

## DALIT IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN MANORANJAN BYAPARI'S *INTERROGATING MY CHANDAL LIFE*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** *This article analyzes Dalit identity and the theme of resistance against social segregation and caste dominance in the Bengali Dalit autobiography Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit written by well-known contemporary writer Manoranjan Byapari. The research explores how Byapari depicts the social, economic, and political realities of Dalit community, experiences of caste-based violence and the ways in which this community challenges the dominant caste-based power structures as well as how his work raising awareness about the issues faced by Dalits, and how to assert his identity within cultural and literary society, and to challenge the status quo. In the memoir, the author poignantly expresses the unbearable suffering of being Dalit where caste and poverty relentlessly shape his tragic life experiences at every step of his life. The study is conducted based on the framework of Albert Camus' theory of resistance which considers writer's role as an act of resistance.*

**Keywords:** *Dalit autobiography; identity; caste; poverty; resistance; discrimination.*

### Introduction

The term *Dalit* is literally meant for 'crushed or broken' (Valmiki 3), which refers to all those backward classes that are depressed and oppressed in India, including Shudras, tribes, laborers, Adivasis, and other suffering masses. But in the context of Dalit literature, this term stands for the Shudras or untouchables, who are the fourth *Varna* in the Hindu caste system. They do not have right to own property, enjoy prestige, acquire knowledge, and control power (Anowar 166-167). The Constitution of India officially abolished untouchability by a clause in 1950. However, even after the seven decades of the Constitution's legal protective policies, the viciousness of the practice of untouchability seems to have intensified in recent years, particularly in the neoliberal period during the post-1990s (Bob 172; Teltumbde 17; Arora 556). According to very recent data from *The Economic Times* newspaper, from 2018 to 2020, around 139,045 crime cases against Dalits were officially registered across India's different states, with 50,291 of those crimes occurring in 2020 alone, according to a government report to parliament. Uttar Pradesh reported the highest number (36,467) of crimes against SCs in those three years, followed by Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh with 20,973,

18,418, and 16,952 crime cases, respectively, according to the data of the Home Minister. On the other hand, West Bengal registered the lowest number of such crimes in the three years, with only 373 cases, followed by Punjab (499 cases), Chhattisgarh (921), and Jharkhand (1,854) ('Over 1.3 Lakh Cases of Crime'). Most of the untouchables in India continue to experience considerable discrimination, violence, and disadvantages. They are often barred from village temples, tea shops, and wells; compelled to subordinate themselves before upper caste neighbors; discriminated against in the distribution of housing and land; and debarred from their participation in local government organizations. Moreover, while Dalits have attempted to develop their condition, prevent daily humiliations, or demand their Constitutional rights, they frequently face assault, murder, and rape at the hands of upper caste people who are threatened by their improvement. When such 'Dalit atrocities' have won media attention in India, in many places, government representatives are unable or reluctant to take action against the violence (Bob 173). Although they have formed powerful untouchable political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, mainstream politics often silences their voices (Bob 173-174).

Regional variations and political dynamics create great impact on the nature of resistance, movements, and oppression of Dalit communities. India witnessed a democratic uprising in the other states of the country from the 1990s. It mobilized lower castes to actively participate in politics and increased their unprecedented emergence in electoral politics, whereas Bengal could not follow the same pattern. West Bengal has neither seen the emergence of bahujan political parties like in north India, nor any anti-Brahmin movement like in south India. Caste has often been downplayed because of the class-based oppression of the Bengali *bhadraloks* (upper caste), who suppress the voices of the Dalit community (Chandra, Heistand, and Nielsen xi-xii). However, the Dalit community has enhanced a range of resistance in the social, cultural, and political spheres to challenge the dominant order. In recent years, there has also been a significant growth in Dalit activism. This aligns with recent efforts to shape caste violence and discrimination as issues of human rights at the international stage (Bob 174). For example, a number of Dalit scholars and activists attended the 'World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance' (Rawat, Satyanarayana 7) held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001. The Dalit representatives demanded that caste can be considered as a kind of racial discrimination in the conference agenda. This redefinition of caste violence and discrimination empowered Dalit activists and scholars to claim the rights of their community as legitimate human rights (Rawat, Satyanarayana 7).

