

**MANORANJAN BYAPARI'S *INTERROGATING MY CHANDAL LIFE*
A CRITICAL REVIEW**

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The paper entitled 'Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* A Critical Review' deals with the life and journey of Manoranjan Byapari who has been destined to face all kinds of odds in his life. Byapari belongs to the Namashudra caste. The book is an autobiography written mostly in the first person and Byapari writes this about his father and their community. The Namashudra identity is the one Byapari was born with. That is his first identity, an identity his father was proud of. From the original Bengali to the English translation, Byapari's autobiography or memoir gathered one identity after the other. Quite like how Byapari himself gathered several identities through his lifetime.

The first six chapters "East Bengal, Partition and West Bengal", "Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Project, Food Riots and Calcutta", "I Run Away from Home", "My Lone Travels across East and North India", "On the Road for Five Years" and "Return to Calcutta" deals with the initial life of Manoranjan Byapari and his struggles for survival. Manoranjan Byapari was born into an impoverished Dalit family in a place called Turuk-khali near the village of Pirichpur which used to be a part of the Barisal district in the now vanished East Pakistan. His father was a contractual laborer therefore he was not able to feed his family son well. Byapari's childhood was not comfortable and his family kept on struggling to have basic amenities. In this chapter he introduces us to his caste which is Namashuddurs of the Kashyapgotra.. His community was considered to be the Chandals. Byapari says that his caste has not extinct due to the constant sufferings and hardships that were imposed on them, instead they have survived by drawing on their own resources, demonstrating their endurance and strength. When the Upper-caste colonial officials during the first census labeled them as Chandals, they reiterated back. We are also informed that entire Namashuddur community started to follow a new faith called Matua religion which was founded by Harichand Thakur. Due to constant agitation officials were forced to change the name of the community from Chandals to Namashudra in the census records. But according to Byapari the attitude towards this community has not changed. And he thinks that the struggle which lasted for four decades went in vain. Byapari opines that it would have been better for them to stay out of the varna system because it could have given them the freedom and liberty. He feels that they are handcuffed by coming back into the four-fold varna system. Byapari writes, "I do believe, in fact, that rather than seek to be included within the four-varna system of the hindus and offer servility to the varna Hindus, the Namashudras should have preferred to remain as the fifth varna. He or she was nobody's slave then." (11)

Byapari also gives us the brief account of the partition days. Communal riots had ruined the peace and harmony of the country. Partition caused much turbulence in everyone's lives. Fleeing from one place to another is one of the many consequences of the partition. The 'war' between the two communities, that is, Islam and Hinduism was at the peak. And Byapari's family also had to face the consequences. They had to flee from their native land and came down to India. Here, they lived in the harsh climate with thousands of people living in the tents like refugees or to say they were considered by the government of India as Refugees. They were deprived off the basic facilities and this led to epidemic like situation which created

havoc.

The Dandakaranya Rehabilitation Scheme provided these low caste refugees some hope. Areas under this scheme was largely barren lands of Bastar, the least developed of the seven divisions of the state that is today called Chhattisgarh, and Malkangiri, a similarly undeveloped area of the state of Odisha, were brought together under the Dandakaranya Project. Refugees were asked to go to Dandakaranya, a place in Chhattisgarh by the Indian government. People were reluctant to go under the influence of cunning leader from a communist party who tried to use the helplessness of the people and tried to enrage them by instilling bad image of the government by stating that they are part of Bengal and no one should leave Bengal. He writes, "Do not agree to go to Dandakaranya. Why should you go? You are from Bengal! And it is in Bengal that you will stay! I will go to Delhi. I will fight for you. I will tell them that they cannot send Bengalis outside Bengal. We are with you. Do not lose heart." (25) The consequence was that government gave them 7 days of time to rehabilitate to Dandakaranya. To this communist leader tried to gather all the refugees and made them ready to protest against the government. The hunger strike did not pave the way for them. The second phase was to immobilize all the things in the state by carrying out the procession. As a result section 144 was imposed in the city leading to mass destruction. It seemed that a battle was initiated between the refugees and government. When everything failed to bring government to their knees, people started to get scattered. His father tried to sell firewood and would do different things to run a family of seven members. But it was not enough. Hunger was taking toll on every member of the family. It was getting tough for me and Manoranjan Byapari decided to move out and do some work. Byapari writes, "I was growing and, with it, was growing my hunger. I could not bear the pangs of that hunger. My eyes would dim, my guts would feel as if they were being torn apart and my legs would tremble" (30). In a village Manoranjan Byapari took the work of a goatherd. This work fetched him what he was looking for, that is, two meals a day which Byapari was looking for.

