



# POST-PARTITION POVERTY, HUNGER AND DEATH: AN INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS OF MANORANJAN BYAPARI'S INTERROGATING MY CHANDAL LIFE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A DALIT

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## \*ABSTRACT:

The post-independence partition of India and the consequent massive forced migration from East Pakistan to India, particularly in Bengal find little expression in the contemporary history and literature. In this academic adventure, we try to explore the causes that compelled the partition-affected people, particularly Bengali Hindus to migrate from East Pakistan to West Bengal. We look into the reactions of the host society in Bengal and the State Government in relief, resettlement and rehabilitation of the migrated refugees. The way of the migration caused enough '*penury*', '*hunger*' and '*death*' to innumerable refugees and their families. Many Bengali dalit or namashudra writers from East Pakistan like Anil Gharai, Jatin Bala, Kalyani Thakur, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Manoranjan Byapari etc. have endeavored hard to depict the post-partition existential crisis in their works and tried to enrich dalit literary movement of Bengal with their works. In the present paper, I would like to explore the excruciating pain, sufferings and agony due to penury and starvation and life-long struggle of Manoranjan Byapari to escape death in his *magnum opus* "*Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*".

\***Key Words:** *Post-partition, penury, starvation, migration, death, namashudra refugees.*

People with a death wish and people who dare to defy death deserve our special attention. The breakup of British India in 1947 is the cause of many deaths and it triggered one of the major flows of migration in the

history of humanity. The partition harmed tremendously the Namashudra people of East Pakistan and therefore, it caused enough deaths of the migrated people of the same community. The post-partition victims had to live through the various trials and tribulations of Partition, and escape from death was one of their goals in life. Many shameful and painful experiences of the migrated refugees like government cancellation of dole, andolan for food and shelter, starvation, deaths etc. began to be reflected in the contemporary Bangla Dalit writings in general and in the writings of Manoranjan Byapari in particular. In Byapari's writings, the issues of illiteracy, exploitation, deprivation, hunger, starvation and deaths of the namashudra community are concentrated in great detail and almost all the characters are engaged in struggling to escape hunger and death after their disgraceful displacement from their own relatives, homes and above all, from their own homelands. Byapari has said earlier on the particularity and justification of writing his autobiography in a conversation with Professor J. Sarangi, *"The life that I have lived must be shared with many. I have come back from the jaws of death many times. Recently again I was fighting death, and I had a strong feeling that my life-story must be documented in print, or else it will be lost with me. It's important for people to know that someone survived in such horrid conditions. My writings represent all those people who continue to live in such inhuman circumstances"* (J. Sarangi, Interview: 2012).

*Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018) by Manoranjan Byapari and translated by Sipra Mukherjee is unanimously the first published autobiography of a Bengali Dalit to appear in Bengali as *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* in 2014. Hailing from Turukkhali village of Barishal District of East Pakistan in 1950, Byapari as a small child of three years only came and started living in the Shiromonipur refugee camp in Bankura district of West Bengal with his parents who migrated to India towards 1953. Introducing himself as a chandal, renamed as namashudra, the lowliest in the Bengali caste hierarchy, Byapari attempts to articulate the excruciating pain of being both a Dalit and poor where caste and poverty become the prime movers in deciding his tragic fate at every step of life. As a Dalit refugee family of eight, they survived on scraps of food and were given no job opportunities, nor did they have any way to rehabilitate themselves. Writing on the relevance of borderland studies, Schendel remarks that *"The pain of Partition fell disproportionately on the new borderlands. Here disruption was overwhelming and almost all people were directly and personally affected. The borderland experience of Partition was immediate and acute and therefore, differed from the experience of Partition in other parts of South Asia"* (Schendel, 2005: 21). Like most of the refugees, Byapari does not know his actual date of birth, a gift of illiteracy. He was born in a house where the kitchen fire has not been lit for many days. The Kal-Baisakhi on the night of his birth, blowing away the thatched roofs; the father who chops up a mango tree to bring home some rice, tied in a corner of his gamchha; the bamboo sliver with which the midwife cuts the umbilical cord; the father who breaks down in tears because he cannot manage a drop of honey to place on the baby's tongue. *"So I got no taste of honey at birth. 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"* (Byapari. 2019. 4), says Byapari.

