# "Interrogating My Chandal Life": Manoranjan Byapari and the Silenced History of Bengali Dalit Refugees

By

**Sumanta Mondal** *

Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* gives an intense first-hand experience of the violence and fragmentation brought by the catastrophic chains of reactions set off first by the Partition and later by the urbanisation in Calcutta. He gives an intense and in-depth description of the failure of the rehabilitation schemes by the government, the unfulfilled promises made by various leaders during the fervent 1960s Calcutta followed by the stormy decades of the 1970s, the violent repercussion of the militant Naxalite movement, the forgotten episodes of the Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 where thousands of innocent Dalit refugees were killed mercilessly by the government and finally the darker sides of the corrupt politics and the criminal world. It has been narrated from the perspective of a lower caste Namasudra refugee, something that has never been done before in Bengal's mainstream literary world. Manoranjan Byapari uses literature as a weapon, almost like a sentinel for his conscience, gives voice to the voiceless and he is willing to fight bigotry. He is willing to wage a fight against the hierarchical society. Byapari's autobiography is a critique of the constant dehumanising social forces of a caste-ridden society that get buried in urban post-colonial settings. Through his autobiography, he vents the anguish and frustration of the Namasudras. Although his autobiography narrates his own predicament and the difficult journey of his life, it is universal in nature as it transcends the Namasudra community as a whole. His voice of protest can be noticed in an unprecedented ardour where only harsh truth is being said. His autobiography, therefore, becomes an expression of his anger and retaliation. The pain of the discrimination became unbearable for him, which made Byapari vocal. His work is powerful, albeit a violent expression of truth. The assertion of the self is very prominent in his work.

* Sumanta Mondal, Doctoral Fellow, Department of English, The Sanskrit College and University, India. Email: sumanta.m93@gmail.com
Refugee Watch, 61 & 62, June & December 2023.

The various imposed negative identities like Dalit refugees and *Chotolok* (lower caste) have further pushed him to the periphery of Bengali society. His work almost acts as an impetus behind the emergence of Bengali Dalit literature and can be categorised as Protest Literature. His autobiography is not just an account of the history of one oppressed Dalit but the silenced history of the disturbed times of the Partition and the post-Partition trauma. This book is a moving chronicle that portrays the wound of Partition induced displacement, the ultimate failure of refugee rehabilitation, the atrocity and physical abuse committed in Marichjhapi, the dark side of politics and corrupt society, the militant Naxalite movement, the shady world of crime, the agony of an imprisoned life, and the emancipated soul of a budding writer.

Byapari's autobiography originally written in Bengali as *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* was first published in 2012. Later it has been translated into English by Sipra Mukherjee and published in 2018. He is explicitly vocal about his Namasudra identity and it also shows his ongoing search for liberation from discrimination. The very act of writing about his Dalit life becomes an act of resistance because Byapari through his writing asserts his Dalit identity. Revolt and anger run in Manoranjan Byapari's blood. It is ingrained inside him. He is placed on the border of class and caste within the discourse of Bengali history. In post-Partition Bengal, the issue of refugee politics, poverty, unemployment, hunger, and atrocities have been rising drastically. This forces an individual to take dire actions to merely survive in this world. The narrative is driven more often by his immediate actions than by his emotions. His autobiography acts at once individual and communal portraying the torrents of mental anguish So, it was not so difficult on the translator's part to translate the language as his prose is urban and contemporary. Byapari's self-narrative is packed with brutal and intense events, taking the reader's attention from one major event to another with rapid speed and movement.

The autobiography is a self-narrative of atrocity drawing attention to the oppressive conditions within the Bengali community. It unravels the atrocity self-narrative into testimony and evidentiary statements that are explicitly political in nature. His autobiography portrays the individual, cultural, and social injury where the Dalit body acts as a site of exploitation and marginalisation as poverty, hunger, anguish, sexual abuse, and agony all intersected to make the Dalit body truly obsequious. In the autobiography, the body becomes the site of unpleasant oppression, and where the narrative speaks of human rights violations and trauma. His misery does not consist of one grievous event but it is a continuous process of horrific incidents, it exits as a subalternity continuum. While the trauma becomes a never-ending process delineating Byapari's individual pain, anguish, and physical torture, but still, he gives voice to all the other Dalit refugees who remain voiceless to this day. He acts as a witness within the dynamics of human rights discourse and brutality inquiries by making public what is private. It is almost parallel with a Künstlerroman in which Byapari's victimised self rises to an educated self and the recognition of his self-dignity; as he charts his trials, tribulations, and survival for existence. The atrocity is beyond what has been portrayed in the

