

Life of A Dalit under the Partition of Bengal : A Thematic Analysis of Manoranjan Byapari's "Interrogating My Chandal Life, An Autobiography of A Dalit"

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Abstract

The word 'partition' broadly suggests a structure dividing a space into two parts. It is generally used to indicate the separate areas of two states or countries. But, when we talk about partition literature we find history is mingled with conflict, trauma, pain and agony. Continuous political conflict, extreme poverty, racial conflict, communal riots, unemployment etc uprooted and displaced the people. Nobody cares for this people as there is no concrete government policy for those ill-fated people. With an empty stomach, empty pocket, broken heart they only think to survive or to exist in the world. Their struggle for existence has been continuing since the partition starts. It is utterly impossible to them to create history. But, few are exceptional, god-gifted. In this paper I would like to focus on such a person who had felt the pain of partition by living in refugee camp. He is Manoranjan Byapari, the winner of Hindu Prize in 2018 and the writer of 'Ittibrite Chandal Jeeban' which is translated in English by Sipra Mukherjee under the title 'Interrogating My Chandal Life, An Autobiography of a Dalit'. However, this paper goes on to analyse how partition spoiled the dreams of millions and millions of children.

Key-words : *Refugees and their settlement in India, Partition in East and West Bengal, Thematic and critical analysis of the novel in background of partition, conclusion*

1. Refugees and their resettlement in India

The people displaced by partition were 'refugees' in the sense that they had not left their homes voluntarily. The two new governments did not organise an orderly exchange of population. Refugee resettlement became the immediate challenge for all governments.

The Indian government established an emergency committee of the cabinet to deal with the crisis in Delhi, and a Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation to look after the refugees. In view of large-scale influx of displaced people, the notion of ‘evacuee property’ to be Protected by government, for any future return of those who had left for Pakistan, became an empty rhetoric because it was almost impossible to force the refugees who settled in the empty houses of Muslims. (This, at a later time, made the return of the refugees impossible).

Some refugees were accommodated temporarily in refugee camps, which were run till 1949. For urban refugees, the government started industrial and vocational training schemes, and even grants were given to start small businesses or industries. The rural refugees were given land, agricultural loans and housing subsidies. Although, the state government and the central government mobilised massive resources, it was still not adequate and a general trend of differentiated entitlements to such benefits was observed. For example refugees with social and cultural capital – class and caste status and political connections – often got the better deal, while the depressed classes were given little or no consideration.

2. Partition in East and West Bengal

The problem of partition was much more prolonged and complicated in Bengal. By 1948, only a small group of high-caste, landed or middle class Hindus migrated to West Bengal by arranging exchange of property or jobs on individual levels. But during December 1949 and January 1950, due to a fresh outbreak of violence in Khulna, a large number of peasants started to leave East Pakistan. In revenge, anti-Muslim riots started in February 1950 and forced about one million Muslims to leave West Bengal. This further aggravated anti-Hindu violence in East Pakistan and by 1951, about 15 lakh Hindu refugees arrived in West Bengal. But the Indian government didn’t recognise these migrants as refugees and Nehru tried to send them back.

3. Thematic and critical analysis of the novel in the background of partition

There is this Bangal – a novel and strange beast,

Jumps up a tree sans a tail – flown in from the east

These lines were penned by a Ghoti poet. In the eyes of the Ghoti of West Bengal, the Bangal is always an outsider. The people who have come from another land are now in the process of appropriating their culture, their literature, their jobs and their trade. The hostility was so intense that violence could be sparked off any day. (p. 41)

Since his childhood Manoranjan Byapari always tries to find a solution of this question and issue. Our present novel is written in first person which is an autobiography of the writer who belongs to a dalit family of East Bengal. He was born in a place Turuk-khali near the village of Pirichpur in Barishal district now in Bangladesh. Here, Byapari focuses the story of his life in East Bengal and later West Bengal after the partition. He was the elder son of his family. His father was a contractual labourer worked in pittance and toiled hard to maintain his family. His mother was a lady whose heart was too full of the milk of human kindness.

Byapari unlocks his heart by telling a true story of their life in East Bengal. Their previous title was Mondal and it was a funny incident that they got the title Byapari. It was because of the business acumen of his grandfather related a saree which he gifted his wife. They lived a happy life in Turuk-Khali and was respected by all. He recalls how his grandfather had chosen his mother as daughter-in-law only by seen her streaming black hair when she was filling water in a tiny pot at the river bank. However, Byapari's family belonged to Namashudra Caste, at present popularly known as Matua religion which was founded by Harichand Thakur. In East Bengal, Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Barisal districts were mainly occupied by the Namashudras. They had poverty in their family but their was a happiness to live in motherland or birth place. But the situation had changed when a communal riot began in East Bengal just after his birth in 1950 or 1951.

Communal riots had engulfed the land of Nanak, Kabir, Buddha and Chaitanya and a split had taken place between East and West Bengal. He still remembers one of his uncle had to lost his caste and had to take a caste named Khere (one who converted from Hinduism to Islam) because he was saved a treated by a Muslim.

