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INTERROGATING MY CHANDAL LIFE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY MANORANJAN  
BYAPARI AS A SOCIAL HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Interrogating My Chandal life is an autobiography by Manoranjan Byapari who was born into an impoverished Dalit family in a place called Turuk-Khali near the village of Pirichpur which was once a part of Barisal district which is now in East Pakistan. This autobiography is about life and community of Chandals or Namashudras and this autobiography is written in the form of social history because it talks about the struggle for survival among the community to get one meal.

The autobiography starts with the birth of the author wherein there is a customary where the father has to feed honey to his newborn but his father only weeps because he doesn't have a grain of rice to feed where he would get honey an exorbitant luxury. Manoranjan tells that "so I got no taste of honey at my birth. My life has not been sweet. I have lived my life as the ill-fated Dalit son of an ill-fated Dalit father, condemned to a life of bitterness". Because of this reasons to study this autobiography becomes important. In this paper manoranjan bypari's life story is studied as a social history.

Keywords: Social History, Caste, Partition, Dalit Autobiography

After the partition of India, many people fled the country in panic, leaving their homeland heading towards an unfamiliar place only to face new forms of challenges. Riots breaking among two different communities of Hindus and Muslims were very protuberant and how it made it so difficult for the refugees to survive or co-exist peacefully. East Pakistan and India were the countries the people were asked to choose between. But the socially and economically weaker people were in dilemma the rich had the money, sources for a new life in the new country after partition because they were scared about their lives so what were the poor to do.

This autobiography talks about the struggle the Namashudras had during the partition. The partition had made them refugees from the east of Bengal the Shiromanipur camp set in 1953-1954 was situated in a hot climate where there was no proper water or sanitation the government provided them the rotten rice that was saved up after the second world war because of this conditions people were dying the skies would be clouded by the smoke coming from the pyre even though there was a doctor in the camp he did not have any medicine stocks. Byapari's father was determined in sending him to the camp school but when they went to enroll him there they came to know that the school had been shut down because of the communal riots that were rising in that place disappointed with this they returned back to home.It was also realized that the

government had stopped giving dole or the money food and had refused to take any responsibility of the refugees because it had become difficult for the newly formed country which was economically weak to take care of the unproductive refugees.

The people who had left Bengal were of two types one was the lower castes poor people such as the Namas, the Pods, the Jeles, the Malos they were the poverty stricken chhotaloks and another type of people were the educated rich upper castes called the bhadraloks who had refused to stay with the lower castes in the camp and had bought properties in the new country for themselves to stay. In nearly 149 colonies no lower caste were given houses.

The writer's life comprised of his father who worked as a contractual laborer and some days when he would be jobless and the whole family would starve and the community they lived in their poor neighbors would give handful of rice for the hungry stomachs of his family, this shows the warm sentiment the community had for each other. The autobiography encloses references of many historical events such as the partition of India, Pakistan and west Bengal.

Byapari talks about how his father always proclaimed his caste identity with pride as Namashuddurs of the Kashyap Gotra even though the upper castes called them as untouchable and would talk scornfully as Chandals or Chanrals, neither his father nor anybody of their community would acknowledge themselves as Chandals. They would claim that they were highborn and that the blood of the Brahmin flowed in their veins and it was not just restricted to the Namashudras any community of lowly ranks of the Varna hierarchy would make the same claim.

Byapari in his autobiography talks about Vedas and Shastra's as well, he stipulates how belonging to the lower strata of the caste hierarchy makes the Shudras be seen only with derision and a Shudra can lay no claim to knowledge, wealth or dignity. Any Shudra who would contravene these laws would be killed as Shambuk was killed by Rama for daring to read the Vedas. And in this Shastra, it was designed that the abodes of Chandals would be outside or far from the villages burning the corpse and breeding the animals would be the only profession allowed to them. They would never be allowed to own a property or house no education and no right to dignity at all.

We also find reference of Rabindranath Tagore's essay 'The Claim of Dharma' written in 1911 talks about the life of Chandals after becoming Namashudras where Tagore talks about the villages where the Namashudras lived and how their fields were uncultivated. How no one reaped their crops or even built homes for them. Collaboration and care expected to survive in the world was denied to them. How the society had arbitrated them as undeserving of receiving that humanity and for no faults of theirs? Their life was made miserable and it was altogether a grueling existence of their lives from birth to death. But even after such inhumane treatment the Namashudras are still alive. They have endured almost all the oppression and the exploitation the first census of this land that was carried by the British raj in 1872 the upper caste colonial officials contemptuously called the Namashudras as Chandals and when they rebelled against this there was a strike across four districts Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Barisal. His autobiography talks about his traumatic childhood in the refugee camps of west Bengal and Dandakaranya.

