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Problematizing the Hegemonic Conceptualization of Refugeehood in West Bengal: A Study of Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*

Damayanti Das

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English, Raiganj University, Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal

Abstract

In 1947, the partition of India resulted in the division of Bengal province along the communal line. In Bengal-oriented partition history, literature and films, the trauma and identity crisis of the East Bengali refugees are explored significantly. But how far the exploration of partition engages with the refugee experiences in totality is a relevant query since it is marked by a politics of silence on caste. It appears that the normalization of disengagement with caste identity in studying refugee experiences and the mainstream assertion that the caste system is rather alien to Bengal's progressive intellectual atmosphere have excluded the dalit refugee perspectives. The cultural hegemony of the upper-caste Bengali Bhadraloks has controlled knowledge production about partition so persistently that the conscious attempt at universalizing the selective partition experiences from the upper-caste perspective has been highly successful. But the trajectory of partition history is much wider than what is imagined by the celebrated Bengali Partition narratives and films by upper-caste intellectuals, as is evident in Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. I would like to study how Byapari, an East Bengali refugee without caste privilege, interrogates and redefines the concepts like refugeehood, belongingness and citizenship in this Hindu majoritarian state and how his literary agency registers his traumatic past and the journey of his identity construction from a dalit refugee standpoint.

Keywords: hegemony, majoritarian, universalize, refugeehood, Bhadralok

In 1947, the partition of colonial India which gave birth to two independent states-the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan- left an indelible mark on the history of South Asia. This newly acquired freedom ended up as an unrelatable bureaucratic reality to huge swaths of the population of the two nations as mass deportation across the border and concomitant communal riots left them alienated, traumatized and rootless. In West Bengal, the Bengali Hindu identity took on a new dimension on the basis of geographical relocation of the East Bengali Hindus who migrated to India from the then East Pakistan. Their refugee status which they perceived to be demeaning overshadowed the erstwhile identities they enjoyed in their homeland. Though partition on the Western front has

received greater critical attention, in Bengal-oriented partition historiography, novels, short stories, self-narratives and films, the multiple realities of the Hindu Bengali refugee lives are explored enough to highlight their struggle to retrieve their fragmented memories, sense of nostalgia, struggle to regain their lost dignity and rebuild their lives from scratch. Historically the East Bengali refugees have identified themselves as self-respecting, enterprising makers of their own fate in contrast to the stereotypically passive, dole-dependent roles assigned to them by the governmental records. Uditi Sen comments: “The self-settled refugee and his heroic struggle dominate the living memory of partition's aftermath in West Bengal. This dominant memory is born partly of years of leftist political slogans and propaganda regarding refugee struggles and partly of refugee reminiscences which seek to fashion a cohesive refugee identity out of a deeply divided history” (75). But how far popular and scholarly knowledge and concern for Hindu Bengali refugee identity are taking into account the heterogeneity of this category is a matter to ponder as most of the documentation which makes up an archive of partition reality is marked by a politics of silence on the caste issues.

Though for all East Bengali Hindus, partition resulted in searching for ‘home’ in an unknown territory, their caste identity played a major role in influencing the nature and time-frame of their migration and most importantly, their experience in post-partition West Bengal. Though a large number of lower caste people, the majority of whom were Namashudras came here from the then East Pakistan, their standpoints are ignored in mainstream partition studies. Several factors like Bengal's apparently progressive cultural vibe, lack of dominant caste-based political parties and the rare incidence of brutalities on dalits consolidate the idea of this ‘casteless’ state. But this erasure of caste from the societal domain appears to be a result of the success of Brahminical hegemony disguised under the veneer of Bengali ‘modernity’. Partha Chatterjee thinks that though in West Bengal the caste system is claimed to be obsolete, the role of caste identity in determining a caste Hindu's social standing is far from irrelevant. He observes: "That practices of caste privilege continue is easily demonstrated by the near dominance of the upper castes in virtually every political institution, including those where the leadership is elected, and in every modern profession” (Chatterjee 84). The subversive version of the post-partition reality presented by the dalit refugee Byapari in his autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* highlights glaring absence of lower caste writers from the canon of Bengali Partition literature. Evidently, the legitimacy accorded to upper-caste refugee experiences and the suppression of those of lower caste refugees are parts of a hegemonic project of not acknowledging the literary output outside the arena of the upper-caste bhadraloks' literary establishment. The celebrated partition narratives by upper-caste writers do not engage with the caste dynamics governing the social relations in post-partition West Bengal. But a few dissenting voices like Manoranjan Byapari through their self-expressions incline one to question this façade of caste-neutrality which is a construct by the upper-caste Bengali bhadraloks.