In addition, Dalit literature, which emerged from the Dalit writers' first conference in Bombay in 1958 (Kumar 57; Limbale 25), is a lively genre for resistance, cultural re-evaluation, and self-expression, and it challenges dominant narratives through the authors' real-life experiences (Chandra 49). The emergence of Dalit voices within Indian English literature offers massive changes in society, such as the democratization of education (Chandra 49) and the increased impact of subaltern studies (Chandra 49). Due to the growth of these voices, Dalit literature acts as a crucial counter-narrative to the prevalent representations of Brahmanical and upper caste perspectives. Dalit life narratives not only represent the individual voice, emotion, and consciousness but also represent the voices of the whole community. These life narratives serve as testimonies which articulate the truth about the past; truth about the helplessness and poverty of the pre-Ambedkarite era and the progress and resistance of the Ambedkarite era (Rege 13). Arun Prabha Mukherjee contends that Dalit autobiographies are not 'sob stories' but 'stories of anger against injustice' (Rege 10). Anand Teltumbde critiques 'the autobiographical narratives too individualistic, often glorifying the author, romanticizing dalit backgrounds and failing to represent the collective pain' (Rege 10). Some Dalit scholars oppose the idea of Dalit writing autobiographies and compare it to 'digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past' (Rege 11). On the other hand, some Dalit scholars defend the significance of this genre, such as Baburao Bagul, who argues that Dalit literature could not solely be characterized by sorrow and anguish but it has historical significance in advocating human liberation (Rege 12). Dalit autobiography, like the autobiography of Black writers, is more than just a literary genre; it's a powerful way to form their identity and strongly resist oppression (P 1-14). It can be argued that Dalit life narratives could not simply be considered as 'narratives of pain and sorrow' or 'memories of a hateful past'. These Dalit autobiographies violate the conventions of bourgeois autobiographies and forge testimonies of caste-based oppression, anti-caste movements, and resistance (Rege 14).

In colonial Bengal, the Dalit movement began in the early nineteenth century with the rise of *Matua* religion, established by Hraichand Thakur. He founded the Matua religion within Hinduism to protest against the Brahmanical hegemony. They had various literary trends (most of these were not written) to share their spiritual messages (Anowar 167; Runa 819-820). By the late nineteenth century, these untouchables had united to be a strong community under the leadership of Guruchand Thakur. In 1911, they organized a mountainous protest to alter their identity from Chandal to Namashudra. In East Bengal, the illiterate and impoverished Dalits and Muslims had a close connection. The majority of these Muslims were Dalits who converted to Islam to resist the inhuman treatment by the upper caste

individuals due to Hinduism. Both of these groups (Chotolok class) faced exploitation and discrimination from upper caste zamindars (Anowar 168). On the other hand, upper caste Hindus (like Brahmins, Kayasthas, Vaishyas) were designated as *bhadraloks* (gentlemen). These upper caste individuals were acutely aware of their high-caste status. Based on religious grounds, these upper caste landlords often attempted to sow divisions between Muslims and Dalits to prevent them from uniting in their struggle against suppression. Following the partition of colonial Bengal in 1947, Hindu people migrated to West Bengal in several waves until the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 (Anowar 168). The partition shattered the base of Matua Sahitya. Dalit literature was resurrected in post-partition West Bengal 30 years after the emergence of Marathi Dalit literature (Anowar 167). Bengali writers ‘Set up the Bangla Dalit Sahitya in 1992 after the sad demise of Chuni Kotal, a tribal postgraduate girl student of Vidyasagar University, to eliminate disparity amongst human beings’ (Biswas 96–97).

