

Re-Viewing Partition through Dalit Lenses: The Historical Accounts in The Dalit Autobiographies of Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Jatin Bala

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Abstract

The Independence of India along with the joys of freedom, also brought the pangs of partition. Lands were divided, cartography re-lined and identities reformed. People suddenly had to move to newer territories leaving their roots. It was not just loss of property and livelihood, it was loss of relations, ties, belongings. It was also about trauma. Trauma of seeing friends turning into foes and neighbours into strangers. As tension between Hindus and Muslims flared up regarding who belongs where and people found it safer to move to a country with their religion as the major one, new identities and ties were formed erasing the older ones. Although there's no dearth of literature that has recorded these disturbing phases of history of the sub-continent, many stories are yet to be told. It is only with recent interest in Dalit literature, we have got a scope to view the Partition history from a caste-angle. For this I have selected autobiographies of Dalit writers Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Jatin Bala who have all migrated from East Pakistan to Bengal in the aftermath of Partition.

Key Words: Partition, identities, belonging, migration, caste-angle.

Grand narratives of the partition of India do not speak about its inhabitants' feelings. Though the independence of India and formation of a new country named Pakistan are the two much talked about and glorified outcomes of partition, the event cannot be summarized in such a simplistic way. Apart from creating the mark of partition on the body of the two countries, it creates a number of complications regarding identity and socio economic position of its inhabitants. Though unlike some other countries like Palestine or Germany, India does not observe the day of its partition to remember the disaster and homelessness it has caused to thousands of people. Partition is not only a loss of material objects of Land of wealth oppositions, it is also of numberless emotions which cannot be expressed in words and may not even be named. The immediate effect of partition is the confusion and complication that is created regarding the issue of citizenship as after drawing the new boundary line, many people residing in the border area discovered to their dismay that theirs and their land's political identity has been changed for good. Urbashi Butalia aptly raises some disturbing questions here:

“Who belongs and how, and how does belonging look when seen from the point of view of citizen and from the point of view of the state.”

As the country has been divided on the issue of religion and Islam has become the state religion of the newly formed country Pakistan, the Hindus in Pakistan faced a complicated Socio-Political situation. Though from the legal perspective, Hindus were also citizens of the newly formed country Pakistan, the series of communal riots held them back from asserting their citizenship-rights. On the other hand from the legal lenses of India, its erstwhile citizens are now viewed as foreigners in the post-partition situations. Along with the citizen-foreigner binary, the majority-minority issue too makes the concept of citizenship a problematic one. The religious minority of both the countries ponder over their probable unprivileged future and their doubt over safety and honour led them to think about leaving their homeland. Haimanti Roy states about the situation:

...it was the everyday interactions between majority and minority communities, now predicted on new ideas of belonging and nationality, that produced state of uncertainty and fear amongst the latter, and continued to influence contingent decisions to move from one's home and to become evacuees or refugees in another country.(5)

With the crossing of the boundary of a country, an individual's socio-political identity further gets complicated as leaving the homeland takes away from him the status of 'citizenship' and marks him with one level or another. To quote Roy again:

Defining categories of Identity such as evacuees, refugees, displaced persons, aliens and infiltrators was a major element of the process of establishing Post-Partition national orders and turning colonial subjects into national citizens. Further, these identities were

produced discursively, mediated through the actions of officials located at the periphery of the nation, especially at the borders and diplomatic missions.(5)