autobiography. It is an autobiography of trauma, agony, loss, and survival. Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography is an amalgamation of both a social narrative and a personal account. One of the most prominent attributes of his autobiography is the self-assertion of his Namasudra identity. At times he proudly declares it and at other times he asserts it out of frustration, rage, and disgust. The self-narrative explores his Chotolok location in the periphery of the hierarchical society. He had lived many lives from being a Dalit refugee, an illiterate child labourer, cook, rickshaw-wallah, alcoholic, criminal, Naxalite revolutionary, and prisoner. The autobiography is packed with unconventional similes, abhorrent metaphors, and parallelism to reflect upon his social self, assert his Dalit identity, depict his traumatic experiences, and portray the life of rootless Namasudra devoid of respect and honour in society.

Byapari portrays the dark world of crime, poverty, displacement, and the failure of rehabilitation schemes. Each chapter of the book unravels excruciating pain, trauma, resistance, and retaliation against the hidden apartheid and hypocrisy of the existing hegemonic political and social framework. He rejects traditional romantic aestheticism to expose the crisis of political situations and personal sufferings. He adopts the technique of alternative aestheticism to unveil the hidden truths of the Bhadralok society. Byapari begins his life narrative with an emphatic 'I' to announce profusely his Dalit identity: "I was born into an impoverished Dalit family."[1] He makes the assertion of his marginal self. Byapari tries to discard the humiliating identity of an illiterate Chotolok and emancipates into the new intellectual figure by entering the world of letters inside the prison and bringing steadiness to his otherwise fluid refugee life. His odyssey from the struggle for existence to the path of a celebrated writer and making a place in the prestigious literary world and Bhadralok society is remarkable. Byapari's autobiography is both a self-reflection and a socio-political account of the trauma of a Dalit refugee in Partition and post-Partition West Bengal.

## The Uprooted: Displaced Home and Fragmented Identities

Manoranjan Byapari was born around 1950-1951 into a destitute Namasudra family in a place called Turuk-khali which was near Pirichpur village in the district of Barisal in East Pakistan. Despite the improvised situation, their community was helpful and there was no dearth of kindness as they would help Byapari's family in time of need. Even though his neighbours, relatives, and friends were poor and belonged to the same Namasudra community, they would still try their best to set aside for Byapari's family a handful of rice. His implementation of social realism draws the attention of the readers to the post-Partition socio-political conditions of the Namasudra community as a means to expose and critique the hegemonic power structures behind their harsh realities. From the very beginning of his autobiography, there is a strong resonance of self-assertion: "There are quite a few Manoranjans, and also quite a few Byaparis. But you will not find another Manoranjan Byapari. I am only one. In me is the beginning and in me is the end."[2] He also makes the

readers aware of his improvised condition—a life bereft of happiness. It also shows the vicious circle of eternal marginalisation which is a cycle of subalternity continuum: "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."[3] His family was pushed into a life of darkness and traumatic existence but still, he managed to survive on his own will, resource, and strength. At a tender age, Byapari along with his family of four (grandfather, father, mother, and his brother Chitta) were forced to migrate to India because of the fear of the communal riots. They arrived in India at Shiromanipur camp in the district of Bankura. Byapari's life narrative is based on his social position as a Dalit and his personal traumatic experiences as a refugee. The autobiography portrays that his social knowledge stems from his social position and experiences that he had endured rather than from any educational institution of production of knowledge.

## The Wounds of Partition: Life as a Refugee

Gail Omvedt observes that in most of the Dalit self-narratives, the "image of the oppressed mother, the toiling father, both often pushing the son (not so often, sadly, the daughter) to education in spite of grinding poverty; the vulnerability to violence in the form of rape, casual beatings and more vicious atrocities…the formed and humiliating labour represented by caste-based 'duties'" are a recurrent theme.[4] This is also true in the case of Byapari. He along with his family were forced to migrate and take shelter at Shiromanipur camp from 1953 to 1954. Again, they were displaced to the Doltala camp in 1960. The educated upper castes or Bhadraloks were unwilling to stay at the camps with the other poverty-stricken, illiterate, lower-castes Chotoloks like *Muchi* (cobbler), *Nama* (non-Aryan), *Jele* (fisherman), and most of the upper castes "with the help of the caste Hindu officials or ministers in West Bengal, managed a space within or near Calcutta…because the primary condition to being given land here was education and the Bhadralok identity- an identity that was unaffordable to all but the upper castes."[5]