After some time, Byapari returned to his family and we decided to shift our base to Dolata Camp to meet our family requirements. This camp was close to the city Calcutta. Manoranjan Byapari and his family expected that they will have good opportunities in the city. But, life had different plans for his family. It was the beginning of the ill-famed 1960s decade when rural Bengal was creeping towards a deadly food shortage due to famine. The decade witnessed a traumatic picture of deprivation all across rural and urban Bengal. The next thing which was important apart from food was shelter, and this chapter portrays horrific and inhumane behaviour of the upper caste. Lower caste people were not allowed to take claim of the empty land such as Bijoygarh. There was no sympathy for the people of the lower castes. Byapari writes, "I decided to run away. I thought that I would have a better life than my other family members not realising that the world is possessed with harsh brutality. I wanted to run away from all the problems that I was facing as a child, the problems of hunger, shelter, poverty etc. I set out to find my destiny. My heart was crying for the family I was leaving behind. I had no idea what would happen to them but I knew that if I stayed on here, I would die with them." (38)

Byapari was laying down on one of the benches at the railway platform when suddenly a stranger's voice woke him up. The man enquired him that where Byapari was going? Byapari did not know the answer of this question. All he knew was that he wanted to get away from the hunger. The man was doctor by profession and asked Byapari to come and stay with him. He asked Byapari to look after some cows and he would provide me the food. The first time Byapari witnessed the ugly side of his caste faith, which is Hinduism. Byapari belongs to Hindu caste and wants to portray the inner reality of his caste where a person from the same caste is humiliated because he belongs from a lower sub caste of Hinduism. The plate in which Manoranjan Byapari used to take his food was twisted one and the lady of the house would let fall the rice and vegetables from a considerable height so as to evade my polluting touch. Manoranjan Byapari was asked to sleep outside the courtyard.

Doctor tried to have a good relationship with the Muslims as they dominated the area. Doctor thought that at the time of communal riots which was very much inevitable seeing the condition of the country he would be saved. But all the flattering went in vain. Doctor's wife did not like Muslims and one day after the feast, started to shout and spoke bad about the Islam. This infuriated the Muslims, and doctor's house was vandalized.

Manoranjan Byapari came to Jadavpur, and he got a work at the tea stall with the monthly salary of 10 rupees. After that Byapari did many jobs roaming in the city like a nomad. When Manoranjan Byapari was working for his master at Park Circus he experienced a horrible incident. Communal riot was at the peak and Byapari was walking through a desolate area of the city. He was surrounded by three men who wanted to know his religion. Byapari mustered his courage and successfully knocked one down, remaining two fled away from the scene. The fear of getting killed enveloped Manoranjan Byapari. He started to run to save his life.

Byapari was now on Howrah Bridge after many twists and turns of fate. He was a murderer who was running from one place to another to save his life. But alas! Byapari was 'caught' by a policeman near Howrah Bridge. He thought that he has been caught but it was not the case. Policeman was concerned about Byapari. Byapari informed policeman that he wants to do any job which would fetch him two times meal and a shelter. Policeman helped the writer to join in the police mess. The mess owner was a Brahmin by caste and used to impose himself on Byapari. One night, the mess owner Amulya Thakur asked Byapari to massage his penis by keeping the same on his palm. He obliged to do the same but situation worsened when he asked Byapari to have anal sex with him. This infuriated Manoranjan Byapari and this time he did not oblige to his master's orders. Finally, Byapari had to leave the place and once again he was on the street of Calcutta.

