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The Wheel that Turned: Manoranjan Byapari
Writes Back in *Itibritte Chandal Jiban*

Jaydeep Sarangi & Angana Dutta

Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* is a clarion call to observe the structures of Indian social set ups and people from multiple subaltern perspectives – set ups that are usually heavily represented by the more privileged social groups. In the social matrix of various stratification parameters that frame a person's social identity, Byapari is one who has been multiply disadvantaged. Dalit autobiography is more of a social narrative than a personal account. But Byapari amalgamates both in a structural unit. His case is a living discourse where individual and the social shake hands and create a dilemma for a scholar. It reminds us *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble which provides an insight into the oppressive caste and patriarchal tenets of the Indian society. It reclaims memory to locate the Mahar society before it was empowered by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Caste-wise he has been a chandal (outcaste), nationality-wise a refugee, occupationally perpetually in the unorganised sector, a child labourer, educationally illiterate up till adulthood, and frequently tagged as the criminal! However, in spite of his disadvantaged positions, he has also been a philanthropist, the labour movement activist, the writer, the fighter who never gives up hope and the dauntless saviour of the fellow sufferers. Byapari's life is a great challenge to the different stereotypes formed by society about the subaltern people – who do not usually "write" for themselves. His accounts are a wealth of information about the particular types of subaltern populations' – lives, family, marriage, threats, expectations, ethics, ambitions, oppressions, worldview, avenues for social mobility, blockages – in all their total social and psychological world. With documentation of

life experiences of above 60 years, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* is well rooted in concrete political and social context of Bengal and India, and how major social changes have influenced the lives of the disadvantaged. The autobiography is a first-hand documentation of the dynamics of the complex of stratification systems from the 'bottom', how they maintain themselves, and how multiple systems interact to mostly reinforce, rather than cancel out each other. The book powerfully subverts many of the traditional - middle-class, higher caste, law-conforming, secure job holding people's understandings of Indian society.

One of the striking features of the autobiography is the author's bold subaltern identity assertion. He loudly declares, at times with pride, at others with disgust, his location in the lower rungs of multiple stratification systems. Thus he declares:

I am that rickshaw puller by the name of Naba, that truck-helper by the name 'kick-worthy', that angry lowly caste (chandal) by the name of Jiban, alcoholic by the name Gurjal, that thief by the name of Bhagaban, that dacoit by the identity of Agastya, that writer by the name of Bangal – all are me. They all are my fragmented nature.

(Byapari 14)

He continues that he was born in "untouchable Dalit family" "declared criminal due to birth" (Byapari 20), declares the futility of the former Dalit attempts at *Sanskritisation* and prescribes realising the glory of the Dalit identity. He has been the hungry, the refugee, the child labourer, the illiterate, the alcoholic, the ruffian, the wretched poor sucked into criminal world, the underground revolutionary, the prisoner and disbeliever.

One of the aims of writing this autobiography has been to reveal to the readers, the injustice, oppression, helplessness and struggles of many of the disadvantaged populations of India. A powerful tool that aids him in doing so is the

language used. The language is mostly colloquial and jarring to elite aesthetics defined by the upper caste and upper class citizens. Unconventionally revulsive similes, metaphors and analogies used seem to befittingly paint his social experiences, experience of the self, as well as that of fellow subaltern populations, as devoid of dignity, frustrating, revulsive and torturous. Speaking as an inmate of the jail he describes how on being tortured the prisoners' "skull would crack and brain fluid would sprinkle out. There will be downpour of blood. Turning humans into lumps of giddy flesh [...]" (Byapari 230) He compares the event of the government official who had to take his word back as, "now he has to lick back again the saliva that he spat himself" (Byapari 357). Such use of language seems to be a conscious tool for unmasking the horrors of subaltern social experience, along with their pent up rage against the socially advantaged oppressors – which much of elite language or expressions may neutralise. Frustrated about his own struggle as the absolute poor in an attempt to live a life of ideology, he describes: "Life is the name of a horrible experience. Life is the name of a journey getting charred with torment. The life that I have live, am living, feels like as if someone is burning me alive on the pyres. There is no light anywhere, no road directions. There is none holding whose hand I can walk two steps" (Byapari 439). He says the life's field that he treads has blood sucking "leeches" and "snakes". "It is the territory of tigers, bears and human-head-hunters"(Byapari 439). Descriptions of his life mostly spell the tremendous torture and insecurities of a subaltern, "writing two lines, and associating with Neogiji for a few days, I am quoting elaborate ideology, but that my buttocks are exposed through my torn pants, I am oblivious" (Byapari 371). His blunt admission of his psychological traits bears testimony to the tremendous destructive emotions that may be nurtured in the minds of the have-nots due to continuous deprivation – "I too am not a decent person. In me too sleeps a wild bull."

It is striking to find how social stratification systems stratify social space and allot different spaces for different social strata. Byapari's explores in great sensual

details the majorly bleak, filthy, crowded, dilapidated, grey, constricted, barren, abandoned social settings where his life as a subaltern unfolds. Such spaces are constant neighbours to epidemics, exploitation, violence, injury, betrayal and crime. Thus as the low caste refugee family they were relegated to camps with inhuman conditions, with deplorable and short lived dole, food, medical, water supply, ridden with epidemics, hunger, thirst and high mortality rate. As the 'rehabilitated' refugee they spent their days in the rocky dry terrains of Dandakaranya surrounded by dense forests with fierce animals and fiercer tribes. As the migrant child labourer he travelled in passages between the coach toilets and on the steps, slept in freezing open platforms, in the master's haystack or the lusty employer's threatening veranda corner as the homeless on the platforms, as the absconding amidst the sweepers' squatters beside the filthy bog, or heaps of medical waste; as the prisoner within the grim grey walls shrieking third degree torture; as the sweeper amidst the murky slimy stink of the elite. Describing the insecurity of the sleeping girl child on the open road at night he says, "the main road was then under ownership of few cows chewing the cud, few skin-peeled dogs and alcoholics of unsteady gait." All these are concrete ways in which society silently works to relegate those in the lower rungs to spaces deprived of human dignity.

The autobiography also offers a wealth of insights into the unorganised sector of the economy. Jaws stiffened for supporting his poverty stricken home and ailing family, Byapari became a migrating child labourer very early in life. His journeys are accounts of the great economic, physical, sexual, insecurities constantly faced by homeless child labourers 'out in society' and unorganised sector workers. Almost predictably with every job his salary is delayed and ultimately denied, he gets caught on false charges and beaten up in unknown lands of employment due to lack of credibility, taken for granted as a sexual toy by employers and goes sick and hungry for days. Even after years of life threatening toil, he fails to accumulate any savings. Similar trends continue as he grows up through jobs as dishwasher in

restaurants, coal shops, attendant, cook, sweeper, truck-helper, wood collector, rickshaw puller, forest ranger and so on. All of them give detailed narration of the spontaneous discrimination, betrayal and violence by the privileged society on unorganised casual labourers, taking advantage of their voiceless-ness. Detailed also are how in attempt to show hypocritical political attempts of organising and representing these labourers. Again labour movements have been well documented from the perspective of an activist.

Drifting in the torrents of the crude world, Byapari's life-narration is a constant critique of dehumanising influences of a stratified society, which get fossilised further in urban social settings. He ponders on the thousand ways in which "humans invent walls between humans", while his fight reveals barbaric values of oppression that operate across such walls. Being the victim, Byapari's narration of such phenomena offers alternative perspective for understanding what is labelled in society as efficient, heroic, just, ethical, moral and altruistic. He points out the inhospitable treatment meted out to Bengal refugees in West Bengal, erratic government policies of rehabilitation, whereby refugee-camps devoid of basic human needs were active death-beds for thousands, in the name of 'rehabilitation' refugees were forcefully packed away to rocky lands of Dandakaranya within dense forests and little context of survival, labelling formerly toiling refugees presently devoid of employment opportunities as 'lazy', mean politics with the hungry-dying refugees in attempts to organise them for 'revolting inhuman rehabilitation government policies', mercilessly crushing their guided revolts for food and dignity, portrayal of the peaceful attempts of self-rehabilitation by refugees in comparatively liveable uninhabited lands regarding which the government itself had formerly raised hopes – as a 'threat' to social unity. Similarly he unmasks the irrationality of the mass killing of Shikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, continuing caste discriminations in the modern educated metropolitan society whereby lower castes, who are also lower class refugees have been relegated to most deplorable refugee

camps by administration, as a cook he is denied payment for laborious assignment and shooed away after revelation of his identity as an outcaste, the sweeper is sacked unpaid because he writes better than the teachers, and he writes for justice! Elite hypocrisy frustrates him when he witnesses corruption among paid hospital employees who sell off free medicines in black-market, sick nexus between the judiciary and the rich, where wealthy abhorrent criminals are released on bail with money, buy the gallows, while poorer ones rot in and are hanged, his sexual abuser employer plays role of the ideal husband, while working as a supervisor, his employer forces him to steal from supplies for the black market. Later while he started writing, the persistent discrimination faced by him from publishers while trying to publish his works are testimony to how talent recognition is mediated by one's position in social hierarchy.

It gives him the critical eye to mock the hilarious derogatory tags given to the less-privileged by the powerful of society. How the powerful have extremely narrow and unfair understandings of the subaltern that inform and justify their discriminatory and violent behaviour towards them. Thus he mocks :

In the Indian social system – in the thinking of the Bengalis of Bengal, especially in the thinking of the middle class of metro-city Kolkata, lower caste, ruffian, labourers are inseparably related words. Whoever are lower castes, are ruffians. These are whoever pulls the rickshaws, gives physical labour, pushes the *thela* cart, washes dishes and accumulates food for the belly through various forms of such physical labour. And those who are *bhadralok* (genteel), they eat well, live in good houses, are in good jobs in which they do not sweat or need physical labour.

(Byapari 146)

Eye-opening is his revelation of how children are socialised into these perceptions, when he narrates the irritated response of the “7-8 year old flower like” middle class girl seated on his rickshaw, “None will visit your house. You pull

rickshaws!" (Byapari 146). Shameless is the delay and treachery by the publishers in printing manuscript of a rickshaw puller. Similarly he questions every day phrases of the metro-city genteel like "*chor-chamar*" which are uttered in the same breath to refer to thieves. Chamar is one belonging to the caste which earned a living by making goods out of animal skins. They were traditionally considered lowly outcastes. Thus he unmasks how higher caste indignation towards lower castes is vented unconsciously through expressions like "*chor-chamar*", where lower castes are criminalised for their occupation. Various are his narrations of how his dark tribal non-Aryan features and poverty stricken dress repeatedly labelled him as a deviant by unknown public of the metro cities with Aryan features. He further documents the disastrous effects of unregulated urban contact with the tribal populations whereby urban lust and exploitation were taking toll of the tribes.

The autobiography throws light on the social relativity of ethics whereby the narrator is faced over and over with moral crisis when his condition forces him to take steps socially defined as deviant, sometimes in self-defence, at others for his family or in defence of the fellow underclass. But embittered by the hypocrisy and oppression of the powerful in the stratification set up, the political parents, the law makers, the law keepers, he finally loses faith in their values and systems. Discarding mainstream values, he starts searching for alternative values which he powerfully captures with the expression, "From today my worship-worthy is your (God's) opponent – devil. I remembered him silently, O devil, give me guts, give me strength" (Byapari 145).

Submitting to the 'devil' frees him from the obligation of being non-violent – which is one of the celebrated qualities of the elite conceptions of the divine. Violence and aggression saved his life and restored human rights to his fellow suffers frequently. It is a painful narration of how long-standing exploitation and oppression can push one towards a life of violence in self-defence – that maybe be unfairly labelled as deviant. With great care he unearths the situations which may

push the underclass towards 'deviance' –as understood by the elites. He explains, "one should not expect ethics from the poor. Their feet slip in hunger" (Byapari 375). Beginning with individual use of violence, he gradually joins various social movements, sometimes developmental, sometimes extremist, in revolt of elite oppression, trying to gain more ground for the toiling masses, the unorganised sector workers, poor and refugees. Frequently he got drawn into misled revolutions – which frustrated him further, yet at times he celebrates being associated with constructive revolts led by austere noble committed leadership. Detailed is the exploration of the ideologies, leadership, organisation, strategies, loop holes and impact by various revolutionary organisations as the Naxalbari Movement, the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha Movement, etc.

Long struggles has demystified Byapari of false tags of the society –this gives him the sensitivity to discover beauty in the working class, cooperation among the have-nots, humanism among rebels, simplicity and honesty among outcastes. He salvages various concepts from the hasty derogatory labels of the privileged, and makes the understanding concepts more complete and realistic. Thus his Guru and mentor who invited him to the world of education was his fellow prisoner inside jail. He was granted life-giving economic opportunity and shelter by his charitable political opponent goon! As a truck-helper he explores cooperation among long-distance truck drivers, life-saving friends from the village labelled as criminal by neighbouring upper castes, the illegal alcohol seller who wailed disconsolately seeing a destitute refugee girl at risk and who impelled the author to protect the girl. He wonderfully explores alternative ethics of the tribals, of the refugees, the revolutionaries. Thus after his public revelation as an orator with deep understanding of politics, a local man takes him on his shoulders and throws him off at a distance in front of the liquor shop and offers him free liquor as a gesture of appreciation! The tribal priest host was ready to behead him as offering to local Lord Anga, in which the author discovers devotion and compares it with animal sacrifice

in Aryan religions. Throughout his experiences Byapari finds rural settings and rather underprivileged communities have preserved life-giving humanism. No matter how poor, they nurture deep cooperation, sympathy for sufferings, unthinkable hospitality, whereby unknown people forced him to have meals and rest with them. He documents the day of his birth and the charity by his neighbours:

The people around who were of our caste, family, even they were desperately poor like us – daily wage labourers. The thing called *maya* [here kindness] did not still disappear from their homes. That is why some of them would give my mother about a handful of rice by having less food themselves. This is how one unfortunate housewife somehow survived with the child in womb.

(Byapari 21, *italics* and bracketed words mine)

Being moved by the honest confession of the mad 'man' he ponders:

I've never heard a political leader admit by himself that he is a thief, never heard a religious leader admit that he is a cheat, an embezzler. I could never make an alcoholic admit – he's an alcoholic... but today a mad man says in his own words – he's mad.

(Byapari 230)

One is frequently surprised in how the gruelling tortures of life do not steal his sensitivity to appreciate beauty in nature, humans and creation. One gets engrossed with his descriptions of the exquisite landscapes while he was travelling hungry on train as the migrating child labourer; of imagery of breath-taking rural Bengal landscapes though it nestled the worst kind of oppression by the high caste neighbours of the low caste *Bagdis*.

Towards the end of the autobiography, Byapari documents his rise to glory as the self-made writer. However Byapari does not fall prey to counter-stigmatisation of the privileged of the society – who were the prime perpetrators of violence on him. He profusely acknowledges the noble souls of privileged positions

who truly sacrificed for the uplift of society, inspired him to creativity and repeatedly stretched out a dignified helping hand that he could explore his skills and gain limelight. Thus vivid are descriptions of the compassionate and austere lives led by leaders of tribal and labourer development movements, the high class beneficiaries who allowed him hours in their libraries to read, or even allowed him to take their books home, the various high caste writers who recognised potential in him and gave him platform in various literary gatherings, journals, books and papers, all have been given due recognition.

Asked about the contribution of Mahasweta Devi, Byapari exclaimed, “For me Mahasweta Devi is the creator of rebel characters in her Literature of Revolt. She helped my creativity bloom. My literary career started with my first article getting published in *Bartika* in 1981. It was a very special achievement for me. I remain her affectionate Madan” (Byapari, “Conversation with Jaydeep Sarangi”).

The autobiography is one of those rare decolonised subaltern voices who selectively accepted benefits of modern education; training himself the reading and writing skills, but denied its sly injection of self-hatred given by the traditional propagators of education – the colonising privileged society. It is an incredible narration of the indomitable human will to fight and survive against most deadly situations, and the resilience of humanism and the desire to create amidst most impossible conditions. A life of constant social insecurity generated out of joblessness, migration, homelessness, hunger, abuse – emotional, sexual, economic – and a constant sucking into the criminal world – yet never sparing a thought of risking his nothingness for helping a struggling soul. Thus he was the ‘saviour’ of the helpless homeless women and children at the train station, of the old rickshaw puller, the destitute girl at risk, counsellor for the many in need, driven by the constant sense of ‘duty’ towards his family and driven by a constant guilt not being able to fulfil it, the dedicated revolutionary of multiple social movements which convinced him with its liberating potential of the toiling populations. His life has

been constantly propelled by inexplicable hope and faith that all his sufferings have some purpose. The pace is tremendous, the dangers are fatal – yet the autobiography is testimony to the undaunted human spirit that refuses to give up hope. He not only survives, but educating himself in the jail, he reads voraciously, persistently keeps nurturing his writing skills, breaking through unthinkable road blocks of the stratifications system. He keeps the lamp of knowledge burning till the time he catches the eyes of well-placed experts – who offer their mighty hands to board the deck of literary limelight. It is the invisible hand of irrational hope that pulls through most rugged conditions, and as the author feels, hope kept its promise! Humble is his acceptance of his rise to glory as a writer:

He could never cross the margins of a school in his life. He pulled rickshaw in front of Jadavpur University. When across the pages 125 – 137-12 of the journal volume no 46/2008-2009 of Comparative Literature Department of that University, his life and literary works are discussed, it is natural for him to feel fortunate. When many famous, respected writers write about him with their powerful pens – when his name and identity is published in papers as Jugantar, Bartaman, Anandabazar, Pratidin, Ajkal, EPW, Kathadesh, NotunKhabor, Dinkal, The Hindu, when he is broadcast in popular Doordarshan programmes as “Khashkhabor”, “Shadharon Oshadharon” of Akash Bangla, “KhojKhabor” programme, “Tara Nojor” of Tara News, in ETV news, he may think – Life is meaningful/fulfilled.

(Byapari 20)

In a recent gathering at Jibonanada Sabho Griho, Kolkata noted Bengali writer Shankho Ghosh asked if anyone hasn't read Byapari's autobiography. No hand could be seen. It sums up the whole story. Byapari is a household name these days. The Wheel has started turning. We are all part of this renaissance.

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