There are many literary works on the Partition of colonial Bengal in the Bengali language, which are mostly written by Bengali upper caste authors. They are failures to portray the suffering, distress, and displacement issues of Namashudras, who were the prime victims of this Partition. Manoranjan Byapari, one of the commanding writers in Bengali Dalit literature, represents in his autobiography how Bengali Dalits suffered from the brunt of the Partition, which is unexplored so far (Anowar 167). His autobiography offers a searing look into the unbearable suffering of Dalit existence, where the twin faces of caste and poverty relentlessly shape a life of tragedy. Although the Dalit authors’ autobiographies have been thoroughly examined and investigated by researchers, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding how a Dalit autobiography, such as Byapari’s *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, helps to raise awareness about the issues faced by Dalits, constructing a distinctive Dalit identity and a form of resistance against the caste-based power structures in Indian society, particularly in Bengal by the Namashudra community.

The methods such as evaluation, comparison, interpretation, analysis, and argumentation will be employed in order to explore the impact of the Dalit autobiography on society as well as its potential to transform the caste-based Brahmanical hegemony of Indian society. Michel Foucault states that a discourse is formed by political and social structures and institutions. According to him, ‘power is a key element’ in discursive formations. He asserts that a discourse not only transmits power but also produces it. In fact, discourse is nothing but a tool of struggle, ‘[a] point of resistance’ and ‘[a] starting point of an opposing strategy’ (Multani 10). Resistance is not just a rejection, objection, or an opposition to power; this is also ‘an activity and attitude’ (Multani 12). It uncloses the injustices, weakens the dominant power

structures, and can ultimately generate an equal space for the marginalized sections and their practices (Multani 1). This study conducts a peaceful and non-violent resistance for those who lack power, focusing on the positive, constructive, and creative aspects of their diverse acts of resistance, which can reshape an oppressive order. As Byapari's autobiography endeavors to display the naked realities of the upper caste in society and creates awareness among the Dalit community, Camus' resistance theories have been suitable for critical analysis of the study. Camus believes that by articulating the injustices, mistreatment, and indignities faced by the marginalized communities, an artist strongly challenges the existing social realities and acts towards establishing an equitable society (Multani 6). He differentiates the violent revolutions and the non-violent resistance, advocating for a 'moderate resistance' that he considers is more aligned with human dignity and the pursuit of justice (Multani 7).

### **The Experience of Untouchability, Poverty and Exploitation**

*Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2018), authored by Manoranjan Byapari and translated by Sipra Mukherjee, is widely recognized as the inaugural published autobiography of a Bengali Dalit, which was initially released in Bengali under the title *Itibritte Chandal Jivan* in 2014. The narrative delineates the odyssey of an impoverished, marginalized individual ensnared within a caste-ridden society, navigating tumultuous socio-political landscapes and tragic dislocations. Byapari was born in 1950, hailing from the *Namashudra* Community, an identity that his father regarded with pride. His initial identity was that of a *Namashudra*, yet societal constructs relegated him to the status of a Chandal while his circumstances rendered him a refugee. Byapari was indigenous to the locale known as Turuk-Khali, situated in proximity to the township of Pirichpur, which was formerly part of the Barisal district in what is now defunct East Pakistan. His parents, both unassuming agrarian individuals, possessed only a nebulous understanding of his year of birth, estimated to be around 1950-51, a few years subsequent to the harrowing event that profoundly impacted the Indian subcontinent, namely, the Partition of India. To be precise, Byapari was born in a country presently referred to as Bangladesh. The eruption of communal riots and the pervasive dread of violence compelled countless individuals to flee from East Pakistan toward an uncharted geographical entity labeled 'India.' In a similar vein, Byapari's father also fled, ultimately finding the refugee camps established for displaced persons at Shiromanipur in the Bankura District of West Bengal, India. The autobiography chronicles his arduous and fruitless journey from his homeland to various places throughout the country in a bid to escape starvation. At a tender age, he departed from his

family in pursuit of employment, traversing the country like a nomad, only to confront further instances of maltreatment.