The delineation of his six years life at Shiromonipur refugee camp in the Bankura District is horrifying. After spending the initial years in smile and sorrows, the family like most of the immigrated namashudra families started suffering from hunger and starvation. The suspension of government doles or cash payments and dry ration made the lives of the refugees more miserable and vulnerable. Byapari's sister died of starvation, his father suffered from dreadful ulcer and his mother had only rags to save her honour. Apart from deaths of hunger, deaths from Cholera, Malaria and plague were day to day event in the camp life. It is said that in the village, namely Sekh, about three hundred people died of Cholera and there was not a single one to light candle in the village. Though the government doles or cash payments help the poverty-stricken people at first, but the mean quality of the rice is enough to cause diarrhea among the camp refugees and causes many deaths almost in all the families. The refugees were then compelled to go to Dandykaranya as cheap labours for Dandykaranya Development Project. They were namasudras, pods, kamars (blacksmiths), kumors (potters), jolahas (weavers), muchis (cobblers) etc. But the miseries and sufferings of the refugees remained the same even in Dandykaranya. There was no touch of sympathy, compassion, and affection for the refugees either from the political leaders or from the governments. The bitter experiences of the camp life overburdened the author's whole life. Sekhar Bandhyopadhyay in his book (Bandhyopadhyay, 2009) dealt with problems of East Bengal refugees. In the chapter '*arrival of freedom*', he depicted refugees as '*bitter taste of freedom*'.

In Shiromonipur refugee camp in the Bankura District, many temporary camps were set up by the Government of West Bengal for sheltering 15000-16000 post-partition refugees. They lacked basic facilities like food, water, medicine etc. An 8' x 6' tent was set up to give shelter of 5-7 members of a family. Only two hand pumps were installed to meet their daily requirements of water for washing, cooking, drinking, bathing etc. Latrines, toilets or bathrooms were not there. People of all ages, men and women, old and young, boys and girls assembled in the open areas for defecation, urination without any sense of shame, respect or dignity.

To eradicate hunger of the camp dwellers, the Government provided '*dole*' and an amount of Rs. 20 among the refugees from the Govt. storeroom. The '*dole*' comprised rice, pulse and a cash payment of Rs. 20 for each family consisting of 5-7 members. But the rice was mixed with stones and a foul smell emitted from the cooked rice. Eating such kind of rice caused various ailments in the stomach like diarrhea, vomit, jaundice etc. and took many lives of the penury-stricken refugees.

A single Doctor was deployed for the treatment of the camp dwellers. But he had no medicine to cure the serious patients suffering from diarrhea. He prescribed only two bottle of medicine comprising red and white liquids to each and every patient suffering from headache to jaundice, diarrhea to fever, pneumonia to TB and so on. So death visited every tent and spared no family. Children whose age was below 7-8, they died more than others. There was not a single house where the mourning of a bereaved mother whose child was no more, was not heard. The author's mother was no exception. She grabbed her two sons in her arms so tightly believing that even Yamraj could not take them away from her lap. The author's abdomen swelled one night



and also was suffering from acute headache and fever, diarrhea in the morning and finally raw blood in the stool. Though died, he was resurrected at last. No arrangements for funeral of the dead bodies of the refugees was necessary to the administrative authorities. If any refugee survived the ravages of the diseases and apathy of administration, it was just a miracle.

All of a sudden, cash payments, called 'dole' and dry ration were suspended and the refugees are ordered to go to Dandakaranya (a dense forest region spread across Chattisgarh and Orissa—primarily Bastar region of Chattisgarh and Koraput of Orissa) for rehabilitation. The inmates of the Shiromanipur camps were given two options—either to move out of these camps to the site of rehabilitation (outside West Bengal often) or to take up six months dole in advance and leave the camp. Either way, all kinds of amenities received in the camps so long would be stopped—food, water, medical aid etc. Those who refused to go were denied any form of State aid after the distribution of an advance 'dole' of six months. No touch of human feelings, compassion or sympathy in handling the issues of refugee rehabilitation was visible either in the government or in public representatives or political leaders. The cruelties and atrocities of Dandakaranya and the tragedies of Marichjhapi were just indescribable.