Manoranjan Byapari was born in the village of Pirichpur of Barisal district of the then East Pakistan into the traditionally scorned untouchable Chandal caste now known as Namashudra. Quite early on in his book, he recounts the history of the struggle of the Namashudra community for their right to human dignity. They led a long term social movement (1872-1911) against the upper-caste use of ‘Chandal’ as a term of humiliation and compelled the British government to change the denomination to Namashudra.

Byapari, however, feels that the years of protest and subsequent victory actually did little beyond reforming the mode of addressing a dalit community, given the unchanged predominance of caste identity in deciding one's access to respect, wealth and social acceptance. Perhaps his experiences, both in undivided Bengal and post-partition West Bengal, have impelled him to develop this opinion. His and his family's journey from dalit to dalit refugee identity made their situation worse with their caste identity exposing them to the host country's hostility and indifference. He was born sometime around 1950 or 1951 when the socio-political scenario was charged with anxiety and tension about an uncertain future. He says that the Namashudras of Pirichpur did not leave for India immediately after partition, unlike the well-off upper-castes. Though they stayed back in the then East Pakistan as minorities in post-Partition time, the fear of riots kept them on tenterhooks. At Pirichpur, people did not witness communal violence till that time but the news of riots in the neighbouring villages such as Muladi made them feel safe no longer. He remembers the horrific details of Muladi riot. He says:

> About four hundred men, women and children of all ages fleeing from the violence of the riots had taken shelter in a school. Having blocked all exits and escape routes, they were hacked to death in a night-long orgy of violence. It was rumoured that the killer wore dancers' bells on their ankles as they danced and slashed. Who could say with certainty that such violence would not occur in the villages of Turak-Khali, Pirichpur, Jalokathi or Nazirpur (14)?

He seems to echo the thought of his own people who finally decided to migrate to India. He says: "In our village…the fratricidal riots had not taken place. There was, however, no certainty that they would not take place in the near future" (12). Like the other families who were gradually evacuating the village, his family crossed the border in 1953-54 even if his father was in two minds regarding this decision. His father had cordial relationship with the Muslims of his locality, who assured safety to him. But given the current situation, his family did not have the courage to stay on. His uncles already left the land. So his father also decided to join his brothers. His parents along with the author himself, his brother Chitta and his grandfather arrived in "the Great Land of India" (15) with a lot of anxiety. For a few days they lived on the Sealdah Station platform of West Bengal. From there they were taken to Shiromanipur Camp in the Bankura District. Their stay at the camp was short-lived because from there the journey of uncertainty began for them. As if the physical and psychological strain of severing ties with homeland were not enough, their continuous displacement from one camp to another in India made their life hellish. Though, back in their own village they were not financially stable, their own houses, communitarian bonds and agrarian economy offered them a sense of rootedness. But once they arrived at "an unknown geographical entity called 'India'" (Byapari 14), they were treated as infiltrators by the ruling government and were packed off to refugee camps in different parts of the nation without any initiative for arranging for their permanent settlement. Byapari has devoted a considerable section of his book to delineating life in the camps probably in greater detail than could be found in any standard historical account. As a refugee, he registers his first-hand experience of the unimaginable living conditions which pushed the refugees to utter hopelessness. He spent his life in several camps like Shiromanipur refugee camp in Bankura and Gholadoltala camp in South 24 Parganas. He recollects that when his family arrived in Bankura, the camp life was terrible. He says: "The refugee camps then were like stagnant ponds, still and lifeless. There was no vitality of

