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Resistance and Redefining 'Chandal' Identity in *Interrogating My Chandal Life*

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Abstract

Freedom to participate in social and cultural discourse in daily life is crucial for the realization of the country as a real and independent entity. The quotidian nature of nationalism must be interactive rather than revered as an abstract concept attainable through perseverance and sacrifice. A considerable portion of civil society in India intentionally refrains from interacting with the untouchables or executing measures to improve the severe circumstances of Dalits. The upper-caste imposition of a social boycott against the untouchables reflects this anti-national and illiberal tendency. Through this article, the researcher discusses the role of education as an emancipatory instrument for Dalits through a critical examination of Manoranjan Byapari's autobiographical account. It also demonstrates the pursuit of knowledge functions not only as an engine for financial advancement but, more importantly, as a profound act of defiance against historically entrenched oppression and epistemic injustice.

Keywords:

Dalit literature, Education, Caste hierarchy, Social mobility, Freedom, Epistemic injustice.

Introduction:

In the contemporary era, the concept of human rights protection has been a topic of critical discourse among social scientists, scholars, philosophers, public intellectuals, and statesmen

globally. The increasing significance of rights-based discourse has compelled scholars and politicians to reevaluate the power dynamics, exclusionary behaviours, and disparities that affect individuals and communities. Within this wider context, Dalit literature has taken on a crucial function as an instrument for the articulation, contestation, and reimagining of issues related to dignity, justice, and acknowledgement. In India's intricate socioeconomic and historical context, the Dalit population has suffered decades of persistent discrimination entrenched in the unchanging community classifications, where their experiences were often marginalized by societal and spiritual constraints that classified them as the underprivileged (Ramteke 1823).

From a human justice perspective, literary depictions of marginalized, impoverished, victimized, and underprivileged communities gain distinct importance. These works not only record suffering but also expose the structural and institutionalized character of discrimination, thereby contesting prevailing narratives that normalize the experiences of the oppressed. In India, writings by Dalit authors have arisen as a significant and essential body of literary works that highlight caste-based oppression, abuse, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. In the last few decades, a wide range of Dalit literature has been produced on the Indian literary platform with great energy. The works include poetry, novels, short tales, biographies, memoirs and autobiographies. These works have all tried to change and challenge the historically unfavourable images and deep-seated biases that have long affected Dalit life and culture. Contemporary Dalit writers have transformed literary expression into a vital tool for cultural reclamation and social assertion.

Dalit authors have used these different genres to look at, reinterpret, and honour the inherent value and ethical behaviour of Dalit culture, which has often been misunderstood or ignored by mainstream upper-caste writers. Dalit literature emphasizes ethical qualities, communal solidarity, and work ethics by offering an authentic counter-narrative to centuries of cultural denigration. Prashant Ingole discusses in his article that Dalit literature changes beauty and storytelling rules and gives a voice to those excluded from India's literary mainstream. Dalit authors have used these different genres to look at, reinterpret, and honour the inherent value and ethical behaviour of Dalit culture, which has often been misunderstood or ignored by stories from higher castes (Ingole 91).

The emergence of these various literary forms indicates not only a mere diversification of style or genre but also it embodies an intellectual and cultural transformation. By putting the Dalit experience at the core of literary production, these works redefine identity and belonging in ways that fight against caste discrimination while also promoting dignity, humanity, and social justice as

important cultural ideals in Dalit literary works.

Rangnatha and Sunitha in their article titled “Dalit Movement: Quest for Identity to Social Equality", discuss the etymology of the word ‘Dalit’.The word ‘Dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘dal’, which literally means ‘cutoff’’ ‘oppressed’, 'downtrodden', 'broken', or 'reduced to pieces'. So, the word refers to people who are cut off from or far apart from the rest of humanity. People use the word ‘Varnashrama Dharma’ to talk about castes and classes that have been looked down upon.