His father, Bipin Byapari, used to travel many miles and sat in the railway station in the prospect of work with his spade, *gamchha* (coarse cotton cloth), and basket. But the majority of the time, he would not get work, he would return home soulless, empty-handed, and famished. Byapari's family was dependent on his father as he was the sole breadwinner. But unfortunately, this extreme exhaustion took a toll on his health making him bedridden, lashing about on the bed with pain like a slaughtered spectre. As luck would have it, his sister Manju died due to starvation. Byapari laments that no language could possibly describe the pain of starvation, poverty, penury, and destitution which they had to endure. Those past unbearable days could not be possibly expressed in nice poetic-sounding words as it would not do any justice to the victims. Ironically, words failed to describe the excruciating misery that they were going through. It echoes Gail Omvedt's

observation on the pervading themes and social realism in Dalit autobiography:

> I have seen my father writhing in agony as he inched towards death, a day at a time, without any medical treatment. I have seen my mother living the life of a rat in its dark hole, unable to step outside into the sunshine when the cold and dank interior chilled her. I have seen my sister die of starvation, and watched helplessly my three other siblings exhausted by malnutrition and fasting. My aged grandmother went around the market collecting rotten or worm-eaten potatoes and eggplants and papayas. Trying to squeeze what little nourishment she could from these rejected foodstuff.[6]

Byapari then took the decision to take his destiny into his own hands and decided to run away. He decided to run away to an uncertain future as at that tender age he had no idea about the atrocities of the world that lay outside.

Byapari's autobiography gives the readers microscopic insights from the perspective of the subcontinental Partition diaspora and highlights the interface between nations, forced migration, statelessness, displacement, and transnational consciousness. The events following the 1947 Partition of India saw an exodus of Bengali Dalit refugees from East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) to West Bengal. In Bengal-East Pakistan, the Partition occurred in a gradual, complex, multi-faceted, and successive process that was stained by the personal disaster that resulted in suffering and traumatic memories of many uprooted refugees. In the first wave, mainly upper-caste Bengali Bhadraloks migrated from East Bengal prior to the 1947 Partition. But with their substantial social power and capital, they managed to negotiate with the government and received proper rehabilitation in the new land. But in the second wave, from the 1950s onwards, mostly lower castes migrated. The Namasudra refugees had to flee their homeland for the possibility of communal violence and ostracism. They were forced to take refuge in government refugee camps. They had to endure a persistent amount of displacement and segregation unleashed by the post-colonial government. Manoranjan Byapari explained how the displaced Namasudra refugees were later forced outside of West Bengal to alienated places like Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Orissa, Bihar, Dandakaranya in Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. He argued that the segregation of the people in the refugee camps was based on caste identity. Byapari acknowledges both the failure of refugee rehabilitation and the issue of caste and bigotry associated with the Partition and the politics of forced migration and displacement. He realised in his early days as a refugee that not all refugees are equal. The condition of the camps was abysmal. The rehabilitation camps were associated with a space of exile, alienation, and imprisonment. They were misplaced as the "dispersal of refugees" and were forced to accept the new resettlement because the government feared the potential of dangerous political mobilisation in the refugee camps; which happened quite often and even Byapari's father got beaten by the police because he protested. "As my father groaned and cursed his fate deep into the night, I swore with my childish intelligence to take

revenge on the police who had beaten my father."[7] Hence, the Namasudra refugees were relegated to the margins. He indirectly equalised the forceful and selective rehabilitation of the uprooted refugees as misplacement and asserted the failure of the government to uplift the Namasudra community. The whole process was described as a cataclysmic failure.

## The Dispersal of Refugees: Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi

Byapari's uncle, after much discussion, advised his father to migrate and join them in Dandakaranya. So even though his father, who once hated the idea of Dandakaranya agreed to take a chance and join his brothers there. He was unaware of the impending dangers that were lurking in the dark jungles of Dandakaranya. He had no prior knowledge of what was to come in their ways and push them further into the margins. Byapari's family was again displaced. The Dandakaranya Project came into existence in September 1958 to rehabilitate the displaced refugees in the districts of Bastar in Chhattisgarh, and Koraput in Orissa. The arid land was unsuitable for agriculture and was already inhabited by the tribals. It was supposed to provide homes for the residuary refugees, but the conditions were abysmal. The displacement was hence an endemic process. The Namasudras were selectively chosen for this project as the majority of them were farmers by profession and hence they could cultivate the lands.

