

Rewriting the Self, Reframing the Society: A Study of Manoranjan Byapari's Interrogating My Chandal Life Beyond Traditional Autobiography

Sishupal Mahato

Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Languages, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur.

Abstract:

This paper will discuss *Interrogating My Chandal Life* by Manoranjan Byapari as a very attractive genre of writing, which breaks certain conventions of autobiographical writing. The conventional autobiographies are, predominantly, about personal development, personal accomplishments, success or reflection. Dalit autobiographies, on the other side serve as a collective protest and revelation of the systematic oppression based on caste. The personal story that Byapari tells is not a story concerning any one individual but rather a representation of his whole community who were displaced and marginalized in their lives through the course of raw and lived experience. Byapari additionally asserts that such life experiences or lived moments cannot receive adequate space in the mainstream literature. His story is no longer a story about his personal but a story about social and political facts of caste. In addition to this, turning the autobiography not only into an autobiography but also a social protest. According to the argument in this paper that identifies the select autobiography as a part of a much larger scheme of Dalit writing, this type of autobiography employs personal experience as a vehicle to formulate history anew, to invert the official histories and institute a new literary and political identity.

Keywords: Caste, identity, narrative, resistance, Bengali Dalit etc.

Introduction:

According to Wikipedia, it argues that an autobiography is a self-written report on the history of one's own life, which gives the story of the career, recollections, and knowledge of an author. With the help of such writings, these people are able to tell their own experience or their own story to the readers and, in this way, the reader is able to know, instead of experiencing the personal journey of the author within the cultural and historical context in the given time.

Earlier autobiographies might not be part of traditional Indian literature. However, since the nineteenth century we have started to discover writing that relates to personal experience. In India, critical analysis of these individual stories has been a long time coming. The echoes are clear that the literary critics in India have not been suffocated by this otherwise significant genre. The list of Indian personal narratives that both have positive reception among the readers and among the researchers is long; it includes: *An Autobiography or The Story of My Truth* (1927) by Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography* (1936) by

Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) by Nirad C. Chaudhury, *India Wins Freedom* (1959) by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *An Indian Pilgrim* (1935) Gandhi, Nehru and Chaudhury are all diverse views that represent the world, yet socio-culturally they fall under the same category, and they were men of the upper caste, and therefore they were highly privileged to be heard at the global level. The critics who had to work on autobiographies took them since their autobiographies were in English from a very young age to judge their life and writings. Along with this, over recent years, there have also been significant volumes of critical writing about Indian upper-caste women autobiographies. Conversely, the Dalits, as the ones who have been screaming their voices and voicing their concerns over a lengthy period of time, through their respective personal histories were seldom heard of and were therefore systematically left out of academic profiles. The reason as to why this systematic oversight may have been the case might be that these voices are disrupting the hegemony of the new interest in scholars to examine the autobiographies of men and women of Dalit caste. It is a good move, though on the fringe, towards their proper rehabilitation.

‘Dalit’ is a term of the Marathi language that means ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’, and it was adopted by the people formerly called untouchables, and now they use the term to identify with themselves. This can be compared to how the Dalit writers in autobiographies have also claimed to control their story and have decided to tell their stories. According to Sharmila Rege, one of the great Indian Sociologists, academics and authors, said, “The act of narrating one’s life as a Dalit constitutes a radical break from dominant literary traditions in which Dalit lives were either invisible or represented through the mediating consciousness of upper-caste writers” (Rege,13).

There is a complicated literature and political context that culminates in the production of Dalit autobiographies. They are prompted by the anti-caste literature of B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s among other genres of fiction, such as life writing, testimonio literature, and subaltern literature. Dalit autobiographies are rather unlike the typical autobiographies of India, which have at all times been focused on spiritual journeys of exceptional people who have belonged to the upper classes. Rather, Dalit autobiographies tend to emphasize the collective oppression of people on the basis of caste, materiality of discrimination, and the fight against dignity and justice.