Marginalized sections, like any other groups, possess a distinct cultural memory, which fosters a collective consciousness of resistance for the sake of uplifting their position on the ladder of society. The source of cultural memory is traumatic experiences and historical events by a community at a particular time. Manoranjan Byapari, ‘a jail-returned rickshaw-wallah’ (Byapari xiv), who ‘has never crossed the threshold of school’ (Byapari xi) and he spent his childhood as ‘a bare-bodied goatherd running behind his cows and goats with a stick’ (Byapari ix) and

ferrying goods at the railway station, climbing up the bamboo scaffolding to the roofs of the second or third floor with a load of bricks on my head, driving the rickshaw, working as a night guard, the khalasi on a long-distance truck, the sweeper on the railway platform, the dom at the funeral pyres. (Byapari ix)

Being a refugee, it was very difficult for Manoranjan Byapari’s family to survive and had to face several hardships to have at least two meals a day. Byapari’s father was the family’s only earning member, who was struggling to feed the entire family. Now and again, the family also had to travel to a helter-skelter seeking of better resources. Despite being born in a lower caste family, he never tasted the harsh realities of untouchability before running out for his survival and working in a priest’s home. He had not experienced the harsh reality until then but could not protect himself either from oppression or the brunt of the same. While working at the priest’s home, he experienced the stigma of untouchability, where he was treated like an animal. There was an old and twisted plate in the priest’s house from which he ate his food. The woman of the house, careful to avoid contamination, would drop the food onto the plate from a distance. He would then take the food and eat it in a corner of the house, much like a beggar. The plate itself was not allowed inside the house. Having eaten the food, he would keep the plate in the cowshed. He also had no proper place where he could sleep. He had to sleep in that cowshed. Because of the mosquitoes and the foul smell of the cow’s urine, he could not sleep properly during the night.

Dalits have to face numerous hardships just to survive. While occasionally they are helpless, yet in other instances, they exhibit resistance, a phenomenon exemplified by Byapari as well. Just to survive, he had to pay lots of hard work at the police mess and could manage to earn a meager income. Like others who are from the lowest strata of society, his life was chaotic, and the mess owner’s treatment only exacerbated his struggles. He writes:

He (Amulya Thakur) came up close to me, pushed his dirty lungi to one side, took out his filthy, nauseating male organ and, placing it on the palm of my hand without the least hesitation... My mind rebelled at the deed but, shutting off my senses, I obliged, yearning to be left off from this act. But Amulya Thakur had no qualms of imposing himself on a helpless boy and wanted to carry this further. (Byapari 55-56)

The revenge did not result in positive outcomes for Byapari, and his destiny was determined. He once again returned himself on the road to find a job to sustain his survival. As it is inescapable for a Dalit because Dalits have no right to challenge or speak out against the injustices and sufferings, they face due to the upper caste people. Such kinds of experiences articulated by Byapari in his autobiography shatter the traditional Brahmanical order. The author, through his writing, redefines Dalits as historical agents rather than as submissive characters, which transforms the historical silence into testimony. The real-life experiences of the author not only reveal the mechanisms of the caste system but also strongly challenge the caste-based power structure and assert counter-discourses which validate resistance, dignity, and agency. Therefore, this life narrative breaks the caste-based power/knowledge nexus and serves as both personal resistance and collective assertion. Byapari here highlights the pain and oppression experienced by him, on the other hand, the autobiography gives Dalits a positive identity by emphasizing their inner strength and energy.

Due to limited educational opportunities, Dalits are often seen as unqualified for jobs. Byapari's financial struggles compelled him to migrate frequently, yet he remained unable to secure a reliable income source. Having put in extreme effort, he managed to obtain a job. However, he experienced profound disappointment when he was ultimately left unpaid despite several months of labour at a tea shop located in Siliguri. He writes:

Though dejected at not getting the money, Jeeban had consoled himself saying a month's wait would mean a larger amount. But every month Jeeban's enquiry produced the same response in Saha babu: No money now. (Byapari 71)

This unfair treatment left Byapari feeling frustrated and angry. He never anticipated such treatment or exploitation as a Dalit, especially while he had to support his family, but he found himself unable to escape the dark realities of untouchability. His tormenting past memory reflects the lives of his community, who share similar stories of anguish and hardship. Therefore, it can be asserted that the writer's 'self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self' (Mostern 51). In this memoir, the writer's personal sufferings form a constant attempt to uplift the social position of the lower caste people, as they fight not just for economic betterment but also for the affirmation of their social identity.