The word encompasses the downtrodden subaltern castes and classes, including Scheduled Castes(SCs),ScheduledTribes(STs). Gandhi called Dalits ‘Harijans’, the British called them ‘Depressed Classes’, and the Indian government called them ‘Scheduled Castes’ and Scheduled Tribes.’There were additional names for Dalits, like ‘Pariahs’, ‘Mlecha’, ‘Chandala’, ‘Panchama’, ‘Avarna’, and ‘Adishudra’.(p.76)

Reclaiming and Redefining the 'Chandal' Labelas ‘Namasudra’:

Dalit consciousness in Bengal significantly evolved during the Partition era, initially inspired by Matua Sahitya, which arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the guidance of Harichand Thakur. Harichand Thakur, as the spiritual and social reformer of the Matua community from the Namashudra group which was previously labelled as ‘Chandals’ that led the opposition against this derogatory term.This religious framework functioned integrally as a social movement for the Namasudras, with its devotional songs frequently conveying messages intended to bolster the self-confidence and collective ego of the depressed community (Abraham et al.). Building upon this foundation, the Matua Andolan functioned as a driving force for the social rejuvenation of the depressed classes in Bengal by propagating the idea of social change among the masses. Although the group was formally designated as Namashudra in1911,its social and financial situation largely remained unchanged. His son, Guruchand Thakur, carried out that revolutionary objective by collaborating with Christian missionaries to establish institutions of learning for Namashudras, while cultivating self-awareness, collective assertion, and a critique of caste oppression.

The life and literature of Manoranjan Byapari must be contextualized within this historical continuum of resistance, self-respect, and educational enlightenment. Byapari manifests not only as an individual author but also as a vital embodiment of the Matua-led Dalit assertion in Bengal. Born in 1950 into a Namashudra family in rural East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), he inherited the legacy of caste stigma and systemic hardship that previous reformers had contested. Subsequent the

Partition, his family relocated toWest Bengal as refugees, where their dislocation exacerbated caste marginalization. Lack of formal schooling and forced into laborious employment, Byapari's existence epitomizes the incomplete endeavour of Dalit liberation as envisioned by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. Through reading and writing, he converts hereditary degradation into intellectual protest, illustrating the progression of Dalit consciousness from collective reform movements to radical autobiographical self-expression.

Byapari's literary oeuvre spans articles, short stories, and books that collectively focus on the experiences of Dalits.It is his autobiographical narratives that provide the most direct insight into the contours of his life. His autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* which is known as *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* in Bengali, was initially published in 2012, Subsequently, author Sipra Mukherjee translated it into English and published it in 2018. The narrative embodies his personal experience of marginalization and oppression and also serves as a testimony through which one can examine broader social structures of caste, class and religion. This article will critically examine Byapari's autobiography, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, which mainly focuses on humiliation and suffering, the cultivation of resilience, the transformative role of education and the use of writing as both a tool of self-expression and a means of liberation.

The Refugee Identity and its Humiliation:

Following India's attainment of its freedom, the partition of India became a curse for the Hindu inhabitants of East Pakistan who belonged to lower castes. After the partition of India, the Namasudras were forced to abandon their homes and seek refuge in India. In the beginning, it was fascinating to note that nobody desired to leave their home and establish themselves in a new country. Although, later, a section of Namasudra people started going to India under the leadership of Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, the other group of the Namasudra community were in favour of remaining in East Pakistan under the leadership of Jogendra Nath Mandal. The move led to a severe and tragic future. They were displaced. The migrants of the 1950s arrived burdened with horrific memories of brutality that would persist throughout their lives. After 1951, the migrants began encountering a multitude of additional challenges. During their train travel, they were robbed and deprived of all their possessions. Peasants were permitted to carry a maximum of fifty rupees per individual. Women were seized and mistreated under the cover of night. Individuals lost their life belongings in this catastrophic disaster. Numerous individuals were shot in the process. They lost

all connections with their homeland and emerged with a new identity designated as 'refugees'.