> Our usual tools did not work on this…It would take days to eke a decent living out of this land. To make matters worse, this was the month of May. The sun burnt our backs with the bite of a hundred angry snakes. It was the notorious loo of Bastar which was blowing, causing blisters to form upon our bodies…everyday of life lived here was an added pain. I would return to Bengal.[8]

Many frustrated refugees deserted Dandakaranya due to a lack of basic amenities and migrated back to West Bengal and founded their shelter at Marichjhapi in Sundarbans in 1977. Dandakaranya has been examined as an adjunct to the Marichjhapi massacre. The Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 is considered one of the catastrophic events in the history of postcolonial Bengal where hundreds of Dalit refugees were killed mercilessly. When the Namasudra refugees settled in Marichjhapi, the state government committed inconceivable abomination and violence upon them to cast them out of Marichjhapi immediately. The Marichjhapi chapter was one of the most fearful incidents and dark history of the Bengal genocide where hundreds of Dalit refugees were beaten, starved to death, killed, and raped. It was basically a result of the state government's crude politics of policy reversal in the case of refugee rehabilitation and resettlement in the Reserve Forest area. Jhuma Sen rightly posits in her article, *The Silence of Marichjhapi*, "Partition resulted in the loss of bargaining power of the Dalits because, being divided along religious lines of Hindu and Muslims, they became politically minorities in both countries."[9] Despite the government's eagerness to publicise the

migration of refugees as an instance of successful rehabilitation but in reality, it was characterised by mismanagement due to a lack of planning. It was in fact adversely inadequate, delayed, and ultimately a complete failure.

> The treachery inflicted upon the poor people who returned from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi island. Marichjhapi. A ruthless saga of massacre and rape, arson and plunder that is comparable to the likes of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Perpetrated by the state on a small, riverine island nearly forty years ago, the brutality of the violence would be difficult to match in the annals of human history.[10]

Byapari's father and younger brother Chitta passed away before he could meet them. His father was already badly injured after he broke his ribs on being beaten by the police at Marichjhapi but ultimately his *Baba* (father) could not bear the pain of the death of his younger son and sadly, out of grief and bad health, he passed away. Byapari laments about the continuous forms of pain and brutality that he has to endure where atrocity came in incessant waves, one after the other. Before even he could pause and reflect upon it, another gruesome violence would come up in his way.

## Jeeban: Byapari's Alter Ego

Byapari significantly uses an alter ego named "Jeeban" which means life in Bengali. Byapari's alter ego Jeeban becomes a symbolic character that carries out the function of "destruction" and "reconstruction". He becomes the allegorical figure of the Namasudra's eternal struggle with the hegemonic society and its corrupted people. The struggles of Jeeban become an example of the struggles of the entire Namasudra community. The third person Jeeban almost becomes a metaphor for the vicious cycle of subalternity. It shows his perennial attempt to establish and discover the figure and meaning of the "self". Byapari's autobiography perfectly characterises Gopal Guru's theory of "counter-rejection."[11] The agony of Jeeban, thus, became an exemplary fragment of every Namasudra refugee's struggle for existence. The body of Jeeban becomes a site of appropriation and a locality of oppression. Both the self and the body sustain torrents of pain, mental anguish, and humiliation. Here the trauma attaches to both the body and the soul. Byapari's usage of "traumatic realism" centers around the Dalit body as the foremost site of marginalisation. The wound scarred the psyche of his Namasudra self. The pain was so raw and intense that he dissociates himself and gives himself an alter ego named Jeeban. The traumatic realism in Byapari's narrative is so intense while depicting the raw vulnerable trauma of his childhood that Byapari takes refuge in the third person. He named his younger self Jeeban who got molested, cheated, beaten, raped, and exploited. He takes the readers on a wild ride while narrating the dark times of his life. Amulya Thakur, ironically, a Brahmin who wore the sacred thread around his neck, and was the preacher of purity and dignity molested Jeeban. "But this was against my desires and my cultural conditioning. My body and mind revolted and the word rushed out from my throat, 'No'…In much the same way that this

young boy, call him Jeeban, slipped and fell into dark and harsh times. Every station has a certain disembodied person about it."[12]