This autobiography, like other Dalit life narratives, introduces itself as a living narrative of a community, whereby the narrator consequently emerges as one of the numerous voices encapsulated within this text. The marginalized Dalit people are silenced and suppressed in society by the prejudice and elitism of the upper-caste Bengali *bhadralok*. But the author's individual memory from this autobiography serves as a form of collective memory for these subaltern people. His childhood was burnt by the bitter memories that uncover the stark realities of Bengali *bhadralok* and their social hierarchies and aristocratic norms, which perpetuate dominance over lower caste populations (Mondal, Jana 2). So, it's well argued by Albert Camus, who 'Considers a moderate and non-violent ethical resistance to be the logic of creation which enables the common person to fight oppression and to restructure the oppressive order' (Multani 6). Thus, the author Manoranjan Byapari, through his autobiography, becomes a representative of the Dalit voice and also helps to raise a consciousness of resistance against the oppression, exploitation, and discrimination of the upper-caste Bengali *bhadraloks*.

### **Resistance through Identity Concealment**

Such distressing treatment at the doctor's house shocked Byapari and made him realize the importance of concealing his identity in order to avoid similarly egregious treatment. It has been noted that the act of concealing one's identity stands as a significant strategy for the Dalit community to evade the various forms of violence and discrimination to which they are often subjected. Subsequently, upon securing a job, Byapari resolved to adopt this same approach. Hence, having changed his surname, he determined to keep secret his *Namashudra* identity from others. Otherwise, either that identity could be an impediment to getting his work, or if he had got a job, he would have faced contemptuous and disdainful treatment from upper caste people. In this context, as knowledge and power aid in classifying and identifying individual subjects to be ill or mad, and knowledge is always used for the sake of the dominant groups' interests (Nayar 53), this caste discrimination and oppression faced by a lower-caste individual who lacks power can be examined through the following observation.

Ideology is a system of beliefs and ideas that permeates social formations. Ideology justifies oppression and social inequalities by suggesting that the lower classes have also been inferior and persuades them of the validity of this belief. That is, ideology circulates as a system of representation and images that naturalizes oppression and creates the illusion that oppression is natural. (Nayar 53)

Byapari was rushing to several places in the hunt for shelter and food, and when he decided to go to Assam, he intended to change his name as Jeeban so that he would not face any kind of problems. This concealing of identity



could be observed in many Dalits' lives and Byapari was one among them. He is from *Namashudras*, 'the lowest of the lowly communities' (Byapari 110). Byapari was hired to cook and clean by a higher caste master because of the occasion of a marriage, as higher caste people were prohibited in kitchen. His master warned him to conceal his true identity and caste.

This was proof that no matter your economic status, caste is like a tattoo on your face that you cannot hide, she wrote. Neha (an engineer who is a Dalit) also opened up about growing up like an upper-caste, middle-class girl but never speaking about her Dalitness for fear of being 'ostracized'. (Dutt 26–27)

The text also elucidates the actual depiction of the *Namashudra* community, encompassing its struggles and tribulations. By exposing the resentment, humiliation, agony, and resistance, the autobiography serves as an external manifestation of the anguish and ire experienced by his community, thereby confronting vicious issues such as untouchability and systematic oppression faced by the *Namashudra* populace. The author persistently articulates his anger and protest on behalf of those who are 'silenced' for a long time due to the oppressions and biases ingrained in the selective amnesia perpetuated by the dominant Brahmanical hegemony. This memoir introduces a novel dimension by dismantling and revealing the myth of a stable and harmonious existence of Dalits within the socio-cultural framework of Bengal, thereby becoming an invaluable testimony to different cultural and socio-political issues. Consequently, the narrative constitutes a chronicle of the writer's life experiences across various regions of India as well as his struggles to satiate the profound need arising from extreme deprivation. The work acts as a form of protest for the subaltern community, who have been systematically overlooked within the fabric of Indian society for a long time. It foregrounds various issues while illustrating the neglected commitments of the caste-based society. Within the Indian social context, caste still remains a pivotal determinant in influencing one's educational opportunities, occupational choices, social esteem, and access to matrimonial prospects. Caste, though omnipresent, manifests as an imperceptible force that silently manipulates the mechanisms of nearly every system within the nation (Mondal, Jana 4). As the author's articulation of the dominant and oppressive power structures of the upper caste challenges and exposes the naked realities of Indian society, it can be illuminated through the following standpoint.

