And he believes that the forty - year effort was ineffective. According to Byapari, being outside of the varna system would have been preferable for them because it would have allowed them more freedom and liberty.

A brief history of the days leading up to the split from Byapari is also provided. Community rioting has damaged the peace and tranquilly of the country. The division caused great turbulence in everyone's lives. The urge to move from one place to another is one of the divide's many repercussions. The conflict between the two major religions, Islam and Hinduism, was at its height. Additionally, Byapari's family had to suffer the consequences. They were compelled to flee their homeland and make their way to India. They had to live in a harsh environment among thousands of other people who were refugees. He writes, "Everybody suffered from stomach disorders for the first few days as a consequence of eating this rice. There was no lavatory within the camp. People would need to go out to the overgrown grounds and fields nearby to relieve themselves. Those who were healthy, especially the women, would try to complete this daily task before the sun came up. (16) It was

a hellish place for them. They were denied access to essential services. The Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Scheme provided some consolation for these low caste refugees. Areas that were primarily underdeveloped were combined as part of the Dandakaranya Project, including Malkangiri in the state of Odisha and Bastar. Refugees were recommended to travel to Dandakaranya, a place in Chhattisgarh, by the Indian government. Due to the influence of a cunning communist leader who tried to use their helplessness and agitate them by painting a poor picture of the government by adamantly stating that they are a part of Bengal and that nobody should leave Bengal, people were reluctant to leave. He writes, "Do not agree to go to Dandakaranya." The government consequently gave them seven days to travel back to Dandakaranya. This communist leader wanted to organise all the refugees so they could oppose the government. The hunger strike did not make them possible. The march was held as the second stage in order to paralyse the entire state. As a result, Section 144 was put into effect in the city, which caused significant damage. It seemed like war between the authorities and the migrants. When all attempts to topple the government failed, people started to scatter. His father tried to sell firewood and would do various things to maintain a family of seven. But it wasn't enough. The entire family was suffering from the affects of hunger. Manoranjan Byapari decided to quit and find work as things got more challenging for him. He was unable to cope with the discomfort of hunger. Manoranjan Byapari adopted the position of a village goatherd. He was able to provide Byapari with the two meals each day he was looking for by working hard.

Byapari returned to his family after a while, and they decided to relocate their base to Dolata Camp which was not distant from the metropolis of Calcutta. Manoranjan Byapari and his family believed the city would present them with promising opportunities. Life, however, had different plans for his family. Bengal's rural areas were coming ever - closer to a fatal food shortage driven on by famine as the terrible 1960s got underway. During this decade, the whole Bengal was subjected to a traumatising image of poverty. After food, shelter was the second most important need, and this chapter describes the dreadful behaviour of the higher caste. It was forbidden for members of lower castes to claim unoccupied land like Bijoygarh. There was no sympathy for people who belonged to lower castes.

When Byapari was short of food, a doctor came for his assistance. He gave Byapari instructions to look after some cows and promised to provide him with food in exchange. Byapari discovered the negative aspects of the Hinduism practised by his caste for the first time. Byapari, a Hindu caste member, tries to expose the inner workings of his caste, where a fellow caste member is made fun of because he belongs to a lower caste in Hinduism. In order to avoid his contaminating contact, the lady of the house used to let the rice and vegetables fall from a great height into a twisted plate that Manoranjan Byapari used to eat from. This reminds us the same treatment given to Daya Pawar in his autobiography *Baluta* and Om Prakash Valmiki in *Joothan*. The writer was asked to sleep outside the courtyard. The doctor made an attempt to get along with them because they predominated in the community. Unfortunately the doctor's

wife, who detested Muslims, one day started to scream and insult Islam. This infuriated the Muslim community, and the doctor's house was set to fire. As a result the writer had to leave the place. After reaching to Jadhavpur, he was given the opportunity to work at a tea shop for a monthly pay of 10 rupees. After that, Byapari did a variety of occupations and roamed the city like a nomad. When the racial unrest peaked, Byapari was strolling through a deserted area of the city. He had to awkward questions related to caste and sometime he had to fight with the rowdies in the streets.