The autobiography also shows how soft casteism was still prevalent in postcolonial Bengal as the tea stall owner bluntly boasts that he gave Jeeban the job because they belonged to the same Kayastha caste. Jeeban had to lie about his surname to survive in this cruel world. Here Byapari exposes the fact that surnames are signified by the concept of impure, dishonesty, and discrimination. Sardonically, the tea stall cheated him and never paid him his dues. His surname carries the connotation of caste hierarchy and a sense of otherness. Byapari's rage began to engulf him and he became vexed with himself, with the Bhadralok society, and with humanity in general. Jeeban got sexually abused by a *havildar* (police), ironically donning a Hanuman tattoo. The fact that the havildar's job was to protect the citizen, but his narrative grotesquely exposes how the havildar violently traumatised Jeeban's body and soul. It shows the hypocrisy of the power structure for gross violations of the people's expectations.

> All that humanity had aspired for with its civilization, its culture, its traditions, were pushed back in the violent savagery of that night. Like a hungry hyena, the havildar had pounced upon the helpless Jeeban…as the havildar poured dirty, sticky, foul indignity onto Jeeban's body and soul…betraying all that was held sacrosanct by humanity, all that was decreed by the vocation of the police, the man raped Jeeban. He raped Jeeban's soul, his spirit, his identity.[13]

Byapari employs the narrative strategy of distancing while depicting the horrific incidents of his boyhood. The pain, humiliation, and starvation described in those episodes were so raw and excruciating that Byapari distances himself as a third-person narrator named Jeeban. While doing so he is able to evoke the unfiltered emotions that violated both his body and soul. Despite Byapari's hesitation to be labelled as a victim, the little boy Jeeban who once run away from his home to make his future better can only be portrayed as one sufferer of the inhumane society. In depicting Jeeban as the third-person narrator, Byapari exposes the dark side of the society where a little child had to face the worst kind of abuse and exploitation at the hands of the protector.

## Cursed from Birth

Byapari had a myriad of identities from cowherd, tea stall boy, child labourer, cook, sweeper, criminal, jailbird, and rickshaw-wallah. His multifaceted roles articulate the pangs of his anguish, and his experiences of the darker side of the Bengali society which was tinged with violence, abuse, hatred, cruelties, and discrimination. Violence and humiliation came crashing repeatedly like waves in his life as if he was cursed from his birth. When Byapari was a cook, he got a job at a rice-eating ceremony. He did an excellent job at cooking as people were happy with it and praised him but unfortunately, his joy was marred when they found out about his caste identity. He had to endure extreme forms of humiliation and shame for it. By birth, Byapari belonged to

a Namasudra family that has been stereotyped as impure, criminal, and untouchable. Here we again see how the hegemonic caste hierarchy played its part and exposed the Bhadraloks who were still practicing discrimination and the notion of untouchability in the garb of the progressive liberal minds. In the ceremony when it was revealed that Byapari and his friend belonged to the Chandal[14] community, the upper castes humiliated them by making them do sit-ups while holding on to their ears. They even forced them to bend down and rub their noses against the ground. Byapari and his friend were filled with shame and disgust and they had to flee away from there at the break of the dawn. They did not even bother to wait for their dues as their souls were filled with shame. The incident must just be simple fun for the upper castes, but for them, it was the ultimate form of discrimination and ignominy. In another incident, the party members started beating Byapari by tying him around the lamppost for no fault of his. He was held to be the scapegoat as the Bhadraloks always looked upon the Chotoloks as criminals. The main accused was excused because he was Kayastha by caste and his father was well off. Byapari here points out the ways the Bhadralok society discriminates against people and divides them on the basis of caste and class. Here the Bhadraloks represented the "haves" and the Chotoloks represented the "have-nots". The Bhadraloks did not feel guilty about beating the "have-nots" as they knew that they won't have the power to retaliate. This was an example of a political necessity. Byapari starts searching for alternative deviant values thus discarding the traditional Hindu values. He swore against Hindu God and denounced God as he lamented that God was never beside him even when Byapari was an ardent follower. He summons Satan and professes himself as a worshipper of the rival. He asked Satan to give him immense strength. By doing so, he uses resistance and revolt to cripple and dismantle all forms of atrocity. He subverts the practice of worshipping the traditional religion. Byapari defied the traditional boundaries of structured religion. Jaydeep Sarangi, and Angana Dutta postulate,