Since resistance recognizes the need to hear the voices of the dispossessed and aims to bring the marginalized into the centre, it confronts the dominant and oppressive structures, both overt and concealed. Basically, it is the disequilibrium of power at the social, political and economic levels that provokes multiform resistances... Resistance engages with oppressive power structures and questions the injustices perpetrated under those structures. (Multani 2-3)

### Aesthetic Resistance

Byapari was going through a difficult time, facing harsh treatment at the hands of a havildar in Lucknow, which only intensified his suffering. He faced this deeply tormenting incident in his life only because of his Dalit identity. This experience of sexual harassment that he had to endure left him utterly shaken. He narrates:

Jeeban gritted his teeth and bit down into the cloth helplessly, as the havildar poured dirty, sticky, foul indignity onto Jeeban's body and soul...the man raped Jeeban. (Byapari 96)

To the common people, these rapes are widely considered to be infrequent cases. However, in reality, such rapes occur hourly and consistently throughout society. The author reveals the nasty faces of the upper caste people in society as he recounts the horrific sexual assaults he suffered at the hands of the havildar and the Brahmin head cook, Amulya Thakur, on two separate occasions. These are powerful and deeply traumatic experiences which have a huge impact on Byapari's identity and his eventual turn to writing more thoroughly. These personal traumatic experiences are not isolated and stray incidents. Instead, they are profoundly associated with the systematic caste oppressions. This violence was not only on his body but also on his 'soul, his spirit, his identity' (Byapari 96). Byapari, during the sexual assault by Amulya Thakur, reminisces, 'My mind rebelled at the deed' (Byapari 56), which signals his initial sign of refusal. He was powerless to fight back at that time, but that silent rebellion sowed the seeds for his eventual decision to use writing as 'weapon.' These experiences fuel him, and he later narrates, 'An anger seethed within me' (Byapari 152). The anger appears from pain, humiliation, and an awareness of the powerlessness enforced by the caste system.

Byapari has expressed his concerns regarding the necessity of affording equitable rights to Dalits, while simultaneously representing them to be homogenous community. However, various other Dalit narratives indicate a profound silence regarding the discussion of Dalit lives in Bengal, sometimes even denying their existence. The romanticized designation of the Bengali *bhadralok*, in its endeavor to portray a collective image of a cultured or intellectual community, has often ignored the struggles of those on the margins. The intelligentsia among the Bengali *bhadraloks* has consistently sought to silence these voices by denying their rights and relegating them to the outskirts of society. This pervasive 'collective deafness' towards the marginalized community exacerbates their vulnerability within the social fabric. Within the hierarchical social structure of India, the Bengali *bhadraloks*, who are deemed to be the so-called upper-caste, dominantly exert

control over those lower castes. Byapari's individual memory slowly evolves into a collective memory, helping to unveil the external dimension of his community, which has continually attempted to articulate its plight but has been stifled by the father-like attitude of the Bengali *bhadralok*. The author has eloquently delineated the distinctive cultural experiences of humiliation and pain that each Dalit has faced within the context of the prevailing hegemonic caste hierarchy. The key theme of the narrative is the pervasive influence of caste, which manifests as one of the myriad issues that subjugate the *Namashudras* within society (Mondal, Jana 4).