The complexities regarding the issue of identity and the resultant sufferings of the individuals are not captured in the grand narratives of the nation-state. It is only the local micro-narratives that keep track of the immigrated person's experience, and all the Post-Partition memoirs and autobiographies are such local narratives that capture the lived-life of the narrators, and consequently these narratives can be viewed as a kind of testimony to the life and time of the narrators. It is quite interesting that in Bengal while the upper-caste voices, speaking about their experiences and trauma during and after the Partition are hard frequently, the Dalit voices narrating such an experience is a rare phenomenon. It is only very recently, few Bengali Dalit intellectuals open up about what they have faced during and after their migration to India. Stalwarts like Manoranjan Byapari, Jatin Bala, Manohar Mouli Biswas try to capture their Post-Partition experiences in their autobiographies and each of their autobiography is unique as they highlight different facets of their partitioned-life. Manoranjan Byapari and Jatin Bala's autobiographies demand special attention among their different kinds of writings because of the blatant descriptions of the journey from east Pakistan to West Bengal and their experience as refugees in Refugee camps with other destitute persons towards Benapole and the camp life they are compelled to live. As they were the eyewitnesses of a fateful event like the partition of a nation, these autobiographies are testimony to a number of historic and political events of the nation state, events which are mostly under-carpeted for being shameful for a nation-state. It is quite different to look at historical facts through personal narratives of an eyewitness as only through this medium the consequences of such historical incidents and political decisions at ground level can be properly traced. In this paper I have tried to look at the consequences of the partition of India more particularly of Post- Partition conditions through the autobiographical narratives of Manoranjan Byapari, Manohar Mouli Biswas and Jatin Bala.

The graveness of Partition does not lie in Radcliffe's Act of drawing a line over the body of the country but in the aftermath of the very act. The act of laying new boundaries became the cause of innumerable peoples' uprooting from their homeland, and Byapari, Biswas and Bala gave voice to the uncertainty and sufferings of the uprooted people in their autobiographies. These narratives tried to answer the fissures that came out of the serious historical decisions and the fissures which are generally ignored in the Grand narratives. After the formation of Pakistan, Jinnah declares in his very first speech:

you are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan....Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims—not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.

But interestingly what happened to the ordinary Hindus of Pakistan is quite contradictory to what was promised by Jinnah, and the reasons for such contradiction lie in the local narratives as these narratives focus on the voices of sufferers and endurers. Though Jinnah promised freedom to all citizens of Pakistan, what in reality the minority Hindus faced there is completely different. Bala

and Byapari were children at that time and witnessed such disagreeable incidence when Bihari Muslims attacked their village to threaten them and to compel them to leave the places as early as possible as they believe that Pakistan is meant only for Muslims and there no Hindu has any right to live. So Muslims of Pakistan,in general, do not think it is important to pay heed to Jinnah's ideals or they may even remain simply unaware to such ideals and promises; and the panic that is purposefully created in the minds of minorities successfully stirred them enough to make them desert their home. Refuge in deserted village did not seem safe for long and by obtaining migration certificates they tried to acquire safe shelter in India. But crossing the boundaries at Benapole does not make an end to all the difficulties. Rather it makes them confront the crudites of life. The horrible condition of refugees at the Bongaon station as revealed by Jatin Bala in his autobiography *A Life Uprooted A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* speaks clearly about the Nation -State's policies regarding the refugees:

Just before twilight, fifteen families consisting of eighty one of us from various age-groups entered the hell that was the Bongaon railway station, filled chock-a-block with people. We looked hopelessly for a space to rest from one end of the station to another, and failed. So many helpless families stood waiting to take the place of refugee families being transferred to Sealdah. We stood for almost an hour bearing our bundles. We grabbed any space that was vacated suddenly; this is how, with great cunning and planning, we managed to get a temporary shelter under the corrugated tin roof of the station. When our bundles were set down, there was no place left for us to sit. Children like me were made to sit on the bundles; the elders stood surrounding us. Only if they could struggle and occupy a newly-vacated space would they get to sit down and rest; otherwise they would continue standing day and night. As soon as I sat down on the bundles, my eyes were greeted by an unknown ramshackle, bleeding, putrid world that could not be described. The Partition had introduced the primordial racks of Hell into our lives, that still haunts me. (Bala,116-17)

From Bongaon station they are pushed to shift to Sealdah station.The situation at Sealdah station is not at all better than the Bongaon station. People are stacked on the Sealdah Railway platform until lorries come to put them in different Refugee camps:

Within this small space five to six thousand, ten to twelve thousand women-men-children lay stacked for days after days,nights after nights. As everyday thousands of refugees come in Sealdah station, likewise through the afternoons and evenings thousands of people leave for different refugee camps by boarding lorry. But twelve to fifteen thousand people always remain on the Sealdah platform. So the families have to stay on the Sealdah platform for seven to fifteen days. And for these large numbers of people there are only three tube wells,two lavatories for women and eight for men. After arriving on the Sealdah platform we have got flattened rice and jaggery twice in three days and we have got these only after standing four hours, and have received such an amount that can satisfy only three or four persons' hunger. These are distributed by charitable institutions.The responsibility of Govt. and these charitable institutions ends in doing this. If anyone falls ill, there is none to take care of him .(170-71)

A similar fate waited the Byaparis and Manoranjan in his autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life* gave graphic descriptions of the misery that awaits them in this part of Bengal:

Five of us arrived in the Great Land of India: my father, my mother, me, my brother Chitta and my aged grandmother who was too fond of her only daughter to let her go. We spent quite a few days on the Sealdah Station platform after arriving in this Bengal. From there we were taken to the Shiromanipur Camp in the Bankura District. A few thousand families were already there before us. A huge field upon which had been strung up lines of reddish brown canvas tents. Families of five, six or seven were stuffed into tents of about six by eight feet. (15)

The sheer human apathy that led to gross human rights violation in these camps are well documented in these life-narratives. Byapari continues:

The Bankura district of West Bengal is a hot, dry, drought-prone region. We arrived here at the height of summer to face a severe crisis of water. Two tube-wells had been set up by the benevolent government to cater to these few thousand families. There was no other source of water in the vicinity.... There was no lavatory within the camp. People would need to go out to the overgrown grounds and fields nearby to relieve themselves. (15-16)

With the loss of homeland and identity, these refugees people lived a life at the mercy of a newly formed Nation-State who viewed them as burden and thus the value of human life has also been lost as death makes its occurrence frequently:

“Six days before we, the children and grown-ups, eighty-one members of fifteen families had took refuge on the Bongaon platform. Seven among them consisting both children and grown-ups had left the earth forever.(Bala,167)”

That they are treated as non-humans to whom the State owes nothing and had no responsibilities for anything adverse happened to them due to negligence or mishandling (the treatment reminds us of what Agambe termed as “Homo Sacer”). Byapari exposed many such hidden histories:

Over and above this misery of indigestion and bad rice, was the tremendous heat.... The relentless heat was aggravated greatly by the waxed surface of the tents and within the tents the temperatures were about four times greater. This state of affairs hiked up the death rate in the camp for quite some months.... People returned after cremating one dead body only to prepare for the cremation of another. (17)

Byapari said that there was only one doctor in the camp; but he had no supply of “life –giving medicines which could cure disease” (17) and despite his “repeated requisitions for the necessary medicines” (17), the supplies never arrived.

Anwesha Sengupta in her research article tried to find out the reason behind such plights of these refugees in stations and camps. She writes:

Earliest migrants from East Bengal in post-colonial Calcutta were mostly “bhadraloks; – they had enough money, connections and /or education to be economically independent. With the riots of 1950, however, the social profile of the migrants became more heterogeneous. The poor, often from low caste backgrounds, were the chief victims and now they began to move out of East Pakistan. Many of them choose to come to Calcutta. But with no relatives and friends in the city and with not enough means for settling down on their own, the new refugees of 1950 begin to squat on the railway platforms at Sealdah. (Sengupta, 6)

The inhuman condition of these camps shows the callousness and indifference of the government. And the establishment of camps shows that the government is interested in reliefs only and has no plan for rehabilitation:

Initially the Government of India attempted to discourage the migration of East Bengalis to India. It became clear from the instruction given by Mohanlal Saxena, the then Rehabilitation Minister of the Government of India to the representatives of Tripura, Assam, Bihar Orissa and West Bengal in a meeting held in the Writers’ Building on March 2, 1950 that the Government's work would be restricted to relief only rather than to rehabilitation. Moreover, Saxena was in favour of establishing the relief camps in the border areas to facilitate their quick return to their homeland. (Basu Ray Chaudhury, 12)

This decision of the administration shows their ignorance of the common Hindus’ condition in East Pakistan and the graveness of the situation that leads thousands of poor Hindus to cross the border and become refugees. Shekhar Bandopadhyay opines:

“The Namasudra day labourers found it difficult to get employment, as their previous employers – the caste Hindu landlords – had mostly left. And in a labour surplus market the Muslim landlords preferred their co-religionists” (2022).

He again states, “There were demands for hefty subscriptions for the Jinnah Fund and refusal to pay would lead to various forms of harassment. Refugees also reported Muslim landlords unlawfully seizing Hindu properties and taunting them to leave” (2022). It also highlights the failure of the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Khan Agreement that promises to “ensure to the minorities throughout its territory, complete equality of citizenship, irrespective of religion, a full sense of security in respect of life, culture, prosperity and personal honour, freedom of movement within each country and freedom of occupation, speech and worship subject to law and morality... to participate in the public life of their country, to hold political or other office, and to serve in their country’s civil and armed forces.” Compelled to leave, they thought it would be beneficial for them to cross the border and settle down in West Bengal. But their socio-economic conditions posed difficulty in it and they had endured a vicious nexus of caste and class on this side of the barbed wire. Manohar Mouli Biswas in his dalit autobiography *Surviving in My World* sums up the doubly marginalised positions of these low-caste migrants through the metaphor of big and small fishes:

The nation was divided. I saw the partition of the country in my childhood. We were not like the aristocratic rui or katla fish who could cross over the borders immediately with the partition of the land and seek a living on the other side. We, like the common chunoputi fish, stayed back in our motherland, primarily because of sheer helplessness. Our small plots of land were all we had; we had little else to restart elsewhere-no other assets, no other skills, almost no connection with people of the western part of Bengal. It was true that other factors had also some influence over us; factors like the hope of a peaceful communal cohabitation, in spite of Partition, that was given to us by the Awami League, by our leaders, as Jogen Mandal had initially convinced us; but it took some time for us to realize that this was a distant dream. (84)

The marginalised minority Hindus remain minority even after arriving in a country of majority Hindus. Rather, they have become doubly marginalised for being refugees and belonging to the Namashudra community who used to be considered untouchables or dalits in this part of the country. They felt left out as the government does not seem to be interested in giving them rehabilitation and utilizing these people in its nation-building projects. Byapari minced no words when he lay bare the caste-angle for their double marginalisation:

The upper caste was unwilling to stay at the camps with the Muchi, the Nama, the Jele. Most of them, with the help of the caste Hindu officials or ministers in West Bengal, managed a space within or near Calcutta in the over one hundred and fifty colonies which sprang up on land that had been forcibly occupied by the refugees.... The other millions who had come over, honest workers of the land, could not find space in any of these forcibly occupied colonies 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. A few of the prosperous lower-caste families managed to hide their real names and claim space. Other pretenders who were discovered were thrown out. In none of the 149 colonies in and around the city therefore you will not find a single Nama or Muchi family of that time. (20-21)

As if hellish life in different camps was not enough, a bigger blow came their way. As communal tensions mounted in the 1950s in East Pakistan and the Namashudras of East Pakistan started to cross the Border in numbers and seek refuge in West Bengal, the burgeoning pressure led the Central as well as the State Govt not to dole out these hapless refugees in temporary camps and they had chalked a detailed plan of their resettlement across some hitherto uninhabited terrains of the country. This crucial juncture of refugee life has been depicted by Byapari in his autobiography:

“We learnt the refugees would no longer be receiving dole, food or money. Everyone was to fend for himself from now. The government had no responsibility regarding the refugees any more. (20)”