The Bhadralok (social elite group) refugees who relocated during the initial wave of migrants were provided the resources. After some time, the government also authorized them, and they were settled in colonies located in Calcutta and its vicinity. The condition of the Dalit peasants who arrived during the second wave was deplorable. They possessed limited resources, and anything they had was plundered throughout the rail journeys. They had been sent to various refugee camps located in the districts of Cooch Bihar, Nadia, 24-Parganas, Midnapur, and Burdwan. The concept of caste consistently captivates significant interest in India. It was essential in the distribution of the camps to the refugees. Peasants were enquired about their caste affiliation. The government exhibited a lack of appropriate care for their educational qualifications and occupations, categorizing them together as 'Namashudra Cultivators,' which was permanently inscribed on their registration cards. They encountered numerous challenges for survival. They were residing there like a herd of animals, devoid of privacy and sleeping in expansive areas together.

Byapari's childhood was characterized by severe impoverishment and caste-based oppression. This compel led him to undertake perilous in formal employment as a tea stall attendant, train porter, cook and similar roles. These exemplify the predicament of the Dalit youth, trapped in a culture that provided no alternative choices. These narratives of relentless labour emphasize not only financial difficulties but also profound existential deprivation that removes the lower-caste individual of autonomy, necessitating survival by way of physical exhaustion in the grim realities of urban Calcutta. The autobiography depicts early life as a critical battle ground where caste-class inter connections dictate living environments, converting young life into a domain of premature adultification and incessant humiliation.

Byapariʼs story commences with the statement “I was born into a destitute Dalit family in a location known as Turuk-Khali, adjacent to the village of Pirichpur, which was formerly part of the Barishal district in East Bengal” (Byapari 1). The opening line establishes the central theme of the narrative, primarily focusing on Byapari's struggle against class and caste. His family is part of the Namasudra community, classified as Dalit and regarded as untouchable. The connection to 'banished East Pakistan' comprises the discourse of partition and relocation. The initial chapters of his autobiography addresses his birth, his destitute Dalit familial origin and the economic condition of the Namasudra community.

“There was not a grain of rice to cook in our family at that time. I have heard from

> my mother that my father, who earned his income by working as a contractual labourer, could work like an ox. But at that time, he was out of work.As a result, the kitchen fire had not been lit for the past four or five days. Our neighbours, friends and relatives who were from our community were as poor as us, their daily earnings going only as far as that day. Yet, there being no dearth of tenderness in their hearts, they would set aside a handful of rice from their meals for my mother". (Byapari 1)

Poverty had cast a long shadow over their lives. It shaped and created an unforgettable memory in his childhood. Existence itself frequently resembled a daily nightmare, with food scarcity being accepted reality rather than an unusual occurrence. It was during these times of adversity that he comprehended the genuine essence of hunger. The sacred texts declare that human birth is a divine blessing, a rare privilege bestowed upon a soul only afterbirth as traversed forty million other lives. If human birth is regarded as the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, then Byapari's experience reveals the profound disparity between sacred ideals and actual existence. This uncommon existence has been moulded not by ease or spiritual satisfaction, but by hunger, scarcity, and unyielding adversity. Consequently, the concept of rarity assumes an ironic significance. It is uncommon not due to being endowed with ease or dignity, but because it has been shaped through struggle, reflecting the inequitable distribution of mankind itself.

Byapari's family, which is part of the Namasudra community, endured the traumatic experiences of displacement. Infant Byapari, along with his father, mother, one brother, and elderly grandmother, crossed the border with the hope of safety in a new country, but in reverse they faced only humiliation and nothing in favour. They stayed at Shiromonipur Camp in the Bankura district, where thousands of people had already set up brown tents on a field. He stated: "My father had had no desire to leave his land. I have heard my mother say that he used to have good relations with the Muslims and had been assured of his safety by them. But his brothers had already left and my father was hesitant to stay on with a broken family and a broken heart. Thus my family crossed the border. (Byapari 14)

Bankura's drought-prone climate and hot temperatures made it difficult for thousands of refugees to survive with only two tube wells supplying water for the inhabitants. During the struggle for existence, it took one or two hours to collect a bucket of water for domestic tasks. Byapari's family received rice and lentils for survival, as well as a cash allowance of twenty rupees and one anna

(equivalent to six paise). The author's description accurately depicts their struggle to subsist with limited government assistance in refugee camp. Byapari writes.