At the beginning, the victims of partition or the refugees were ordered to leave Shiromanipur camp for Dandakaranya under the scheme of Dandakaranya Development Authority. Then many communist leaders came from Kolkata to fish in the troubled water and provoked them to go for fasting till death. So the government officers went back to Ankara Govt. Office warning the refugees not to fall in the trap of the communist leaders. Many trucks moved back empty as most of the refugees who enrolled their names in the Govt. Registrar, refused to board on the trucks. They came to know about the perilous Dandakaranya forest from their reading of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The writer remarks that this forest is full of perils, in which many man-eating monsters roam in search of human flesh and even Rama, the god in human shape, fell into great danger there in Dandakaranya (Byapari, 2019: 44). Like Andaman Rehabilitation project in 1952-53, the refugees were instigated to revolt to revoke the Dandakaranya Development project, and they had to undergo fasting for many days. But their revolt for rehabilitation and food remained unheeded. They broke fasting when probably one man died owing to hunger (p.47). *"The prolonged hunger-strike by the refugees lasting for more than a month in almost all camps in West Bengal has proved beyond doubt strong reluctance on the part of the refugees to accept the proposal of the Government regarding their rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. As a matter of fact, there has been no movement of refugees to Dandakaranya though they have been put to serious hardships and untold sufferings due to stoppage of doles. For more than a month refugees in almost all the camps have been on hunger-strike to voice their protest"* (CM Jyoti Basu's Letter to Sri P. C. Sen. July 13, 1961). Later the refugees had collected food like wild pumpkin, jungle raw bamboo, young palm flour, date palm, mohuya fruit etc. from the jungle to quench their hunger (p. 46). One mother threw her child into the well out of indignation and sorrow when the latter demanded food, *"Give me food, mother! I cannot tolerate hunger any longer"* (Byapari, op.sit. 2019: 46).

The CPM leader Jyoti Basu assured the post-partition victims in a meeting in Bhilai on 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1975 that when the leftists were voted to power in Assembly Elections, they would certainly bring the refugees back from Dandakaranya to West Bengal for permanent solution of the issue of their rehabilitation, guarantee of food and shelter. When the leftists came to power in 1977 Assembly Elections, under the command of the then CM Jyoti Basu, on January 16, 1978 the Left Front Chairman, Shri Ashok Ghosh had given a flamboyant assurance to the refugees: *"When you return to West Bengal, five crores of Bengalis will welcome you with ten crores of hands."* (Byapari, op.sit. 2018: 268-270) The trust of the poor refugees of Dandakaranya was betrayed.

In 1979, the Left Front Government's attack on post-partition victims or refugees in Marichjhapi led to hundreds of deaths. In 1978, around 1.5 lack Hindu refugees from Bangladesh settled in Marichjhapi, an island in the Sundarbans, to start their lives anew. However, by 1979, the island was cleared by Jyoti Basu's Left Front Government in West Bengal. An economic blockade was imposed and there were many deaths resulting from the diseases and malnutrition that followed, as well as from violence unleashed by the police on Government's order. 'Operation Marichjhapi' caused enough bloodshed, rape of many refugee women, political and communal murder.

Armed police in 40-42 motor boats had surrounded the island, sealing the entry and exit. (pp.270-271) Food, drinking water, medicine, milk-powder etc. were denied access to help the people escape hunger and imminent death. Boats transporting refugees were sunk by the heartless Police in the Bay of Bengal for the food of the hungry crocodiles. Even the dead bodies of men killed or women raped or died of starvation were left without cremation on the shores to be floated away with the high tide of the ocean, wiping out all proofs of human massacre. Ross Mallick, a researcher on the Marichjhapi massacre, comments that *"in the case of Marichjhapi it was the poorest people who paid with their lives, while the benefits went to the animals, tourists, and tourist operators"*. (Mallick, Ross, 2010: p.5) No serious attempts were made to decipher the accurate number of deaths in Marichjhapi. Byapari remarks that *"at least 2000 men and women were killed by police action. At least 200 women were raped.....The dead bodies of the children were thrown out of the windows of running trains"* (Byapari, op.sit. 2018: 267-272) It reminds us Allen Ginsberg's poem "September on Jessore Road",

*"Millions of babies in pain*

*Millions of mothers in rain*

*Millions of brothers in woe*

*Millions of children nowhere to go"* (Ginsberg, 149-152)

Even the writer's father's ribs were broken by the police and this accelerated his death. The massacre disillusioned the refugees, who were the backbone of the Communist Movement in West Bengal and a solid

pillar of strength. Byapari unambiguously condemns Jyoti Basu as a be-iman, betrayer of trust. (p. 267) The Telegraph, Calcutta editorially commented: *“Even his predecessor (Buddhdeb Bhattacharya’s predecessor Jyoti Basu) in West Bengal did not hesitate to kill thousands in Marichjhapi.”* (3) Nearly 10,000 people were killed in the Marichjhapi massacre according to the oral report of the survivors, while the government officials of the time demand that there were less than ten victims. How does an entire island population disappear? How does one unearth the truth behind one of the worst atrocities carried out in post-partition India? Journalist Deep Halder reconstructs the buried history of Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 through his interactions, interviews with the survivors, government officials and social activists with a rare combination of courage, determination and empathy.