> Submitting to the 'devil' frees him from the obligation of being non-violent- which is one of the celebrated qualities of the elite conceptions of the divine. Violence and aggression saved his life and restored human rights to his fellow suffers frequently. It is a painful narration of how long-standing exploitation and oppression can push one towards a life of violence in self-defence—that maybe be unfairly labelled as deviant. With great care he unearths the situations which may push the underclass towards 'deviance'- as understood by the elites.[15]

Manoranjan Byapari was drawn into the Naxalite movement more because of his need for survival in the new land than its ideology. Byapari got caught in two major revolutions. The first movement he was associated with was the militant Naxalite movement but he was way too young to grasp the intensity and the horrors of the revolution that was yet to come. The second revolution he got associated with was Mukti Morcha which led him to Shankar Guha Neogi at Bastar. This time he pushed himself into active politics. Even though he did not agree with all the ideologies, the revolution

was ingrained in his blood. The pain of an empty stomach made him travel from one place to another. Certain situations forced him into the revolution. Byapari met Shankar Guha Neogi, who was the founder of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha in Dalli. Byapari's meeting with Neogi marked the beginning of his short-term career in politics. He was amused by Neogi's ascetic lifestyle and his smiling face despite all the sacrifices he made in his life. Byapari idolised Neogiji for what his Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha stood for. Neogiji initiated many health programs like anti-liquor efforts, education for all, and their own health center called the Shaheed Hospital. Byapari is eternally grateful for the impact that Neogiji had on his life. Without his help, he and his family could have possibly been wiped away into the darkness. Neogiji was as significant as an epic warrior because he was the protector and saviour for hundreds of people like Byapari. He went to any extent to save the poor and put himself in grave danger in hours of their need. Unfortunately, Sankar Guha Neogi was murdered in 1991 by the forces of the capitalist class. After his demise, Byapari vowed to continue his mission by letting his grief be the strength to fight against injustice.

## Introduction to the World of Letters

Byapari was booked under Sections 148/149/307, clause 3/5. The two years of imprisonment he wondered how his life could be worthy. He was then encouraged to learn to read and write in jail. He called the other prisoner his *Guru* (mentor). The prisoner inspired Byapari that if the green sapling can grow from the hard cement cornice so can Byapari in the prison. He motivated Byapari to search for joy and hope despite being imprisoned. He encouraged him to yearn for more despite Byapari being enclosed within the prison cell.

> Look at that cornice of the National Library. See that tiny green sapling there? How do you think it grows there? How does it draw water from that hard cement cornice?…The truth is there is water and nourishment in that hard concrete too. The proof of that is the living sapling. It would have died otherwise. But its roots yearned for water, searched for water, and found it. What is the bottom line, then? He who searches, shall find…Search. Here too you shall find joy and hope.[16]

In prison, he was introduced to the world of letters. Thus, began Byapari's odyssey from the dark world of illiteracy to the world of knowledge. Byapari first started writing with twigs on the prison floors and later Bhuvan Sepoy gave him chalks so that he could practice his letters. He slowly became engrossed in the world of letters. He started writing on the prison cement floor making words with the newly learned letters. He was so bewitched by the world of his dreams that one night in the jail he dreamt of a bright angel-like figure who conveyed that the letters written on the prison floor are not simply just letters, but Byapari's emancipated life. He had an insatiable hunger for learning. Byapari donated blood in the prison and got a pen to practice his letters and become a writer. His thirst for education was unstoppable as his

unlettered darkness had made his way to the world of knowledge through his experience in jail. The wheels of fate did turn for Byapari when he met with Mahasweta Devi by chance. He was carrying her on his rickshaw when he asked the meaning of the word *jijibisa*. Devi was surprised at the question and responded the word meant "the will to live." The word is synonymous with Byapari's life as he survived in this diabolic world because of his desire to survive. The word jijibisa is the quintessence of Byapari's life. Mahasweta Devi then encouraged him to write about his life as a rickshaw-wallah. His first work entitled 'I Drive Rickshaws' got published in the January-March issue of *Bartika* in 1981. Thus, with the help of Mahasweta Devi, Byapari voyaged from the world of darkness to the world of dignity and respect. Manoranjan Byapari became the epitome of resistance. His knowledge is born out of his struggle, anger, protest, resistance, and retaliation. His accomplishment is born out of his blood, tears, sweat, and hunger. He uses his literature as a medium of war and his pen as a sword to fight for the marginalized and oppressed people and give them voices to dismantle the crippling injustices meted against them in the world of Bhadraloks. Byapari concludes, "Educate yourselves. Education will engender the conscious, and consciousness will engender revolution. May you be the winds of change that bring revolution to the stagnant pond of society."[17]