> The day after he would receive the dole, Baba would take half-a day's leave from theCampOfficeandgoofftoBishnupurChowkmarkettoshop.Thatwastheday we would have a full meal of fish curry and good rice. To our palates, fed for fourteen days on rotten, bug-ridden, dirty rice, the food that day would taste like manna from heaven. The government store houses from where we would collect our usual dole of rice possibly possessed very old stock. Some said these were fromthestoresofricethathadbeenkeptforthesoldiersduringtheSecondWorld War. Over the past years, the rice had been rotten and become inedible. When one cooked that rice, there would be a foul smell. For lack of kerosene, the cooking would be completed before the sunset and when this rice would be cooked in all the tents, the entire place would be filled with the bad smell. (Byapari 16)

All individuals experienced gastrointestinal ailments during the initial days due to the use of this rice. The camp lacked a sufficient lavatory facility for all refugees. Individuals would have to go into the adjacent overgrown lawns and fields to discharge themselves. Individuals in good health, particularly women, tried to carry out this daily routine prior to sunrise. However, individuals in poor health and the old could scarcely await suitable moments or locations to relieve themselves. They typically crouched behind the tents. Consequently, the back of the tents would typically be covered in a filthy expanse of human excrement. If one is not cautious, one may contaminate one's feet;that was a frequent occurrence for us and children. Due to gastrointestinal disorders and extreme heat, a procession of death commenced in the camp area continuously.

> It was like an epidemic of death, an endless procession of death on every side of us. People returned after cremating one dead body only to prepare for the cremation of another. There was a stagnant pond if one went about a mile down the road that went through the camp towards the east. It was here that the cremations were done. Throughout the day and night, the pyres would burn here and the sky would be clouded over by the smoke. It was mostly the elderly andthe children who died. The adults would be cremated and the children buried (Byapari 17).

The mortality rates in these camps remained alarmingly high due to disease, malnutrition, poverty,

and the absence of proper sanitation and medical facilities. The critical situations were intensifiedby insufficient accommodation, as evacuees received wax-covered canvas tents and wooden logs that were intolerable in the extreme July heat, resulting in countless fatalities. This biased approach starkly stood in opposition with the handling of high-caste refugees, who were allowed to settle in around 149 colonies near Kolkata, while Namasudras and other lower-caste communities were consistently refused equivalent chances and alternatively shifted to desolate, abandoned regions (Paunksnis 820).

By criticizing the severe plight that had haunted his family, Byapari's immature and curious intellect was incapable of uncovering any appropriate answers to the uncertainties and dilemmas that haunted him. Over whelmed by dissatisfaction and disorientation, he resolved to escape, seeking to make a more promising future for himself in the wider world. Byapari's financial difficulties and precarious upbringing made him vulnerable to sexual assault from a young age. Alongside social status and caste prejudice, he endured harassment and sexual assault committed by his employers, guardians. David Finkelhor delineates child sexual abuse in his publication “Child Sexual Abuse: Challenges Facing Child Protection and Mental Health Professionals” as transpiring under particular circumstances: when there exists a considerable age differential between the parties involved, when one party occupies a position of authority or assumes a care giving role with the child, or when the act is executed against the child's consent through force or deceit that lead to depression (Finkelhor 101).

Byapari's condition as an insecure, exploited youth with financial dependence fulfils all these conditions. Subsequent to the assault, Jeeban (Byapari) undergoes a profound sensation of the inner corruption and ethical degradation, despite being the victim of the violation. He begins to perceive himself as stained and unfit, internalizing the stigma placed on him by a system that associates violation with humiliation rather than unjust treatment. This tragedy intensifies his emotional solitude, amplifying his feeling of alienation from meaningful interactions with other people. Jeeban becomes acutely cognisant of the solitary that defines his existence, a loneliness marked by both physical isolation and psychological and social estrangement. His alienation from society emphasizes the lasting impact of violence, as the attack weakens his identity and reinforces his marginalized position within an uncaring and harsh social framework.