After learning that Assam has a decent quality of life and offers a lot of opportunities that could help him improve his financial situation, the writer shifted to Aasam. He struggled to find food and a decent place to live while wandering aimlessly through Assam. Finally, trying his luck in the north of the nation, he boarded a train and made his way to Lucknow, the state capital of Uttar Pradesh. At the Lucknow station, Manoranjan Byapari stumbled into a police officer who asked him to accompany him to his staff quarters. After reaching the quarters the officer sexually attacked the writer. He was greatly shaken by the pain he felt. For the first time, Byapari was witnessing the harsh truths of the world. This infuriated the author once more, and he yearned for revenge. The policeman's uncivilised response reflects the socioeconomic reality of the era in which the author lived. He came to the conclusion that the weak are at the mercy of the powerful system.

Byapari decided to relocate back to Bengal after five years of living elsewhere. Byapari's protracted years of arduous labour and challenging national relocations were in vain. He left his residence with nothing and returned empty - handed five years ago. Manoranjan Byapari discovered a movement that was just getting started when he arrived home. The movement was led by the peasantry, and it was founded in the village of Naxalbari. I had heard of a movement led by peasants, farmworkers, and adivasis who had declared war against the unending persecution they had experienced.

In the chapters *My Entry into the Naxal Movement, To Dandakaranya and Back to a Changed Calcutta, Life on and around the Railway Station and Bomb Explodes in Barddhaman* vividly recount Byapari's journey within a turbulent periphery with a rebellious zeal and gesticulations that aim to destroy fundamentalism in society. Among the fiery political figures that Byapari introduces us to are Tata Dutta, Nanu Das, Ashu Majumder, Mohit Barman, Khoka Chakraborty etc. Battle between police and Naxalite was at its height. He writes, "As for me, a poor, weak, oppressed and exploited humanbeing, the rhythm of the revolution awakened within my heart anechoing beat as I felt one with Che Guevara and Mao Zedong." (129). On both sides higher were the encounters higher were the fatalities. Byapari puts himself at danger as a bomb detonates in his hand in Barddhaman.

The subsequent chapters *Into Jail and the World of Letters, A Rickshaw - wallah's Meeting with Mahasweta Devi, A Girl from the Past, Marichjhapi, To Dandakaranya, Dalli and Bastar, Chhattisgarh, Mukti Morcha and Shankar Guha Neogi, and After Shankar Guha Neogi* show how Byapari's life starts to change. By enrolling in classes inside the prison

and bringing stability to his irregular existence by raising a family, Byapari sheds his disgusting lower caste persona during these periods and becomes a contemporary 'bhadralok' category avatar. Interactions within the wide circumference of stalwarts namely leader Shankar Guha Neogi and his 'Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha' that made him reinvigorate the idealism in politics in the region of Dalli, Bastar and writer Mahasweta Devi who draws out the writer in Byapari by publishing his writing in the journal Bartika by the name of Madan Dutta, a rickshaw - wallah - writer seem to make his life worth living. Byapari first attempts to submit articles to five publications, including, Hatiyar, Sisrikha, Banga Barta, Runner, Vigyan using the alias Jijibisha. The author then goes on to produce multiple novels, short tales, essays, and an autobiography, among other literary works. Byapari creates his identity among the literary and cultural society with these writings.

3. Conclusion

Interrogating My Chandal Life by Manoranjan Byapari is a powerful, poignant narrative of squalor and poverty as well as of tenacity, struggle, and a remarkable will to survive. It highlights the factual pitiable condition of a dalit person who is the victim of caste system. It is very disgusting that one human is treating another human being like an animal. Are we really living in the era of science and technology? But it is very disgusting and pitiable that for the sake of some material gains humans had and have violating and exploiting human beings. We very proudly say that we are living in the age of information technology and in the age of globalization where we don't consider anybody inferior based on caste. It is very unfortunate the incidents of exploitation, suppression, marginalization, humiliation taking place in our society. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar appealed for the annihilation of caste for the growth of the society. But unfortunately even today people are proud of their caste, class, and gender. We must uproot this caste system for the stable health of the Indian society. He rightly says, "Out of the ashes will arise a new life." (349).

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