The life of Manoranjan Byapari is more of a great novel on its own. He grew up in refugee camps; at the time of the Partition, his family relocated to Bengal (now Bangladesh) outside the old East Pakistan which was Barisal. Byapari engaged himself in several odd jobs, including rickshaw puller, sweeper, watchman, and cook, amongst any jobs he could get in keeping alive, including working for the Naxalite movement. He was indeed not living an easy life. But the destiny decreed otherwise. Byapari learned to read and write in the two years he served a jail sentence in the 70s and was 24 years old. It opened up a whole new world to him and a chance encounter with Bengali poet Mahashweta Devi gave him the desire to begin writing. According to Byapari, I wrote about my life in this novel. However, to give people the sense of the historical significance of this period, I also talked about Partition- the refugee camps we found ourselves in, the reasons and ways why we had to find ourselves there etc. Therefore, the book will have 25 percent of my life and 75 percent of the society, or environments, that I had. Perhaps that was the reason why it captivated people; that it was not an account of an individual, but also the account of an era.

In literature, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018), a book by Manoranjan Byapari, was initially published in Bengali as *Itibritte Chandal Jivan* in 2014 and translated into English by Sipra Mukherjee, which is generally regarded to be the first published autobiography to have a title in Bengali. The book is a first-hand account of the strife and predicament of a poor and unhappy man caught

in the oppression and misfortunes of castes, enduring all the socio-political changes and tragedies. Byapari is a lower caste person belonging to either Namashudra or Chandal, and he just as many times expresses despair and misery of being not only a Dalit, but a poor person, whereby caste and poverty are the major determinants of his unfortunate situation on every level. According to him, “I have lived my life as the ill-fated Dalit son of an ill-fated Dalit father, condemned to a life of bitterness” (Byapari, p.4).

The first two chapters of his autobiography, “East Bengal, Partition and West Bengal” and “Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Project, Food Riots and Calcutta”, describe the experiences of pain and struggle with the existence of a Dalit refugee who is born in the house of the Byapari called Turuk-Khali, Barisal and belongs to the “Namashuddurs of the Kashyap gotra” (Byapari, p.4).

Byapari explains the mystical tradition and historical narrative of caste in Bengal and indirectly mentions Marich, Namas Muni, Adisura, the Pala and Sena dynasties, the British rule in 1872, and even the demeaning term the British used to refer to the Namashudras that we know of as Chandal. He also cites the opposition of the Matuas religious leader in Bangladesh, that is, Guruchand Thakur, the liberation of the Namashudra people, the disastrous partition that displaced millions of people in just a few months of the partition, and the emerging religious differences between Hindus and Muslims that have made the situation of Dalit refugees even more challenging. This is also complicated since there are colonies and Dalit camps created later in Calcutta. The government initially gave out cash assistance to these people. This was withdrawn, though with a couple of months when the rehabilitation program was also launched. Through Byapari, we clearly see the situation in the camps located outside Calcutta, where cases of deadly diseases such as cholera, malaria and plague are rife. Brawls are the order of the day in the camps and slaying of individuals is a normal phenomenon. In the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya, rehabilitation programs have rendered life extremely unsafe for the locals. Byapari articulates the crisis of situation and personal misery in Gholadotala and Shiromanipur Camps, whereby the only realities are poverty, destitution, starvation and penury (p.36). He also highlights the hypocrisy of the government leaders who do nothing concerning the plight of the lower caste such as Namo, Malo, Pod, Bagdi, Jele, Muchi and Kaoras, since they are not better than sub-human beings, and the historic Marichjhapi Massacre; the result of the arrogant attitude of the government.

In the following sections, he describes the vagrant life of a poor boy (his alter ego, Jeeban), who quits his family and is exposed to numerous troubles in search of survival. He does many jobs, strange and strange, which come his way in many different parts of Calcutta, Assam, Siliguri and Darjeeling, such as working in tea shops, bearing loads, cooking, and cleaning dishes. Byapari gives the harsh realities of society in the upper cast and classes in his work when he reveals the extreme sexual abuse he was subjected to by both Brahmin chef Amulya Thakur and the havildar and the deceit practiced by the shopkeeper Sashibabu and the beating he received during the ceremony due to his low caste and the unfair beating of his brother Chitta on a falsified case of theft by political leaders Anil, Bilu, and Basak. Destiny changes all spheres of his life, and he never stays long in the same place. So, he says, “Life has sown under my feet: skittish mustard seeds”. (Cited in Mukherjee, Preface, 2018)