*“Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit”* also charts Byapari’s futile flight from home to escape hunger—in search of work as a teenager around the country, only to face further exploitation. *“The constant hunger, poverty, humiliation, the daily fights for food and the lingering stench of illness and death made way for tremendous rage in young Byapari’s mind, and he subsequently ran away as a teenager.”* (Sawant, 2019) The translator Sipra Mukherjee points out, *‘the issues of poverty, hunger and violence have exploded the cautiously sewn boundaries of the more affluent world’*. Byapari fled from the half-fed family and went out in search of job. He was a ticketless traveler, travelling miles after miles in search of job and food in Darjeeling, Assam, Lucknow, Kanpur etc. A ticketless traveler as he was, he always coveted his arrest by the police so that at least food would be available to save himself from starvation. Byapari had spent his childhood by grazing goats and cows, gas cylinder delivery boy, cobbler, coolie, scavenger, helper in tea stalls, car cleaner or beggar on the streets to earn money for an orphanage etc. He was a toilet-cleaner, guard at crematorium, truck-helper and night guard. He collected fire-woods from the forest and sold them in the local market for his livelihood. He performed his duty as a godown darwan, munshi for road construction projects, bookseller etc. He had to pull rickshaw at Jadavpur bus stand to earn his food and later left the job out of fear of his life. He got a new job near Narendrapur as a night guard, but he had to leave the job as his conscience was pricked owing to the corruption in the deliveries of the bags of sands, stone-chips etc. He sometimes took the job of a deputy cook for a Brahmin caterer, but he was caught as a namashudra and dismissed. Again he was employed as a cowherd by a Brahmin doctor from East Pakistan (a refugee), whereas Byapari was termed a refugee not to be allowed within the house. He was once dismissed from his job as a casual sweeper in a government school. His only offence was the publication of a best short story titled *“Acharya”* in the school magazine. Thus, ‘Manoranjan Byapari’s powerful affecting memoir is about hunger and deprivation, but also endurance, struggle and a fierce will to live’, says Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta in her review on *‘Interrogating My Chandal Life Review: Everyman on the Margins’*.

Thus, we have seen that Manoranjan Byapari has started his life journey as a half-fed boy on the shoulder of his parents to escape from the hands of death, but ends with the deaths of his sister, father, so many relatives and acquaintances. Many of the post-partition victims died of poverty and hunger, many from mortal diseases



like cholera, diarrhea, plague, malaria, blood-vomiting, due to transportation from Shiromanipur refugee camp to Dandakaranya, from Dandakaranya to Sundarban islands, where the violence in the Marichjhapi massacre took the lives of as many as 10,000 people. Killings of the people are a day to day event. “Some 30,000 refugee families had gone to Marichjhapi. Over 2000 families of them perished,” (p.53), says Byapari. Byapari delineates the manifold life crisis and his individual agony and sufferings in Ghola Doltala and Shiromanipur camps where “poverty, destitution, starvation and penury” (p. 36) as well as deaths are the only truths. Byapari also reveals the hypocrisy of the political leaders and government agents who turn a clear niche from the lower caste Namo, Malo, Pod, Jele, Bagdi, Muchi and the Kaoras who are reduced to nothing but sub-human species and the historical Marichjhapi Massacre that results from the superciliousness of the government to the “*Namashudras of Kashyap gotra*” (Byapari, op.sit. 4).

Byapari’s autobiography reminds Sharankumar Limbale’s remark: “*Dalit writers give priority of problems of society over the entertainment of the readers. They express their feeling in their literature....their effort is not to transport the aesthete-readers to their own level of experience. Because Dalit writers are not focused on the aesthete-reader, traditional aesthetic values, which are aesthete-reader centred, are not applicable to the evaluation of their literary productions*” (Limbale, 2004: 118-119).

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