Like Byapari, Bala also recalls the moment when they had to face the government decision of closing down Bolagarh Refugee Camp:

The refugees arrived from East Bengal shall be rehabilitated in Central India's Dandakaranya. Those who refuse to proceed to Dandakaranya shall immediately have their government assistance 'dole' cancelled." This order caused great distress among the refugees, who launched into agitated discussions to figure out ways of avoiding this calamity. (190)

A number of associations were formed *Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad*, *Dakshin Kolikata Shahartali Bastuhara Samiti*, *Uttor Kolikata Bastuhara Samiti* etc and the CPI were active in all the camps demanding their rehabilitation in West Bengal. Byapari recalls how the Communist Party had taken a chance of the situation and acted to strengthen the Party's political ground. He mentions:

On the road that led out of the Shiromanipur camp to Bishnupur were located three more camps, Basudevpur 1,2 and 3 camps. About fifteen to twenty thousand people from these four camps now began to make preparations to launch a movement under the leadership of the Communist leader. The first phase of the movement began with a hunger strike.(26)

But the strike proved to be futile as the Govt. was adamant and no humane response came from the policy-makers even though one of the refugees died while fasting. Byapari laments:

The fast is useful as a weapon only when there is a sympathetic and humane authority against whom you are fighting. It is useless when that authority loses its humanity and is a deaf-mute machine. The strike was given up finally and the fast broken with the usual lime and salt water by the strikers themselves. (27)

The Dandakaranya project exploited the hapless condition of these people of no-man's land and utilized their cheap labour in nation-building projects . Byapari's words reveal the same line of thought:

If the refugees could be brought to this area, two birds could be killed off with one stone. On the one hand, an easy solution to the refugee problem would be found, and on the other: this till date unprofitable area could be made productive. The land of Dandakaranya had forested areas where trees like teak and sal, useful as timber, and bamboo groves, useful in the paper industry, grew naturally. The mohua tree, from which could be extracted liquor and oil, grew in abundance here. The land was also rich in minerals like iron, lead, copper, bauxite and dolomite. Lack of suitable labour had prevented the riches of this area from being mined profitably. The tribals were neither skilled in such jobs, nor willing to subject themselves to the ordered routine-bound life of the labourer. The refugees, however, could prove useful here. Since the soil here was not such that it would support farming throughout the year, they would be forced to take on other work in order to survive. Such shrewd thinking created the foundations for the Dandakaranya scheme. (23-24)

As the camps were officially closed down, refugees who had failed to rehabilitate themselves as per Govt. order are left with literally nothing. The government had no more responsibilities towards these people. Byapari writes:

After this, as expected, the population at the camp dwindled to half its number. Surrendering hopes of getting anything from the government, many moved to the cities, its margins, the railway sidings, the pavements. Some enlisted themselves for the Dandakaranya project. Those who remained at the camps tried to find work pulling rickshaws, tying bidis, or working as labourers. All these years, the refugees had been forbidden to leave the camp without official permission. Now there was no office and no official. (29)

He continues:

There was no food, no medicine, no work, nowhere to go and, very soon, no water to drink. The tube-well set up by the Camp had broken down and, when a few of the refugees went to the Block Development Officer to request that it be repaired, they were told that repairs were unnecessary since nobody lived there. Our tents were torn and the sun peeped through the tears as we waited in fear for the monsoons to come. The entire camp had, as it were, ceased to exist. Not only was the camp erased in the government records but even the sound of the frail coughing of the aged or the cries of the infants or the sound of the women who had lined up at the water taps and were arguing amongst themselves—all signs of life—had ceased to be. (30)

These haunting lines highlight the sheer apathy and human right violation Partition brought for these lowly-born people who were once rightful citizens of a country.