In the chapter "Self-Directed Disgust: Reciprocal Relationships with Sex and Sexual Dysfunction,” Jong and Borg elucidate that, in contrast to bodily impurity, which damages bodily health, this

conceptual pollution destroys the true nature of the core self, stemming from perceived actions against the inner self rather than the outside structure. Research suggests that at least two distinct pathways contribute to self-directed disgust following sexual assault: a disparity between the ideal and actual self resulting from harm to the represented self,and blame for oneself stemming from the conviction that one should have taken greater measures to avoid the violation(Jong 97).

Byapari suffered continuous shame and societal inequalities directed at disadvantaged communities, maturing in an environment marked by caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and social exclusion, thus observing the brutality of a society that denied dignity to the marginalized. Poverty represented not merely a lack of finances but also involved continual humiliation, invisibility, and the violation of essential human rights.Such situations sometimes generate deep animosity and a strong yearning for revolutionary change. Consequently, Byapari developed a growing admiration for Naxalite communist ideas and was subsequently incarcerated.

This changing phase of prison time enabled him to pursue self-education, acknowledging the significance of education after experiencing its deprivation from a young age (Mukherjee). A incarcerated Naxalite counselled him to make effective use of his term, contending that within the confines of prison, he would be shielded from external threats and have the opportunity to refine his reading and writing skills. Byapari contemplated this counsel, observing that individuals who remained incarcerated were those who triumphed over their sorrow rather than yielded to despondency. He pursued his studies by perusing texts supplied by fellow Naxalite inmates, grappling with challenging terminology and concepts such as ‘plagiarist,’ which his instructor characterized as a ‘learned thief’ who appropriates the ideas of others. In the absence of institutional educators, the communal setting of political prisoners developed a culture of collective learning, enabling Byapari to immerse himself in revolutionary literature and enhance his critical conscience.

Byapari converts individual embarrassment into a pivotal dialogue, shattering the enforced quiet while reclaiming liberty. Literacy transforms him into not merely a means for self-expression but also a potent instrument of resistance, helping the oppressed to transition from experiencedsuffering to articulated truth, from social obscurity to discursive visibility. Driven by his voracious hunger for knowledge and his fervent zeal for reading, Byapari recounted a memory of visiting a friend's residence, where he discovered volumes on ‘Marxist ideology,’ Maxim Gorky's ‘Mother,’ JohnReed's‘TenDaysThatShooktheWorld,’amongmanyother literaryproductions.Healsostudiedthe works of Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Tara Shankar, Mahasweta Devi, and

other esteemed authors within the boundaries of Bengali literature.

However, reading literature alone could not sustain him, which is why he commenced working as a rickshaw puller. He entirely rejects the lifestyle of radicals and begins earning an income by operating a rickshaw in Jadavpur, Kolkata. One day, in an unexpected event that he encountered Mahasweta Devi while travelling in his cart. He did not know who the passenger was in his cart, and, appearing as a well-educated person, he asked the passenger:

> "Didi, if you don't mind, can you tell me the meaning of jijibisha"?"She must have been surprised at the question. Forshe said.
> 'Jijibisha means the will to live. But where did you get this word? "In a book," I answered. A silence followed. There was no way I could see her face as she sat behind me on the passenger seat. Then she asked,How far have you studied?"
> Ihavenot beenabletogo toany school."
> Then how did you learn to read?"
> I learnt a little on my own,"Isaid.
> The wheels turned and we moved closer to our destination". (Byapari 220)

He requested her to tell the meaning of a challenging Bengali term he had encountered, that is, 'Jijibisha', a word denoting 'the desire to live', as Devi revealed to him. She was awestruck after hearing the word from a rickshaw driver, and she learned about his passion for learning and zeal to documenthislifestories.UnderMahaswetaDevi'sencouragement,Byaparicommencedhisliterary career with his inaugural short story, "Rickshaw Chalai" ("I am a Rickshaw Puller"), published in the Bengali magazine Bartika. The author depicts this period as undoubtedly the most pivotal in his life, as he emerged as a prominent writer who grabbed the attention of the literary world. The happeningofByapariinteractingwithMahaswetaDeviwasagreatambitioninhislife.Herecounts the episode in his autobiographical work as follows:

> "As for me, I was by then beside myself with excitement. My heart beat wildly, my body trembled, my mind trembled, my life trembled. I was having difficulty in holding myself upright on my two legs. I could not hold my head up high. It bowed towards its own accord towards this woman and prostrated myself at her feet". (Byapari 222)

Byapari enters into the realm of writing with the assistance and guidance of Mahasweta Devi. With the pseudonym Madan Dutta, Byapari commenced writing in her journal, *Bartika*, ultimately revealing his identity in the literary realm. He begins documenting his experiences as a Dalit. While composing articles and literary works, he came to understand that composing literature is the most challenging job. He articulates the challenges faced by an individual like himself, who lackedformal schooling yet has a fervent interest in reading diverse literature. He elucidates:

> "A struggle worse than I had ever known. One line snaked upon to the other line. I found words spelt differently in different places. How was I to know which was the right one? Which word set where in the sentence made the sentence both comprehensible and grammatically correct? I wrote on the pages.And then I tore them up. I ran through some reams of paper and some litres of kerosene and bunkedmyworkforsomedaysbeforeIwasmoreorlesssatisfiedwithwhatIhad written. Entitled "I Drive Rickshaws", it was published in the January-March1981 issue of Bartika". (Byapari 223)

Byapari is one of the fortunate few authors who did not experience persistent rejections when submitting their works to publishers. Generally, his writings were promptly accepted. Byapari's autobiography transcends a simple account of survival amidst caste and class-based deprivation, evolving into a narrative of a rebellious conscience shaped by unyielding battle.As Riya Mukerjee aptly observes, Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography interrogates the prevailing bhadralok narrative that characterizes Bengal as a 'casteless society' by documenting the myriad experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by Dalits. He conveys the anguish of suffering, animosity, brutality, and discrimination through this narrative, adeptly employing the medium ofautobiography to depict the hardships of his life, which would otherwise be challenging for him to communicate so openly (Mukherjee).

Manoranjan Byapari embodies a multitude of roles such as rickshaw puller, Naxalite militant, minor criminal, cook, and ultimately writer, within the oppressive limitations of his Chandal identity. These intricate real-life incidents break the myths of idealized creative style, allowing readers to face the harsh, unembellished truths of Dalit existence. Byapari's prose avoids sentimentalism and idealization, intentionally highlighting the stark realities of deprivation, degradation, brutality, and defiance that characterize these lives. The greatness of Byapari's narrative resides not in linguistic flourishes but in its steadfast dedication to authentic truth. This sincerity urges readers to adopt a reformulated aesthetic perspective grounded in the realities of daily life rather than solely in sensory

or intellectual gratification. In this context, Byapari's work closely corresponds with Sharan Kumar Limbale's argument that Dalit literature emphasises the exposure of social injustices rather than aesthetic enjoyment. Limbale contends that Dalit writing arises from deep personal anguish and shared adversity, dismissing the commodification of suffering as sophisticated art for privileged readers.

Byapari's autobiography transcends a simple account of survival amidst caste- and class-based deprivation, evolving into a narrative of a rebellious conscience shaped by unyielding battle. As Riya Mukerjee aptly observes, Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography interrogates the prevailing bhadralok narrative that characterizes Bengal as a 'casteless society' by documenting the myriad experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by Dalits. He articulates the pangs of pain, hatred, cruelty, and discrimination through this narrative, effectively using the medium of autobiography to describe the travails of his life, which otherwise would be difficult for him to express so frankly (Mukherjee).

Byapari's life is characterized by persistent movement across social margins, beginning with his early labour in tea stalls, transporting luggage at railway stations, and serving as a truck khalasi, followed by his participation in the Naxalite movement, imprisonment, and subsequent occupation as a rickshaw puller. These experiences, gathered from a life of dispossession, enhance his moral consciousness, intensify his empathy, and cultivate a profound appreciation for human dignity. This experiential knowledge enhances his language and informs his literary perspective, allowing him to express a distinct historical awareness. His autobiography serves as a counter-narrative that reclaims the marginalized histories of the Namasudra community, converting individual pain into social remembrance, resistance, and affirmation.

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