Byapari talks about his experience in Dandakaranya rehabilitation project initially how the local leaders of that communist party asked the people from the camp not to go to the rehabilitation and instigates the people to go on a hunger strike and that was the time when everybody realized how the government had completely become coldhearted even after twenty-eight days of the hunger strike not a soul from the government had come to enquire about the people. Therefore, under the guidance of their leader the people including Byapari's father started a large procession to Bishnupur court area where they were arrested taken twenty-five kilometers away from their places and asked to walk, the police did not need to beat anyone because they had a better plan to suppress the crowds by simply making them walk and tire the hungry and exhausted men. Food shortage and the rumor of famine nearing the rehabilitation camps started taking its toll on people and Byapari's father started working as a daily laborer in Jadavpur the lands in those places were claimed by all the high castes and for the construction of those houses the laborers were the Namos, the

Muslim, the Kaora and the Bagdi.its extremely ironic that the lower castes and muslims were considered untouchable and unpure but when they needed to build their houses they needed the same lot of people that they branded as untouchables.

For this Byapari talks about the scriptures which state that birth as a human being is a blessing and a rare gift he feels that it is rare for him because he has seen his father writhing in agony when he was ill his mother living in dark hole of a hut to hide her torn clothes and he has seen his sister dying of starvation and his other siblings exhausted and malnourished due to fasting. This is the time when Byapari decides to run away from his home and his family without having the knowledge about what would happen to him once he sets out to find a better place for himself, we get to see him getting degraded, abused and insulted.

From working in a doctor's house for months with just food and shelter as salary to working in teashops, assistant chef in police barracks, cook for marriage banquets Byapari does almost all of his jobs with great honesty but would always end up empty handed at the end of each job either because of his caste or because of the harassment at the work place. Byapari talks about how he was raped by his superiors at work, by havaldar who gives him shelter he talks about this experience with lot of pain and tells how in reality such rapes were frequent and happening regularly in society and how even the dogs and cows were not spared.

He remembers how he had to fight with hungry dogs for some leftover food when he had nothing to eat and how he had to travels in trains ticketless and get down if the ticket collector found him he would walk miles together from place to place in search of work because a man whose vice is food finds it difficult to bear hunger. He travels from Bengal to Assam but once during such travel he meets a man who hears all his story and feeds him bread and tea asks him to go with him to his home and the very happy Byapari agrees to go on the very good person takes him to a cloth shop and gets saris and asks the Byapari who was then fifteen years to go have a haircut and tells the shopkeeper that he has forgotten his purse and he will leave his son here and come back with purse in an hour but he goes away and does not return back for which Byapari gets beaten up we can understand that how people will misuse the situation of a small poor boy.

Byapari gets cheated many times by people even while working in the tea shop in kharibhari railway station the owner said he would pay him salary at the end of the month but doesn't pay him a single paisa even after ten months. Another time he works in a Biharis tea shop where he works hard and saves money for his family but only to be stolen by the tea shop owner's son. And on asking for the money back he gets thrown out.

After having spent five years away from his family Byapari returns back to his native place and comes to Jadavpur where he comes to know about the forests of Terai where naxalbari was very prominent here he starts working as a khuli and he meets his family and shifts to Shyama colony. And it is here where he gets the job of assisting a man in cooking for marriage banquets he then realizes that since he is an untouchable food prepared by him would be considered as inedible but Megha Das suggested him never to reveal his name and caste, and like this he starts cooking and earning some money and this is how his family got to taste the leftover delicacies of a high caste marriage feast food that was allowed to be taken by them at the end of their work. But when one day the family of one of the high caste people came to know that the lower caste was cooking the food Byapari was made to apologize and beg for forgiveness, this humiliation changed Byapari and he started hating the higher caste double standards and the system.

One day after this incident Chitta Byapari's younger brother was falsely accused of stealing duck from a higher caste's home but they did not have any evidence and he was beaten up mercilessly and no one came to stop them it was only later that they came to know that he was innocent. This made Byapari stop believing in man or god and when he started pulling auto rickshaw he starts associating himself with the naxal moment which was fighting against the system and the oppression that was made by the people of power. It was when his companion had died in one of the warfare between the naxals and the police at Barddhaman that he was filled with revenge but he was arrested and put behind the bars and this is the time that he understood that he would be imprisoned there for five to ten years that realization made him feel sad the feeling of not being able to be with his family or even be able to meet them made him feel alone and painful. He felt as though he was

going to die. But this was the place that gave him a new life it was here in the jail that he learnt to read and write. From learning reading and having to live a life of a prisoner he had more freedom than that he ever had outside in the society.