life. No light lit up the darkened eyes, no smile or banter moved past the inert lips. The people were like tethered cattle, weary and listless, uncertain of the future and counting the days as each day passed into night" (Byapari 22). Forbidden to work independently, the refugees had to subsist on the meagre government dole. Since they came from land of rivers, they found the extremely dry and hot weather of Bankura very exhausting. Besides this, climatic change, water crisis, low-quality ration, malnourishment, lack of sanitation and medical service accelerated the mortality rate. Byapari sarcastically comments that the generous government kindly installed two tube-wells to serve thousands of families. Since in the traditional Indian household the responsibility of maintaining a steady supply of water is gendered, women had to bear the additional burden of spending hours at the wells to collect barely two buckets of water. As a consequence of being on a staple diet of government-supplied rotten rice rumoured to be as old as the stock of rice stored since the time of World War II, people started suffering from acute diarrhoea. Since toilet facility was not available, the space behind the camp got littered with human excreta to make the atmosphere more sickening. The government practically did nothing to fight the outbreak of this epidemic. In the camp, medical help was just an eyewash. There was only one doctor whose requests for life-saving drugs went unheeded. The refugees were drained of whatever energy they had and utter frustration and disappointment stared them in the face. Byapari's father's dream of educating Byapari was dashed to the ground when the makeshift government school for refugee children got shut for an indefinite period of time. It must be mentioned that not all the East Bengali refugees suffered the same fate. One's caste background was a decisive factor in determining whether s/he would get adequate opportunities for reconstructing his/her life. In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi titled *From Refugee Camps to Polished Book Stalls*, Byapari reveals that the camps were populated mainly by lower caste refugees. As far as he remembers, at the Bankura camp there was just one Brahmin family. Caste-based discrimination by the West Bengal government was largely responsible for hindering the upward mobility of the dalit refugees but its reception of the East Bengali Caste Hindus was preferential enough. According to Byapari, it was the upper caste Hindus who migrated on the eve of partition or a little later when communal violence in East Pakistan had not yet erupted on a large scale. This group was supported by the West Bengal government in terms of relocation, jobs and subsidies. But the lower caste refugees did not have the resources to move out. But as communal tension escalated in East Pakistan, in 1950s the lower caste refugees were forced to evacuate. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury offer a dismal picture of the harsh treatment of the refugees coming in the 1950s by the customs officials and security forces at the border checkpoints. All their valuable belongings were snatched away and they were allowed to carry only fifty rupees per head. If anybody, fearing further humiliation, tried to flee, s/he was fired upon (67-68). Byapari makes a distinction between the upper and lower-caste refugees by using the terms "Bhadralok" and "Chotolok" respectively. These two terms as used in the common parlance of the Bengali language smack of the snobbery and elitist mentality of the refined upper caste Bengalis. While the former refers to the Bengali upper-caste with their cultural capital, modern education and higher social position, the latter is a cuss word for describing the impoverished, 'uncultured' and uneducated lower castes. As refugees, their lives took different turns as the caste Hindus refused to throw in their lot with the lower caste refugees. The upper-caste refugees, says Byapari, did not share space in the camps with the lower-castes like the Nama, the Jele and the Muchi. On the strength of their

educational background, earlier professional or personal connections with the West Bengalis and caste brotherhood, they enlisted the sympathy and active cooperation of influential political leaders and bureaucrats who unofficially helped them forcibly possess unclaimed and vacant land. For instance, in their illegal occupation of land for establishing the Bijaygarh colony, they had the backing of figures like the then Chief Minister of West Bengal Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray, Governor Katju, Major General Satyabrata Singha, Jawaharlal Nehru, Triguna Sen, Samar Mukherjee and Sarojini Naidu (Byapari 35). In recording the history of the squatter colonies, the author observes that the areas occupied had the civic amenities indispensable for a reasonably comfortable life. When some Santosh Dutta set up a colony at Bijaygarh, the land was already equipped with electricity and the facility for running water and, moreover, the area was well-connected to banks, bus stands and educational institutions. The author comments: "At the time of the Second World War, the British Government had purchased this large tract of land from Indian Zamindars for American soldiers. As a result of this, there was no landowner of this area after the American soldiers returned home and this land, quite expensive as real estate, was lying empty" (34). Joya Chatterjee comments that the Calcutta-centric colonies were densely populated and lacked proper infrastructure but in some colonies, the leaders set up on their own initiative their own markets and schools without any help from the administration at the state or central level (143). Colony life in an alien country, of course, cannot be a desirable alternative to one's own home but it was a far better option than the squalid camps. However, membership of these colonies was granted exclusively to the refugees with upper-caste identity. They were afraid that the prospect of living with the lower castes and sharing with them the same provisions and amenities would jeopardize the sanctity of their caste supremacy. Some moneyed dalit refugees made unsuccessful attempts to find a place in the colonies by disguising as caste Hindus but they were evicted as soon as their caste identity stood exposed. Byapari says that in the one hundred and forty-nine colonies which mushroomed in and around Calcutta there was not a single Nama or Muchi family (21). Even in a new set-up where the upper-caste refugees were grappling with changed conditions, they ensured that they kept up the age-old varna hierarchy to marginalize their fellow countrymen. They continued to utilize the services of the same lower castes such as the Namo, the Bagdi, the Kaora whom they had subjected to spatial segregation. Byapari reflects:

> A group of people from the same land and fleeing for the same reason at the same time, and yet how cruelly different the treatment of one from the other. One group is allowed to lay claim to expensive real estate in the heart of the city and the other group is callously pushed out to one of the remotest islands, Marichjhapi, in the jungles of Sundarbans, valueless in terms of real estate (35).