The next thing that crossed Byapari's mind was that he wanted to go to Assam. Manoranjan Byapari has learnt that life in Assam is good and there lies number of opportunities which can have him in a good space in terms of his livelihood. But the life in Assam was not like bed full of roses. Byapari experienced tough time in Assam running helter skelter for food and proper place to live.

Finally, Byapari thought of trying his luck in the northern part of the country. He boarded a train to Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh state. At Lucknow station Manoranjan Byapari met a policeman who wanted him to accompany him to his staff quarters. Everything was going fine for the Byapari until one day when policeman raped him. Byapari was not surprised but the pain that he underwent shook him from within. Byapari was witnessing the harsh reality of the world which he never expected. This infuriated the writer once again, and he wanted to seek revenge. The animalistic behaviour of policeman mirrors the realities of the society in which writer was living in.

Another incident made Manoranjan Byapari realize that powerless people are at the mercy of the powerful system. Byapari did not have his share of hard work when he was denied of his salary from his master. Master engaged Byapari in an illegal activity, and used to give bribe to the policeman. The orders of the policeman were that the salary will not be handed over to Byapari instead the same would be handed over to the policeman itself. The constant urging and requesting did not pave the way for Manoranjan Byapari to get back his salary. He was left bare handed.

After spending five years out of his native place Bengal Byapari decided to return to his place. All these years of hard work and painful stay in different parts of the country did not fetch Byapari anything. He left his place five years ago with empty-handed and returned home empty-handed. When Manoranjan Byapari returned he heard about a movement which was taking its baby steps. The movement was led by the peasant class and its genesis was Naxalbari village. Byapari writes "I had heard the name of the Naxalbari village and the rumblings of a movement spearheaded by peasants, field labourers and adivasis who had declared war against the eternal oppression they had faced" (103).

Byapari's next task was to search his family members. Slowly and gradually he gathered information about his family members. In the process he came to learn that the condition has not improved for his family members.

The initiation to the Naxalite movement starts when Byapari returns back to Calcutta. In chapters "My Entry into the Naxal Movement", "To Dandakaranya and Back to a Changed Calcutta", "Life on and around the Railway Station" and "Bomb Explodes in Barddhaman" Byapari vividly describes his journey within a tumultuous periphery with a rebellious zeal and gesticulation that aim to destroy fundamentalism in society. Byapari introduces us to the fiery political personalities like Ashu Majumder, Potato-Swapan, Tata Dutta, and Nanu Das, Khoka Das, Mohit Barman, Khoka Chakraborty and the everyday political tug of war between the Naxals and the Police resulted in death from both the sides. Byapari himself steps into a death-in-life situation when a bomb explodes in his hand in Barddhaman.

However, Byapari's life starts to transform as seen in the later chapters "Into Jail and the World of Letters", "A Rickshaw-wallah's Meeting with Mahasweta Devi", "A Girl from the Past", "Marichjhapi", "To Dandakaranya, Dalli and Bastar", "Chhattisgarh, Mukti Morcha and Shankar Guha Neogi" and "After Shankar Guha Neogi". These are the periods when Byapari sheds the cringing identity of lower caste look into the emancipation into a newer avatar amongst the 'bhadralok' category through entering into the world of education inside the jail and bringing stability to his fluid life by setting up his own family. Interactions within the wide circumference of stalwarts namely leader Shankar Guha Neogi and his 'Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha' that made him reinvigorate the idealism in politics in the region of Dalli, Rajhara, Bastar and Kanker and writer Mahasweta Devi who draws out the writer in Byapari by publishing his writing in the journal *Bartika* by the name of Madan Dutta, a rickshaw-wallah-writer seem to make his life worth living. With a number of publications Byapari first makes an attempt to send articles in the pseudo-name Jjibisha to five periodicals *Runner*, *Hatiyar*, *Vigyan*, *Sisrikha* and *Banga Barta*; thereafter he continues to construct literary outputs in forms of a number of novels, short stories and essays and one autobiography) Byapari establishes his identity within the cultural and literary society.

Byapari's *Interrogating my Chandal Life* is a powerful, affecting memoir about hunger and deprivation, but also endurance, struggle and a fierce will to live. Sipra Mukherjee's English translation brings us the portrait of the development of an artist who has much to tell the world.

References:

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