His participation in the Naxalite comes when he goes back to Calcutta. Byapari gives a passionate account of his experience in the disorganized external realm with a defiant nature and movements aimed at challenging fundamentalism in society. Byapari also gives us an introduction of such passionate political leaders as Ashu Majumder, Potato Swapan, Tata Dutta, Nanu Das, Khoka Das, Mohit Barman, Khoka Chakraborty, and political fight in which the parties, Naxals and the police are playing with each other

daily. Police encounters do not lack when it comes to deaths. In Bardhaman, Byapari is in a death-in-life scenario, as he blows up the bomb in his hand.

This is where Byapari leaves his simple and lower-caste past behind being a chhotolok and begins transforming into his new and liberal self, being a bhadrakalok class man when he gains his education in jail and in this way makes his life stable by creating his own family. His contacts with other notable figures, like the leader Shankar Guha Neogi and his group of 'Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha' appear to rouse his political ideals in places like the Dalli, Rajhara, Bastar and Kanker as well. Moreover, it appears that the writer Mahasweta Devi attempts to show the reader the other side of a writer by releasing his writings in the journal "Bartika" under his pen name Madan Dutta, who is a rickshaw puller as also a writer, thereby, making the life of this writer meaningful. Byapari attempts to obtain recognition through publication of his works in different journals by initially making attempts to submit articles under the title Jijibisha to five different journals: 'Runner', 'Hatiyar', 'Vigyan', 'Sisrikha', 'Banga Barta'. He attempts to develop his own identity as a writer later on by publishing several literary works in a form of novels, short stories, essays and an autobiography.

The term 'Museumize or protect Subalternity' (De Kock, p. 46) that Spivak employs underscores the propensity of keeping the subaltern in a state of difference by dubious anthropological subjects (De Kock, p. 46), thus rendering the subaltern unable to express the presence of its existence. The disclosure of the suppressed past of marginalization in Bengal, which is the other history of the past can be read in the tendency of the autobiography, *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, to unravel the concealed past of the subaltern by the dubious anthropological personalities.

It is a powerful writing that is a 'Kuntslerroman', as it exposes the narration of the artist, who is a man of will. The trip of Byapari as a writer out of the state of impermanence to the initial phase of turning into a writer and reaching a respectable position in society implies several layers underneath. The Preface and the Translator's Note might be regarded as the introductory sections of the autobiography that point out the key plot line. In every chapter of the writinh, the author underlines suffering, trauma and resistance in the process of a self-proclaimed hero, who fights against the hypocrisy and decay of the present political and social situation. What is more shocking is the fact that Byapari reveals the spirit of nostalgia and recollections about the past very well as he signifies painful and sad realities about different points in time during his life. His early life is characterized as the period of a boy with bare breasts, herding of goats with the use of a stick (Preface, Mukherjee, 2018), his youth as having untidy hair and seemingly covered with dirt, his boyhood age as a rebellious Naxalite carrying bombs and evading law enforcement. That is why he tells, "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." (Preface, Mukherjee, 2018).

Moreover, Byapari assumes different roles in the situation of his Chandal identity, as a rickshaw puller, a Naxalite, a criminal, a cook, and a writer. Byapari brings the romantic aestheticism out of the picture and introduces the ugliness of Dalit experience. The aesthetic approach revolves around the concept of delivering the truth and, therefore, the reader can enjoy another aesthetic in the autobiography of Byapari. As indicated in the quote, Dalit writers are concerned about social issues and not about expounding their readers. They express themselves in their books...they do not aim at raising the aesthetic reader to their own experience. Given the fact that Dalit writers do not target the aesthete reader, traditional aesthetic values, that is, based on the aesthete-reader, are inapplicable to review their literary works (2004, p. 118-

119). In discussing his reasons and rationale in writing an autobiography, Byapari had stated in an earlier conversation with Sarangi, that the life he has lived has to be shared with a lot of people. I have returned to the jaws of death on numerous occasions. I have been struggling with death again recently, and I was strongly entertained by the idea that my life-story must be printed out, or it will be lost with me. People should know that there was someone who survived in such atrocious situations. I would say that my works are symbolic of all those who are still subjects of living in such inhuman conditions (J. Sarangi, personal communication, 2012).