True it is that the East Bengali-West Bengali or "Bangal-Ghoti" tussle over cultural superiority over each other, which lost its edge over time was relevant in a newly partitioned country. But it was implied that the upper caste refugees on both sides of the border shared in common their exclusivist contempt for the lower castes.

The caste factor not only drove a wedge between these two groups of refugees but also was considered a valid ground of discrimination by the government of India which proudly declared reservation policy for equitable distribution of resources as an independent nation-state. The pseudo-modern administration and bureaucracy relied on the archaic and ritualistic custom of differentially treating humans on the basis of their

birth. The state government treated the dalit refugees as a burden on the country and was absolutely unconcerned about their issues. According to the author, in 1958, the government came up with the Dandakaranya Rehabilitation project for the dalit refugees which implied that West Bengal would be for the caste Hindu refugees. In fact, the ruling government was unable to successfully cope with the overwhelming influx of refugees from across the eastern border. Thus no state-sponsored rehabilitation policy was in place in West Bengal. Nehru government's negative stance about the Bengali refugees and its refusal to incorporate them in the Centre's relief and resettlement policy is one of the major reasons for this failure. Bashabi Fraser comments that the East Pakistani refugees' rehabilitation "was not a major consideration at the Centre, unlike its policy for their West Pakistan counterpart. Nehru's deliberate non-recognition of the East Bengali refugees' presence took away from them their identity as displaced Indians…" (30). As it was beyond the means of the state government to tackle the refugee problem without proper central help, it carefully chose only the dalit for exile in the harsh and unirrigated land of Dandakaranya in order to eliminate competition for the people of their own caste. The author says that there were two motives behind pushing them off to this uncultivated area rich in natural resources. Though there was no trace of civilization in Dandakaranya, how hard it would be for the refugees to survive these primitive circumstances did not bother the authorities in the least. First, it was a convenient way to get rid of the dalit refugees from Bengal and secondly, their free labour would be useful in making the area productive and habitable. The state wanted to pass it off as a lucrative scheme for the camp-dwellers. The anxious refugees put up resistance against this arbitrary diktat and the Communist Party of India which was yet to come to power cashed in on their vulnerable condition. The author says:

> One leader rushed from Calcutta to this distant camp in Shiromanipur, Bankura. Holding the microphone to his lips, he goaded the anger of the people: '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 leaders organized meetings at the camps of different districts to urge action against the contemporary ruling government. But in actual practice, they stayed back when the refugees suffered due to oppressive government measures and police brutalities. More than fifteen to twenty thousand Namo, Pod or Malo refugees started a movement from Shiromanipur, Basudevpur, Bishnupur and other camps under Communist leadership with a claim that the Bengalis should not be evicted from Bengal. The dole was stopped to drive them to hunger, thereby weakening their movement. Initially, they tried to draw the attention of the administration through hunger strike but the inhuman government remained stolidly indifferent. Then their next step was to launch a protest march to the city but the police stopped them at the point of entry and as a precaution against possible vandalization of public property, section 144 CrPC was promulgated. One hundred and fifty marchers, including Byapari's father, were injured.

He reminisces that his father returned quite late wounded all over and writhed in pain all night. The sight of his agonized father aggrieved the child author who, unable to comprehend the full significance of the situation, swore vengeance on the police who had beaten up his father. As a punishment, for challenging the state, the government

officials struck off the dissenters' names from the official refugee register to render them stateless. They became illegal infiltrators to whom the nation did not owe any responsibility regarding their citizenship rights. The abandoned refugee families scattered all around West Bengal settled in every possible place amid dehumanizing conditions. This was not the last time that the dalit refugees witnessed an institutionalized violation of their human rights. The Marichjhapi massacre was yet another case of blatant transgression of human rights. Byapari presents many unknown facts about this chapter which, apart from its mention in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* and few research papers, remained ignored in mainstream partition history for decades. After the resistance to the Dandakaranya project had been suppressed, many dalit refugees had to accept their relocation outside West Bengal. But they could not adjust to life in Dandakaranya for long due to unfavourable climate, barrenness of soil, cultural unfamiliarity and the amount of hard labour they had to put in to earn their living. Like the author, many felt sick of this primitive life and were yearning to come back to Bengal. In Byapari's words: "This was such a village that even if a World War raged outside, the people here would have remained unaware of it. If the village had been wiped out from the face of the earth, the world would not have known of it" (133). They saw a ray of hope when the Communist Party of India (Marxist) came to power in West Bengal in 1977. They thought that as the ruling party it would fulfil its pre-election promise of reinstating the refugees in the Sundarban area of West Bengal. But the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department 1979 issued the statement that "the refugees were 'in unauthorized occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts'" (qtd in Ross Mallick (107). They could not imagine that the party would change its pro-refugee stance so drastically. In spite of repeated assurance of non-interference made earlier, the police was set upon the refugees arriving at the Marichjhapi Island. The author says that though on the way they were harassed by the police, in April 1978, they finally set their foot on the Island. Within a few months, the refugees most of whom were dalits, singlehandedly transformed the desolate place into a town without any help from the outside world and the opposing government. The author comments:

> This uninhibited island was soon transformed into a bustling little town. Roads, schools, markets, bread factories and bidi factories sprang up in no time. And all this happened with no help from anybody outside the island. The only plea the people had for the government was that they be allowed to remain on this island. But this plea could hold meaning only for those who were humane (240).

In 1978-1979, the state government unleashed unspeakable atrocities on them by cordoning the island off in order to starve them to death. Those who, driven insane by hunger tried, to break through the police barricade were thrown into crocodile-infested rivers. From January to May 1979, thousands of refugees were brutally slaughtered, thrashed and killed of which there is not any definitive official record. Byapari comments: "The Left Front declared that no refugee was killed in the Marichjhapi incident. Only two people who were locals died in the police firing. This was a claim that could not be disputed since no written records existed of how many refugees had entered the island. From different records, it has been surmised that 14 people were killed on 31 January itself" (241). Annu Jalais highlights the indirect complicity of the central government in the genocide. She comments: "How many of these deaths actually occurred in Morichjhanpi we shall never know. However, what we do know is that no

criminal charges were laid against any of the officials or politicians involved. Even the then prime minister Morarji Desai, wishing to maintain the support of the Communists for his government, decided not to pursue the matter" (1759). Bypari's father fell prey to police beating in an attempt to save his son Chitta's life. His father had his ribs broken by the blow of the rifle butt. In the absence of media coverage and any protest from the intellectuals and the general public, the Left Front minimized the importance of this brutal massacre and announced that nobody had been killed. But from his visit to Marichjhapi, Byapari got to know that more than two thousand people had been killed and two hundred women raped when "conscience of Awakened Bengal slept"(241). And those refugees who survived the carnage had the nightmarish experience of being randomly forced into the train like animals and sent from Marichjhapi. The poor refugees got separated from their relatives; many ailing and wounded children and aged people suffered in the train for want of food and medicine; and the dead bodies were mercilessly thrown off the train. The state government whitewashed the Marichjhapi episode by framing up the hapless refugees as illegal immigrants. Since no media representatives, intellectuals, academics, writers had adequate knowledge about the massacre; it was easy to blame the victimized for the government. Byapari comments: "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. This improbable declaration had not met with any objection from the many fellow Bengalis who resided in West Bengal" (241). Byapari's family, mauled and broken in spirit, had to come back to Dandakaranya. And again another chapter of struggle started for them. The author's account highlights the fact that after the colonial regime was over, the state machinery and civil society monopolized by the caste Hindus combined to operate as an oppressive machine of colonization. The concept of good governance is still a sham for the dalit refugees since they are regarded as the unacknowledged 'other' of the citizenry. It can be said that in West Bengal, the tradition of enjoying caste privilege and its public repudiation go hand in hand with caste- blindness in partition discourse.

In his autobiography, Byapari traces his roller-coaster ride through life in which he experienced repeated relocation, estrangement from his family, hunger, insecurity, imprisonment for joining the Naxalite movement, had a chance meeting with Mahasweta Devi, articulated his literary self and made his entry into the literary world of bhadraloks. Driven by perpetual hunger and a rebellious spirit, he had to change his vocation as frequently as his precarious life and times demanded. In unravelling the history of his journey as a cook, rickshaw-puller, revolutionary and litterateur, he uses post-partition West Bengal as a backdrop which had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the chain of events in his life since childhood. As he records his memories, experiences, feelings, emotions and anger, these seem to be shared by those millions of hapless dalit refugees who were rendered socio-economically paralyzed over generations. His subjective account of and reflections on how partition scarred his own life and that of millions like him vindicate the human dignity of those who are just reduced to numbers in official statistical records and urge the readers to unlearn the biases ingrained in them by Brahminical conditioning .His autobiography is a valuable social document which acts as counter-narrative in dismantling the strategic silence and hypocrisy in partition studies regarding the caste issues. He unfailingly underlines the importance of 'speaking up' which has the potential to reorient the normativity of refugee perspective.

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