Byapari's family decided to move to the barren jungles of Dandakaranya. He vividly recalled their days there:

When we arrived here, the government office gave each family some utensils, some clothes, spades and shovels, some rice and dal, and some money. I don't remember the amount of rice and dal, but the money as far as I can recall was about seventy-five rupees per month. On this food and money, our family of seven could, with a lot of rationing and calculation, last for about half the month. This was a fact that was known to the planners who had accordingly calculated the dole or, as it was now called, subsidy. For the rest of the month, we would need to work as labourers to clear the forest and earn our money. The wages however would be minimal, a fact that we could hardly dispute since we were as good as captive workers in this scenario.... There were different kinds of jobs, cutting down trees, digging up the earth, chopping up bamboo, breaking the rocks, collecting tobacco leaves. From one job-contractor to another. Yet no matter what job we did or how hard we worked, the wage at the end of the day never exceeded two or three rupees. (134-35)

Such harsh life of a kind of bonded-labour became unbearable for them and the futility of staying there compelled them to be deserters and return to West Bengal. The experience of

Byapari and his family in the Dandakaranya rehabilitation camps speaks a lot about the reason of the failure of most of the refugee Rehabilitation Projects of the government. Historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay states, “Desertion from Dandakaranya was a ‘regular feature’ since 1965; by 1978, 16211 families had deserted from these uninhabitable terrains(2022).”

Thousands of deserters left for Bengal and the Leftist politics of the day encouraged their return and permanent settlement. What Byapari has mentioned in his text find echo in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s words:

Then, on 25 January 1975, Jyoti Basu himself announced at a workers’ meeting in Bhilai in Madhya Pradesh that the refugees from Dandakaranya could be settled in the Sunderbans, and if elected his government would initiate that resettlement process. Therefore, after the subsequent electoral victory of the Left Front, a delegation of refugees from Dandakaranya came to meet the new CM Jyoti Basu in Calcutta on 17 December 1977, and they were again told to settle down in the Sunderbans. (2022)

But as history has proved, these people were used only as vote banks for forming a communist government in Bengal and after gaining power the Left party changed its stance regarding the refugee settlement issue in Sunderbans. Byapari in plain words shows the double standardness the newly elected govt was capable of:

The industrious nature of these Namasudra refugees helped them to transform an uninhabited island to a well-organized and equipped place of habitation; through the construction of this place of refuge they had shown a way of proper rehabilitation that could solve the refugee problem to a certain extent. But by that time the then ruling government had changed their stance towards the refugees who had been rehabilitated outside Bengal; the government posed obstacle to the deserters’ return to West Bengal, used its police force as repressive apparatus to send back the deserters to Dandakaranya, and finally employed all available means to evict the settlers from Marichjhanpi (239-40).

The State Govt unleashes unimaginable atrocities to drive away all refugees from the islands. Byapari wrote in detail:

On the morning of 19 August 1978, the police arrived and surrounded the island with about 40 or 42 launch boats. Section 144, the Criminal Procedure Act that forbids the assembling of more than four people in one area, was imposed on the island. Nobody could enter and nobody could leave. Not even media representatives, political activists, sympathetic intellectuals, academics or writers could enter the island. At that time, there was no potable water available on the Marichjhanpi island. Water, medicines, and most items of food such as rice, lentils, vegetables, had to be procured from outside the island. The police blocked the entry of all these in a ruthless attempt to starve the people to death or kill them by denying medical treatment. When some, in a desperate bid, tried to break through the police barricades on their dinghy boats and reach the other islands, the more powerful police boats smashed into theirs. The number of such boats that the police

grabbed or capsized was over two hundreds.... It is then that the police, realizing that the trapped people were yet unwilling to surrender, moved into the island. This was 31 January 1979. The police shot about two dozen teargas shells into the crowds that stood shouting slogans along the edges of the island. This broke up the crowds and the police alighted on the island. Then began one of the most fearful chapters of the century's history as thousands of half-starved, unarmed people were beaten, raped, murdered. It is said that people were shot, bodies piled on the boats and then dumped in mid-sea and in the depths of the jungles. Some surmise that it is at this time that the Sunderban tigers grew used to human flesh, turning man-eaters. The carnage continued from 31 January to 8 May, a long span of over three months while the conscience of Awakened Bengal slept. The few refugees who remained alive returned as ordered to Dandakaranya, completely broken in body and spirit. (Byapari, 240-41)