Conclusion:

Interrogating My Chandal Life by Manoranjan Byapari goes beyond the limits of the traditional autobiography as it turns the journey of personal struggle into the socio-political story of divided and post-divided Bengal. In crafting an autobiography of his life, Byapari transcends the condition he is using in the lower caste of the man of the chhotolok and certifies his status as a writer, which confirms the operation of the rewriting of the self as a kind of intellectual liberation. Byapari also reverses the idea of society by disillusioning the aestheticism of the romantics and exposing the Dalit with the crude reality of Dalit life, which places the literature focus on the sphere of entertainment rather than social justice. According to Byapari, his writings are the mirror of the people who are still under such inhuman conditions. In conclusion, the story of Byapari can be called a form of resistant, or micro-narrative, and it highlights the little voices of the past that makes the society confront the real issues in the world and requires the stakeholders to finally listen to the dark sides of unfamiliarity of the world around the Dalits.

Rather than a personal exploration and examination of the self, Byapari is more reviewing the socio-political narrative of the partitioned Bengal and post-partitioned Bengal. Others have compared Byapari with Maxim Gorky of Bengal. Byapari chronicles the Partition of Bengal in 1947, the 1959 Calcutta Food Riots, the Dandakaranya Development Project of 1958, the 1962 India-China War, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the 1972 Naxalite Conflict, and the gruesome 1979 Marichjhapi Massacre is the story of an ongoing scenario as in a movie. The autobiography is more action-oriented than reflection in nature since it is written in a mixture of first and third-person narrator style. According to the translator Sipra Mukherjee, this was quite typical of such action: it is violent and, in most instances, desperate, and it lacks the cultural baggage that characterizes our general social movements, making the language more general and less imbued with the particularities of culture (Translator's Note, Mukherjee, 2018).

Works Cited

1. Bandopadhyay, Shekhar. "Different identity formations in Bengali partition narratives by Dalit refugees". *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. 2017. 19(4). 1-16. DOI:10.1080/1369801X.2016.1277154.
2. Benjamin, Walter. *The task of the translator*. In: Marcus. B and Michael. J (Eds.), *Selected Writings* (Vol. 1), (pp. 253-63). MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.
3. Das, Shruti. "How writer Manoranjan Byapari has become a voice for the voiceless". *The Patriot*, 2020. [How writer Manoranjan Byapari has become the voice for the voiceless](#) -Accessed on 20th March, 2026.
4. Guha, Ranjit. "The small voice of history". In: Amin S and Chakrabarty D (Eds.), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Vol. 9), (pp. 1-12.). New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996.

5. Kock, De, L. “Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: new nation writers conference in South Africa”. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 23(3), 29-47, 1992. Retrieved from <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/SpivakInterviewDeKock.pdf>
6. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature: history, controversies, and considerations* (A. Mukherjee Trans.). Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004. (Original work published 1996). Mangalam, B. (2011). Workshop on Dalit writing and translation, Retrieved from http://www.postcolonialtranslation.net/workshop_reports.php.
7. Pal, Bidisha. “Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit by Manoranjan Byapari, translated by Sipra Mukherjee”. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2018. 10. 10.21659/rupkatha.v10n2.27.
8. Samuel, B. M. and Samuel, D.K. “Critical approaches to the notion of translatability and untranslatability of texts in translation studies”. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 2007. 4(3), 375-379.
9. Sarangi, Jaydeep (Interviewer) & Byapari, Manoranjan (Interviewee). “From Wheels to Stalls: Jaydeep Sarangi in Conversation with Manoranjan Byapari”. [Interview Transcript]. Retrieved- from *Lapis Lazuli –An International Literary Journal / Vol. II/ Issue I /SPRING 2012*. Website: <http://www.pintersociety.com>
10. Wikipedia. Autobiography. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography>