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A Traumatic Study of Dalits due to Partition of Bengal in 1947: A survey of Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed to present the traumatic experiences of the Dalits and the sufferings they came across during and after the partition of Bengal in the year of 1947. The partition resulted in one of the largest displacements of people in history. The paper deals with the procedure of migration on both sides of Bengal and the treatment of the government along with higher caste people towards Dalits in their alien land. An account of the representation of Dalit refugees in the partition narrative will be explored here to show how Dalits were struggling to seek a new physical and psychological space. Partition grappled with the issues of trauma, loss, displacement and the collective memory from the lens of multiple identities. Dalit refugees had to suffer an identity crisis due to partition. They were deprived of and denied help by the local residents of West Bengal as well as by the migrants of upper caste, with whom they left their homeland, even after belonging to a similar linguistic group. Dalit writings act as an antidote through which Dalit writers release their traumas and sufferings. A survey of Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* is made to spotlight the miseries of Dalits due to partition. Employing postcolonial trauma theory and subaltern studies as its theoretical frameworks, this study reveals that the Dalit experience of partition constitutes a doubly inflicted trauma rooted in geographic displacement on the one hand and systemic caste-based exclusion in the host state on the other.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the traumatic experiences of Dalits and their sufferings due to the partition of Bengal in 1947. Bengal has faced three partitions, the Bengal bifurcation in 1905, India and Pakistan's independence and partition in the year 1947, and the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan with the formation of Bangladesh in year 1971. The current research would spotlight the literature written in the context of the 1947, the second partition. The text chosen for this article is the autobiographical writing of Manoranjan Byapari entitled *Interrogating My Chandal Life* which minutely records Dalits' sufferings and trauma due to partition of Bengal in 1947. An effort is made here to study the experiences of displaced people, specifically focusing on Dalit migrants. It explores their journey from their homeland to India and the unique suffering they endured simply for belonging to Dalit communities. The government's stepmotherly treatment of the Namashudra, often known as Dalits or 'chhotolok,' is extremely upsetting. It has been observed that refugees belonging to the upper castes were given settlements in and around Kolkata, but refugees belonging to the lower castes were forced to live in camps dispersed over a number of different districts. The impact of the Partition of Bengal on Dalit communities is the central concern of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The partition of Bengal in 1947 has been extensively studied, yet the intersection of Dalit identity and partition-induced trauma has historically occupied a marginal space in mainstream academia. Traditional narratives of the partition, as Joya Chatterji notes in *The Spoils of Partition* (2007), predominantly focus on the socio-political upheaval experienced by the *bhadralok* (upper-caste) communities. However, recent scholarly interventions emphasize the subaltern and Dalit experiences of displacement. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's socio-historical analyses have systematically highlighted how caste hierarchies replicated themselves in refugee camps, leaving Dalit communities doubly marginalized. From a theoretical standpoint, trauma in postcolonial literature, as Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), is not merely an event but an ongoing psychological wound. When applied to the Dalit experience, this trauma is compounded by systemic caste-based oppression. Postcolonial scholars like Homi K. Bhabha and Veena Das have explored how displacement strips subaltern individuals of their physical and psychical agency.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) critically interrogates the capacity of marginalized communities to articulate their suffering within dominant discursive frameworks. Spivak argues

that the subaltern's voice is systematically silenced by institutional and epistemic structures. Furthermore, Debjani Sengupta asserts that literature serves as a crucial archive for silenced voices. Manoranjan Byapari's autobiography bridges this academic gap by offering a visceral, first-hand account of structural violence and trauma. This paper situates itself within this emerging academic discourse, utilizing Byapari's narrative to interrogate the compounded psychological trauma and identity crisis faced by Dalits during the post-partition resettlement, distinguishing their suffering from dominant upper-caste refugee narratives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, analytical approach rooted in textual analysis. The primary data source is Manoranjan Byapari's translated text, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. This specific text was deliberately selected as it serves as a seminal, first-hand account of the intersectional suffering—caste oppression and refugee displacement—experienced by the Namashudra community in post-partition Bengal. Secondary sources encompass peer-reviewed scholarly articles, historical texts, and critical essays focusing on postcolonial studies, Dalit literature and trauma theory. The analytical technique relies on thematic analysis viewed through the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial displacement and trauma studies. By triangulating the primary autobiographical narrative with secondary theoretical interpretations, the study constructs a conceptual framework that highlights the duality of the Dalit trauma: the immediate geographical displacement and the continuous socio-cultural exclusion in the host state.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Who Dalits Are

The lowest layer of the Indian caste system, Dalits have a longstanding experience of being oppressed by the upper castes. They represent a minority that is marginalized, oppressed and inferior. The umbrella term 'Dalit' which has a broad meaning, includes all forms of dominance that any group may experience. The word 'Dalit' derives from the Sanskrit 'Dalita', which means 'oppressed' in English. In the sociocultural context of India, they were considered to be lower than Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. People who were regarded as 'untouchable' in the past were given the names of 'Chandala' or 'Avarna'. These outcasts were referred to globally as "Exterior Castes" by the eminent historian J.H. Hutton. In legal documents, this group is referred to as Scheduled Caste. It is also used to refer to all of India's oppressed and disadvantaged citizens.

In Bengal, the word 'Dalit' is often referred to as 'chhotolok.' 'Bhadralok' denotes the upper caste, whereas Dalit signifies the lowest caste. The word 'Dalit' was used by Jyotiba Phule to refer to those who were excluded from the Hindu caste system. In India, the word 'Dalit' began to be used to refer to anybody subjected to societal discrimination. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936; annotated edition 2014), argues that caste is not merely a social division but a division of labourers – a system that perpetuates inequality through religious sanction and social hierarchy. 'Chhotolok' in Bengali refers to members of the working class and lower castes in the community. The 'chhotolok' under the Indian Brahmin caste system had to work hard to make ends meet and had little access to socioeconomic resources that might empower them. Gail Omvedt further notes in *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (1994) that Dalit communities have historically been denied access to land, education, and political representation that rendered them uniquely vulnerable in the crisis conditions of partition.

Partition of Bengal in 1947

The Partition during the Independence of India in 1947 divided Bengal into two separate entities, one of which is West Bengal belonging to India and the other is East Bengal belonging to Pakistan on the basis of two religions namely Hindu and Muslim. The division of India and Pakistan on 14th -15th August 1947 was a 'last-minute mechanism' devised by the British. East Bengal was called East Pakistan which became an independent nation as Bangladesh in 1971. In 1947 the Bengal demanded an independent status as a separate nation, rather than joining with either India or Pakistan. However, the British rejected this option as it would lead to other provinces that would demand independence and lead to too many non-viable nations. Britain agreed to provide independence and began to consider partition as the quickest method which was the most pragmatic solution to avoid any kind of disturbance and violence. The Radcliffe Line, drawn in great haste, took no account of the socio-cultural geographies of communities like the Namashudras, whose agrarian livelihoods, ancestral lands, and communal networks were irreversibly severed. Most of the Namashudra community lived in the area that became East Pakistan, which made their mass displacement unavoidable and traumatic.

The Trauma and Sufferings of Dalits due to the Partition of Bengal in 1947

Partition, seemingly, was triumph and tragedy, loss and displacement, rebirth and reconciliation; terror and horror; trauma and relief, all at once. One of the biggest population displacements in recorded history was caused by partition. With the migration of at least 20 million people, this became the

greatest displacement of the twentieth century. In an attempt to flee strife, the Indian subcontinent was split, but the outcome was widespread genocide. The division of India into Pakistan and India was nothing more than a process that created refugees and led to the largest mass migration in recorded history. Renowned Bengali Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari's family fled East Pakistan and sought safety in a camp for refugees in West Bengal. In his autobiographical work *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, Byapari describes how Bengali Dalits were oppressed in pre- and post-partition West Bengal and Bengal on the basis of caste. Dalits were referred to as Chandal, or Untouchables, in colonial Bengal. Their identity as Namashudras was acknowledged in 1911. When they arrived in West Bengal after the division, they were recognized as Dalit refugees. The central and west Bengali governments failed to provide the Namashudra refugees with suitable housing. They were placed in overcrowded, filthy and insufficiently furnished refugee camps. The people that suffered the most from Bengal's split were the Dalits. He says; "The unbearable miseries of those days cannot be expressed through any words in any language" (Byapari 37). Reading this testimony through Caruth's trauma theory, the unspeakability Byapari articulates is not a failure of language but a defining symptom of traumatic experience — what Caruth describes as the "crisis of truth" embedded in the traumatized voice (Unclaimed Experience 4). The silence is itself evidence of the depth of psychological wounding.

Because of their caste identity, the Byapari family faced new difficulties in the host state. When they moved from East Bengal as Dalits to West Bengal as refugees, their situation became even worse. He explains in detail that following the partition, the Namashudras of Pirichpur did not instantly go to India. They preferred to stay back in their own homeland as minorities in post-partition time loving their own place and men. But the fear of riots kept them under extreme threat. Suddenly, communal riots and violence broke out. He could remember the horrible details of the Muladi riot. Byapari writes;

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? (Byapari 14)

When his own folks ultimately made the decision to go to India, he echoed their pain. He states; "There was, however, no certainty that they would not take place in the near future. The seeds of violence lie dormant within society waiting

to explode" (Byapari 12). Owing to the terrible circumstances, his family lacked the courage to continue. His parents and the author himself experienced much hardship and concern upon arriving in "the Great Land of India" (Byapari 15). They resided on the platform of West Bengal's Sealdah Station for a few days. They were then brought to a camp for refugees.

He had the first-hand experiences of the horrific living circumstances that drove the refugees to complete despair after they had become refugees. According to him, the camps for refugees resembled dead and motionless ponds. He states;

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).

This camp life of 'chhotolok' portrays a sharp contrast with the utopian imaginings of "homeland" in 'bhadralok' immigrant memoirs. Byapari, in the beginning, tried to mingle himself with the 'bhadralok' by getting literate through camp schooling. But, later, he lost the material means and physical health to last in the upper class and caste-based competition. He challenges to defend the tags of 'chhotolok' and 'bhadralok' from the society. Byapari's path is replete with outrage rather than guilt. In his instance, claiming basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter was challenging, and addressing these requirements included unpleasant interactions with the 'bhadralok'. As a writer he raises consciousness via writing and as a rickshaw puller, Byapari challenges the dominant caste and class structures that define the ethical and artistic boundaries of each class.

Byapari describes the difficulty that the Dalit refugees faced when they arrived in their new 'home,' where they were treated as outsiders. Even within the category of beggars, impoverished people cannot be lumped in with them. Their harrowing experience living in the slums of Calcutta is perceived, as they are seen to be trespassers demanding rights and shares of livelihood from the native working-class community. Dalit refugees inhabiting the slum space are not considered primary settlements provided by the missionary organizations. He says "In none of the 149 colonies" set up around the city (Kolkata) "you will not find a single Nama or Muchi family of that time" (Byapari 21). Jhuma Sen's historical documentation of the 'jabor dakhla' (unauthorized colonies) confirms Byapari's account: the 149 unauthorized settlements around Kolkata were exclusively built by and for bhadralok refugees, while Dalit refugees were administratively redirected to camps in peripheral districts (Sen 3). This spatial

segregation reproduced, under the guise of refugee rehabilitation, the very caste geography that the partition had ostensibly disrupted.

The majority of lower-caste migrants left last, according to Dalit refugee memoirs. Only the wealthy and fortunate could cross the borders safely, while the poor crossed in absolute impoverishment and endured the appalling circumstances of refugee camps. The government never acknowledged the less fortunate refugees who had crossed the border. Dalit refugee testimonies typically describe a horrific existence at Sealdah Station and later in refugee camps. Few of them had family connections in Calcutta, as they belonged to the lower and labouring classes. They lacked a fixed place and sufficient resources that would have enabled them to live outside the city without taking refuge in camps. Additionally, the administration was eager to relocate them to refugee camps. Because they were agricultural labourers, there was little work available for them in the camps. This explains why they were not been able to establish themselves financially. In his memoirs published in 2015, Monohar Mouli Biswas states;

We were not able to cross the boundaries and find work on the other side as the aristocratic Katla fish or rui could when the country was divided. For the most part out of helplessness, we, like the ordinary chunoputi fish, remained in our country. (Biswas 45)

In addition, Byapari's memoirs describe how the refugees were not granted the same privileges as other residents of worksite camps, even though they were forced to labour for specific government projects. Additionally, they were prohibited from working outdoors without government supervision. After the camps were shut down, they were given the option to live on the most unproductive terrain outside of Bengal, either in Dandakaranya or in the heavily wooded Andaman Islands. Byapari states;

This was such an area that it is doubtful if 'civilized' man had ever set foot here. The few tribes who were inhabitants of this place were 'primitive', half-naked tribes. Their language, culture, faiths and food habits were far removed from that of Bengal. It is doubtful if concepts of civilization, modernity or science had at all reached this area. Indeed, it appeared that this part of the world had just come out of the Stone Age and stepped into the Iron Age. (Byapari 23)

The forced resettlement to Dandakaranya and the Andaman Islands was not a gesture of rehabilitation but an act of deliberate exclusion. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism* (1978), powerful institutions often label unfamiliar

territories as "uncivilized" to justify the forced movement of people into those spaces (Said 7). For the Dalit refugees, this resettlement meant not a new beginning but a deeper erasure of their cultural roots, social bonds and human dignity.

To say the least, they were living lives as Dalit Refugees that were marked by proto-slavery, sexual assault, and the denial of fundamental human rights. Byapari depicts the harrowing experience of living in a camp, where lethal illnesses such as cholera, malaria and the plague were all too common among the refugees. The killing of innocent individuals was an everyday occurrence. Rehabilitation to the Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya made their lives more miserable. Byapari shows the suffering in Ghola-Doltala and Shiromanipur Camps that "There was no food, no medicine, no work, nowhere to go and, very soon, no water to drink". (Byapari 30) where "poverty, destitution, starvation and penury" (Byapari 36) were the only truths. He also portrays the hypocrisy of the government leaders who consider the lower caste as nothing but a sub-human species and the historical Marichjhapi Massacre testifies to political violence and hypocrisy. He writes;

Marichjhapi. A ruthless saga of massacre and rape, arson and plunder that is comparable to the likes of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Perpetrated by the state on a small, riverine island nearly forty years ago, the brutality of the violence would be difficult to match in the annals of human history. (Byapari 236)

The Marichjhapi Massacre of 1979 represents the most extreme manifestation of the state's structural hostility toward the Dalit refugee population. Read through Herman's trauma framework, the massacre constitutes what she terms "atrocities" – an event that shatters ordinary human adaptation to life and leaves survivors without the psychological resources necessary for recovery. The state, rather than functioning as an agent of healing, became the primary perpetrator of renewed trauma (Herman 33).

It must be added that in Calcutta and its surroundings, 149 unauthorized colonies, commonly named jabor dakhla, grew up to shelter the bhadralok refugees," says Jhuma Sen in her piece "Reconstructing Marichjhapi." On the other hand, the Chhotolok were compelled to flee the state and were put in transit camps (Sen 3).

The East Bengali Hindu refugee women suffered enormously due to sudden displacement after partition. The movement of refugee women from private to public spaces resulted in difficulties in Bengali women's perspectives

and worldviews. Their personalities took on a new depth after the partition. Many women who had fled as refugees returned home as soon as their families had stabilized financially. During the partition, another kind of women who were used as sexual slaves, suffered trauma. A significant number of women were coerced into working as prostitutes in order to sustain their families. The autobiographies written by Dalit men do not mention the presence of patriarchy in their own households, which is equally surprising.

Sharmila Rege, in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2013), argues that Dalit women's testimonies must be read as a distinct genre – one that refuses the conventional separation of caste and gender oppressions. The silence in Dalit men's autobiographies regarding domestic patriarchy may itself be read as a symptom of the epistemic limits of male autobiographical narration, rather than an absence of gendered suffering.

Dalit refugees had to suffer an identity crisis due to partition. Byapari says India and Pakistan got their independence but they have lost their identity. They became 'kafirs' to their own countrymen, refugees or 'Bangal' to the people of West Bengal, and 'untouchable' to the higher caste people. This multi-layered identity crisis of being simultaneously a religious minority, a caste untouchable, and a linguistic outsider exemplifies what Bhabha identifies as the condition of "unhomeliness" (The Location of Culture 13): a sense of profound alienation within the domestic space of the nation. In this alien land, the upper caste people as well as the government tried to get rid of them who came here in search of space and peace. This psychological statelessness constitutes a form of trauma that is distinct from and in many ways more insidious than the physical displacement of partition. The disillusionment is extremely pathetic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life* is not merely an individual memoir; it is a profound documentation of the collective subaltern trauma triggered by the Partition of Bengal in 1947. The autobiography effectively dismantles the homogenous narrative of the "Bengali refugee," exposing the deep-rooted caste prejudices that persisted even in displacement. Viewed through the lens of postcolonial trauma theory, the Dalit experience of partition goes beyond geographical dislocation; it represents a systemic psychological displacement where the victims are rendered stateless and culturally alienated within their own linguistic community. The trauma of the Dalits was doubly inflicted: first by the violent severance from their homeland, and second by the structural hostility and marginalization in the refugee camps of West Bengal. This study has demonstrated, through the integrated application

of Caruth's trauma theory, Spivak's subaltern framework, and Bhabha's third space theory that the Dalit experience of partition constitutes a paradigmatically distinct form of suffering that demands its own theoretical and historiographical categories. Ultimately, Byapari's narrative stands as a powerful act of resistance and a crucial intervention in postcolonial discourse, demanding a re-evaluation of the partition narrative to include the voiceless. It proves that Dalit autobiographies are vital historical archives that reclaim agency and articulate the unresolved psychological trauma of the marginalized. The paper thus calls for a sustained scholarly effort to centre Dalit testimonies in partition historiography, not merely as supplementary voices but as primary archives of historical truth. Future research may profitably extend this analysis to other Dalit partition autobiographies engaging with the emerging field of subaltern partition studies.



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