Of course the govt denied any such report and these memories are not counted as proof as the government has willfully erased that part of the history. Bandyopadhyay writes:

It is futile to look for 'truth' in these memories of people firmly entrenched in opposing subjective positions. As Annu Jalais has observed: 'We shall never know exactly how many people had lost their lives.' One should remember however those people died not just because of firing, but also because of starvation, malnutrition, and diseases. Nilanjana Chatterjee and Ross Mallick pointed out that 4,128 or nearly 5,000 families or about 17,000 refugees had failed to return to Dandakaranya; they were either 'missing' or 'presumed dead'. And those who were repatriated to Dandakaranya, they continued to experience 'everyday Marichjhanpi'. (2022)

Byapari himself bears the wound of Marichjhanpi massacre as his father and brother Chitta were survivor of the incident. He recalled:

I had had no news that my father and brother Chitta had arrived at Marichjhanpi via Hasanabad. He had probably thought that once he had settled down somewhat, he would send Chitta to search for me. But the police intervened. That night, the blow with the rifle butt that came down on my father's chest, had been meant not for him but for my brother Chitta. My father, in an attempt to save his son, had thrown himself in front of Chitta, and caught the full impact of the blow. (242)

Byapari recalls, "Baba passed away unable to bear the blow of Chitta's death and also because his health had already been badly affected after he broke his ribs on being beaten with a rifle butt at Marichjhanpi" (235). Those who survive the brutal attacks-

were piled into train compartments like cattle with no food, water or medicine and sent on their way. Many were separated from their families, many were too ill or infirm to be moved, and children who succumbed to death during the horrendous journey were summarily thrown out of the moving train. (241-42)

In the grand narrative of the nation-state Marichjhapi Massacre was denied, and the refugees were branded as dangerous and a threat to the nation-state and "it was alleged that a group of

people, with the active cooperation of the neighbouring nation of Bangladesh, had crossed the border into India with the objective of creating a separate nation here” (241).

The reason for such atrocities were debated and the settlers being low-caste Hindu Namasudras point towards the issue of caste apathy in Bengal. From Shekhar Bandyopadhyay we learn that

in an open letter in Anandabazar Patrika, Aurobinda Mistry, the Joint Secretary of the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samiti wrote: Caste Hindus live in other squatter colonies, and there were only Scheduled Castes at Marichjhanpi. Is that why there is no space for the people of Marichjhanpi in this state? Of course, CPI(M) leader Kanti Ganguly would vehemently deny it: ‘You can call us Leftist anything you want to, but you can’t call us communal or casteists.’ (2022)

Bandyopadhyay raised a hypothetical question to ponder upon the caste issue prevalent even in a communist ruled Bengal of that time :

We can only pose a counterfactual question: if the settlers were Banerjees, Mukherjees, Boses, Mitras, Senguptas, and Dasguptas or in other words, if they belonged to the three traditional higher castes of Bengal who mostly constituted the elite bhadralok, would the are the responses of the government and civil society be the same? The answer, we think, should be an emphatic no. and there lies the caste factor, which should impel the savarna bhadralok to introspect about their latent casteism that remains deeply embedded in their overtly elitist culture. (2022)

From the above discussion it is quite clear that Partition hit the dalit refugees in ways not imaginable from recorded histories or literature written by the upper-caste settlers. These Dalit autobiographies were testament to the brutalities they have faced simply because of their caste. The double marginalization meted out to these refugees from East Pakistan had made them ‘homo sacer’ (using Agamben’s term). They were the cursed men who could be maltreated in the name of providing them shelter, sustenance and rehabilitation, and if they lost their lives in the process, no one could be blamed for it. The autobiographies of Byapari, Bala and Biswas compel us to read Partition with caste-lens firmly on.

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