## Epilogue

When Byapari returned to Calcutta, he was introduced to the writer Alka Saraogi, who created a character in his name in her novel *Shesh Kadambari*. This acted as an impetus for his re-entry to the literary world after a few years of hiatus. But poverty and hunger made it impossible for him to follow the respectable life of letters. Despite all the hindrances, writing was his only resort and hope of living a dignified life. His body became weak, and he could no longer fight physically so he made the pen his sword, and his work a battlefield. So, when he detested the oppressors of society, he waged a furious battle against those oppressors through his writings. He killed them in his narratives. Byapari confesses that he harbours a weakness for the Namasudra community. Acknowledging the ills of the Dalits, he knows in his heart that they are not the same as the self-centered corrupted Bhadraloks. Byapari understands that in postcolonial Bengal both caste and class somewhat became inseparable in community-building.[18] Some may condemn him as a Namasudra refugee, the others may condemn him as an illiterate rickshaw-wallah and criminal. But the truth remains that Byapari has been discriminated against by both groups. The upper castes prohibited the entry of the Chotoloks into the domain of the Bhadralok literary world. The Bhadraloks resented Byapari's ingress into their intellectual domain. They had a clear distinction between the world of Bhadralok and Chotolok. Byapari refused to bow down to this oppressive discrimination. He had to wage a double battle. He uses his narratives to vent out anger, resistance, and retaliation against the social hierarchy which was responsible for his marginalisation. All his works are born out of resentment, anger, and pain. Consequently, it becomes a tool

for the oppressed to resist crippling discrimination and protest against the prejudiced social order and make their voices heard. Byapari blatantly exposes that there is a difference between "them" and "us" as "they" have restricted the entry of the Dalits into the intellectual world. The Bhadraloks resented the entry of a Namasudra into the world of letters. He openly vouches that it is a battle that he is willing to fight. Coincidently, the Bhadraloks have done Byapari a favour as he gets immense strength out of anger and not love. It acts as an impetus to keep his fury alive. Hence, his books are born out of this hatred and anger.

In the Epilogue, Byapari confesses that even today when he closes his eyes, he sees the young boy suffering from pangs of hunger. But Byapari tells the young boy to rebel, break, and destroy the oppressive and hegemonic society. He urges the young boy to go ahead and use whatever he has access to get out of the ashes and arise a new life like a phoenix. Byapari ushers him to restore his life after being destroyed by society.[19] His later life in Calcutta is winded up in a reflective form. Byapari delivers a powerful message of hope and reassures the young boy that the Dalit consciousness and human spirit in his newly awakened soul can annihilate any form of formidable obstacle. He urges the young boy to break the shackles of marginalisation. He tells him to rebel against the hegemony of the unequal power structures. The Bhadraloks failed to appreciate the hard work and literary merits of the Chotoloks and they fail to explore the complex labyrinth of their marginalisation and the eternal struggle for existence. Their literary works are always discredited as the works of Chotoloks by the elite Bhadralok critics and readers. Byapari's self-narrative is marked by seething pain, anger, resistance, and retaliation. The Namasudras held the hegemonic power structures and socio-political influences responsible for their sufferings in their discourse.[20] As a matter of fact, they were compelled to use their pen as a weapon and voice their lives as they were victims of repeated marginalisation, violence, and humiliation. The majority of the elite Bhadralok intelligentsia detest the literary product of the Dalits as they consider it unworthy. This attitude makes it impossible for the Bengali Dalits to get their works published by any mainstream publishing house. Manoranjan Byapari being a victim learned it the hard way as his works mostly went unnoticed by the Bhadralok society. Byapari hence urges the readers to lift the tapestry of darkness and see the naked truth of the hidden marginalisation of the Bengali Dalits. When one accepts the truth of casteism in Bengal, one can see the horrid conditions the Namasudras had to sustain. His blunt narration throws light on the veil of deception and polished hypocrisy of the Bhadralok society. "Here I am. I know I am not entirely unfamiliar to you. You've seen me a hundred times in a hundred ways. Yet if you insist that you do not recognize me, let me explain myself in a little greater detail, so you will not feel that way anymore. When the darkness of unfamiliarity lifts, you will feel, why, yes, I do know this person. I've seen this man."[21] With the help of unique Bengali idioms and turn of phrase, Byapari narrates his hapless and fragile situation where he had to endure extreme poverty, starvation, and malnutrition. Despite being repeatedly exploited by all, his intense emotions of agony and anger take the form of his self-narrative.