This partition and fratricidal incident caused millions and millions of people to flee from their own land and compelled them headed towards a destiny which was unknown and uncertain to them. Byapari indirectly points out the intolerance of high-born Hindus were responsible for this riot. By giving a simple illustration he describes hat most of the ancestors of Muslims had been Hindus who had been cast off by intolerant Hindu society for some trivial incident or the other. That is why he says *“That poison tree was now beginning to bear its fruit, and the oppressed were now leading a bloody wave of revenge.”* (p. 14)

Byapari along with his family had to left his Turuk-khali. His father was against to shift from East to West. He had been assured by Muslims of his safety as they had a good relation with Muslims. His father was hesitating and finally left his motherland. A new life begins in a new geographical region. It was overloaded with struggle, emptiness, nothingness and uncertainty. It was too much to bear the feelings when one had to displace from his own land. However, Byapari and his family spent a few days in Sealdah station and then they were taken to the Shiromanipur Refugee Camp in Bankura district. They started to live with a few thousand families in a congested area where there were only two tube wells, no lavatory, no electricity. Lead a life in any way was a luxury.

The problem they had to face most was the scarcity of drinking water, because Bankura was dry and drought prone area. They were given some rice, lentils and some cash per head every fortnight by government. They received total twenty rupees and thirteen annas. The rice which was given was rotten and inedible. So, when his father receive a dole he would take a half day leave and go off to Bishnupur Choowk market for

shopping. That was the day they would have a full meal off fish curry and good rice. The food that they would taste like manna from heaven.

Day by day the situation became worse when epidemic began because of extreme heat, bad food and unhygienic environment. A doctor was there, but there was no life saving medicine and medical equipments. So people has to depend on fate and god. They had no smile on face, no expression, no happiness. Only one could hear the lament of a bereaved mother or bereaved family *“O my precious, my jewel, don’t go away!”* (p. 18) Byapari himself was affected but somehow managed to escape from death. He is a born fighter or else how could he escape from danger again and again? Byapari’s education was started but due to lack of money he had to quit.

Their problem rises high when government declare that they would stop the camp and the refugees would be send Andaman and Dandakaranya. The Communists Party of Bengal turns up in the plot. They assure the refugees that they will protest for them. *‘We are with you’ they said. ‘We will hold agitations to press your demands.’* (p. 22) The camp closed and they started hunger strike and protest. Government did not pay any heed to them that is why they quit from strike. Thinking of his family, Byapari joined in a household job where he was given two meals a day. His dreams get shattered and he laments again and again over his lost childhood. *“My dreams thus were not coloured at all. They were dark and fearsome, the face of a reality red in its tooth and claw, the flaming of her terrifying eyes haunting my life persistently.”* (p. 31)

As the camp closed Byapari along with his family moved Ghola Doltala, another camp where some of his uncles lived and started to earn by making mat from hogla grass which grew in abundance in Garia and Bantala area. It was 1960s when Bengal was creeping towards a deadly food shortage. They had to eat poultry food known as ‘khud’. Extreme hunger maddened them. Indo-China war begins. People were not at all sure whether they would exist or not. In a hut beside the railway line canals they had to live

one upon another. It was like a rat hole. Byapari humourously laments *“In few years man, proclaiming the glories of science, would be setting feet on the moon in the same world some would be moving into increasingly animal-like existence in their rat holes”*. (p. 34)

Byapari remembers his days of Jadavpur and the ill-fated people of Marichjhapi where out of thirty thousand families maximum were missing. His father started to work in Jadavpur area, Bagha Jatin Crossing. Every day his father woke up at three o'clock at dawn and caught train from Ghutiari Sharif Railways Station. Day by day situation become worse. Byapari's father got ill, his sister Manju died without treatment. They had to wear torn clothes. His mother was unable to step outside in the daylight because of her ragged saree which was given during her days in Shiromonipur refugee camp. Byapari was mentally collapsed day by day and at last left his house with a heavy heart, empty stomach and empty pocket. *“My heart was crying for the family I was leaving behind”*. (p. 39)

Leaving home, Byapari started a new life. Again and again he was humiliated by caste Hindus or the people belongs to upper class. During his staying in Bramhin's house he was treated as an untouchable. *“I was a Namashudra, that caste group which had earlier been Chandal. These people knew this and treated me as dirty detestable animal”*. (p. 42) Byapari had seen riot in Ghutiari Sharif and Park Circus of that time. He had managed to save of his life during this time. He had seen how a trivial matter be the cause of a fratricidal riot. At the same time he undertook different type of jobs to earn his livelihood. In this way, through the different experience he became mature. In his ten or twelve years of age he had seen the hard core reality of the world where a grain of rice is expensive, where there is no sympathy and tenderness for the poor. The lives of the poor depend on the mercy of god who are beaten from pillar to post until they die. Here Byapari is the representative of millions of millions of refugees and untouchables who get nothing but contribute much for the society. However, it was partition which spoiled his

childhood and turned his life into a different rocky track.

4. Conclusion

The whole discussion rotates around a single character, the protagonist Manoranjan Byapari. Partition has displaced him, uprooted him from his own land, snatched away his Childhood, his dreams, his aim, ambition and goal, his family, siblings and make him a naked fakir without clothes, food and shelter who wanders here and there in search of 'roti, kapda aur makaan'. From the beginning to the end he highlights what he losses and what he gains, his mental agony, his trauma with an aching heart. He was a beast burden who toiled hard to maintain his family and finally unable to adjust and left from rooster coop domestic life. However, he had a tremendous spirit and will power like Ulysses of Tennyson who believed "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". Like Tennyson he has tasted every drops of life and finally becomes a name. But he is an exception among the millions. Overall, it will be not an exaggeration to say that partition had broken the dream and future of millions of refugees and made them destitute.

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