One day when in the prison there was a blood donation camp organized wherein an under trial prisoner would get twenty rupees for a bottle of blood and they could buy things with that money some would buy cigarettes, bidis, soaps or jaggery but it was Byapari who one day asked for a paper and pen to learn to read and write so that he can be a writer his demand was fulfilled he was given a fountain pen and two three sheets of paper. the main purpose of prison are to reform a person a criminal and jail gave him that reform .

After two years in prison others who had been arrested with Byapari were released on bail and since no charge sheet had been filed by the police the magistrate granted him a bail on payment of thousand rupees. And Byapari never regretted a single day he had spent in prison. All the charges against him were acquitted

This thirst for books and knowledge never left him he started reading various kinds of books such as Marxist literature, works by Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra, Satinath Bhaduri, Tarashankar, Bibhuti, Manik, Mahashwetha Devi, Sunil, Samaresh, Shyamal, Shirshendu, Shankar and the entire canon of Bangla literature .he was quenching his thirst for knowledge but to quench his hunger he started to pull rickshaw before he had gone to prison he would always keep dagger hidden under the passenger seat but now he would keep his books. While reading one of the books by Chanakya Sen a word 'Jijibisha' had puzzled him and nobody was able to tell him the meaning of this word it was only on that day when Byapari had boarded a learnt woman whom he was to take to Jadavpur that he asked her the meaning and she was stunned to know that a rickshawalla was asking her such a difficult word and only on enquiring she told him the meaning of the word it meant the will to live and after that the surprised and now silent passenger asked him from where he got the word and how far he had studied and it was then that he told her about himself and she told him how she was publishing a journal and whether he was willing to write about his life as a richshawalla and she took out a paper and wrote down something and gave it to him it was only then that he realized whom he was talking to it was none other than Mahashwetha Devi he had read her work Draupadi and Agnigarba and one could see rare satisfaction in her face. After some days in the January-march 1981 issue of Bartika his work about his life titled 'I drive rickshaws' was published and he became very famous as the richshaw walla writer he also sent his work under the pseudo name of Jijibisha to five periodicals, Runner, Hathiyar, Lok Vignan, Siriksha and Banga Barta they all accepted his work. And it was after this that he married Anita a girl whom he had known long back and settled down near Garia

One fine day people from Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha from Bhilia had come to meet Byapari. He had heard about Shankar Guha Neogi they believed that each and every individual should be able to claim their right to food, shelter, clothes, education, healthcare and occupation and even Byapari was very much impressed with their work and participated in them as well but this activity were unacceptable by the government of that time and may at times Neogi was attacked an encounter was also instructed by the police. But one fine day Neogi was arrested many people for whom he was fighting were demanding the police to release him. Neogiji was a role model to Byapari he had taken up the agency of a paper called the Amrit Sandesh and he was earning some income through this.

Byapari also involved himself in fighting with people against oppression and wrong doings without any fear with Neogiji. Neogiji being a great leader who worked for the poor and the oppressed was shot dead in his sleep it was one of the greatest loss to the country and Byapari was deeply hurt by his sudden demise. After his death morcha workers started working more in Bhilia and could not focus on Bastar and Byapari had taken good care of all these activities after his struggles in the morchas and meeting dons and politicians Byapari did not want to associate himself in politics and later on he started once again getting associated with the literary field and once again started writing for various journals and magazines such as Padakkhep, Aanon, Rabi-Shashya, Adal-Badal, Bahujan, Nayak.

In this autobiography Byapari ends it with saying that when he closes his eyes he sees a young boy without books to learn from without marbles to play with two hands covering the hole back of his pants pulling

grass and chewing on it because of hunger. Grazing goats, a boy who cannot grow because of malnourishment like a bonsai tree whose growth is stagnant. He snatches the bread from the jaws of hungry dogs. And these are the images that he sees before his eyes and this doesn't let him find inside him to tell him to be gentle and speak of love and forgiveness. He says he feels like asking that small boy to rebel. He says that the fire that is burning inside can be assuaged by two ways: either by adding kerosene and set it aflame and burn it to ashes or by pouring water and covering it to ashes. He asks that boy to go ahead and use whichever he as accesses too. Out of the ashes will arise a new life?

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