In the face of eternal adversities, Byapari gives the readers a ray of hope and exemplifies gracefully that willpower is all needed to survive any form of atrocity. His awakened soul can overcome the most intimidating barrier. Even though life appeared to have spread obstacles in his way, Byapari still manages to survive despite falling down a few times. His literary products are born out of his misery and suffering. Byapari's autobiography cannot typically be ascribed as a Dalit testimony because the sense of individuality, loneliness, solitude, and fragmentation is too strong. His self-narrative is all about resistance, fury, revolt, and vengeance. He bluntly shows the difference and the division between the Bhadraloks and Chotoloks. Many incidents in his autobiography also show how caste and class amalgamate into one to form an identity. Evidently, the truth remains that there is still a visible division between the Bhadraloks and the Chotoloks. The reality of equality will remain an illusion as long as caste discrimination will persist in Bengali society. His writings convey the frustration of being marginalised by the hegemonic system. The alternative aesthetics of his life-narrative draw strength from this anger and portrays the familiar reality of an oppressed Namasudra refugee being exploited by the powerful Bhadralok society that continuously denies him opportunities and privileges. This autobiography explores the gloomy side of the otherwise unknown tales of an oppressed Namasudra.[22]

The unknown lanes of Calcutta tell the story of life in the margins, about the existence of the "other" fourth world, the existence of the "other" people whose voices were either silenced or unheard, their faces unseen, and those who lived in the fringes of the Bhadralok society. Byapari exposes the fact that caste discrimination is more an issue of unequal power dynamics and disparate social forces. His story is from a perspective of a Dalit refugee from the periphery of society who had to struggle for mere food and shelter. His autobiography is composed within a sociological and historical framework. Thus, Byapari's alternative aesthetic is quite unlike that of the contemporary Bhadralok writers. His self-narrative is a tale of a desperate struggle in a world of many unknown faces to secure a respectable identity and a dignified life. It is an impeccable saga of becoming a known face and making a due space for himself in the intellectual domain of Bengali society. The ability of a Bengali Dalit refugee in becoming an established writer in the Bhadralok literary world, the jijibisa of a rickshaw-wallah acquiring the identity of a published writer constitutes the prodigious in Byapari.

## Notes

[1] Manoranjan Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, trans. Sipra Mukherjee (New Delhi: SAGE, 2018), 1–2.
[2] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 4.
[3] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 3–4.
[4] Gail Omvedt, preface to *The Poisoned Bread*, ed. Arjun Dangle (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2020), ix-xviii.
[5] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 20–1.
[6] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 37–8.

[7] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 28.
[8] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 135–6.
[9] Jhuma Sen, "The Silence of Marichjhapi," Bangalnama, July 6, 2009, https://bangalnama.wordpress.com/2009/07/06/the-silence-of-marichjhapi/.
[10] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal* Life, 235–6.
[11] Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (December 14–20, 2002): 5003–9.
[12] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 56–7.
[13] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 96.
[14] The Namasudra community was earlier known as Chandal. The term "Chandal" is derogatory and considered a casteist slur. They are lower caste people who are relegated to the margins of society. By the late nineteenth century, the Namasudras transitioned from the Chandal identity.
[15] Jaydeep Sarangi, and Angana Dutta. "The Wheel that Turned: Manoranjan Byapari Writes Back in *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*," The Apollonian, vol.1, no.1 (Sept. 2014), https://theapollonianjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/ta-1-1_sar.pdf.
[16] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 197.
[17] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 257.
[18] Manoranjan Byapari, "From Wheels to Stalls" interview by Jaydeep Sarangi, *Lapis Lazuli* II, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 1–8.
[19] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, 349.
[20] Manoranjan Byapari, and Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 41 (October 13, 2007): 4116–20.
[21] Byapari, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, ix.
[22] Sipra Mukherjee, "Manoranjan Byapari," in *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak, k. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Thiara (New Delhi: Routledge, 2020), 15–29.