Byapari clarifies why people from the lowest social strata don't see themselves to be 'polished men.' He firmly asserts that the attitude of the upper castes has prevented those from the lower castes from viewing themselves as equals. Their occupations are considered lowly, and their living conditions are often squalid. These perceptions were forced upon them, and sadly, they have been unable to escape the grip of this harmful mindset. Byapari writes:

All who are of the low caste are lowly. They are the ones who pull the carts, carry the loads, wash the utensils, and do all the many other forms of physical labour to fill their stomachs. (Byapari 120)

The treatment is so deeply rooted in the mind that they even consider themselves, as well as their jobs, as lowly ones. Byapari has also shared an incident that one day he went to find out a van-rickshaw-driver who used to live near Radha Housing at Bypass. Having arrived behind the house, he found more than three hutments in a row. After getting confused about which of them was that man's house, he had to ask a young girl, saying, 'There is a gentleman who lives here. He drives the van-rickshaw. Can you tell me which is his house' (Byapari 121)? The question left her in a dilemma, and she replied, 'the gentlemen here all live in that Housing. None of them drive van-rickshaws. My father does drive one, but he is...' (Byapari 121). She also oscillated to believe her van-rickshaw-driving father to be a gentleman.

In his writings, the marginalized groups, who are referred to as 'dirty detestable animal (s)' (Byapari 42), emerge in literature as powerful and speaking subjects. Dalits have started to comprehend the reality that they have been treated as mere stepping stones upon which others have stepped whenever they attempt to uplift themselves. In his *Dalit sahitya ka saundarya shastra* (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature), Omprakash Valmiki writes that Dalit literature 'is not art for art's sake; it is literature of life and literature of the desire to live' (Kumar 71). This is significant since it represents a Dalit theorization of Dalit aesthetics that questions how upper-caste authors and theorists have perceived and promoted Indian aesthetics. It further critiques

the concept of literature, especially in the manner that Indian upper-caste writers convey their perspectives through their art (Kumar 71).

Poverty significantly transformed Byapari's life. He travelled to various places for the sake of a job; nevertheless, all his attempts were in vain. The life of Dalits is characterized by a nomadic lifestyle, and Byapari exemplifies this reality. Regrettably, the jobs he managed to find were unfulfilling, and some compelled him to engage in activities he had no desire to ever pursue. For instance, while driving a rickshaw, he associated with some people who were involved in criminal activities. Byapari failed to recognize this gradual entanglement and ultimately became affiliated with such groups against his will. However, he felt helpless as he had no alternate options. For Dalits, life has consistently been marked by deprivation and hunger. Hunger drives them to engage in behaviors that are morally questionable and undesirable.

Life was forcing me into the notorious profession. It is only the swan that can glide un-drenched through the waters of life... But humanity could not. If man spent too long a time in the jungles, his animal-like instincts came to the fore. When the water of the holy Ganga is poured into the gutter, the Ganga becomes the gutter, not the gutter the Ganges... But now, my environment swallowed me. I drank, I gambled, I quarrelled. An anger seethed within me. (Byapari 152)

The author's direct experiences from his life lead him to firmly embrace humanism, and he refuses to believe in the concepts of God, religious texts, the soul, and rebirth, which promote discrimination, heaven, and fate, as these have turned him into a slave -

Experience becomes important for him (Ambedkar) because the existing society, according to him, is mostly driven by texts like Manusmriti, which has formidable cognitive influence on conservative social consciousness. This makes it difficult for Dalits or women to rely on such texts. Ambedkar uses the Mahabharata only as a means of confirming existing experience. (Guru, Sarukkai 2)

The lack of dignity shown by the upper castes towards the lower castes is a significant issue for the Dalits. This is something one can witness on a daily basis. Byapari was haunted by this disrespect from his childhood. He felt a strong rage but was unable to voice his feelings. He had to deal with the repercussions of being at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Byapari became engaged with the Naxalite movement not because he was entitled to participate, but because he believed it was his path to a healthier and more dignified life. He felt compelled to join this group, as remaining outside either the elitists or the revolutionaries would likely lead to a difficult life. He remained oblivious to the strategies and methods employed by the Naxalites in pursuit of their goals. This decision stemmed from the pent-up anger within

him, which drove him to view the Naxalite movement as an opportunity to retaliate against upper-caste people. Thus, the only trajectories available to Byapari were characterized by darkness, complexity, narrowness, and a bloodied path.

Manoranjan Byapari's story is that of a constantly famished young man who becomes involved in the movement not due to his ideological beliefs, but because of the fundamental requirement to survive, which is the primary concern for an individual belonging to the Dalit community. However, after realizing the importance of life, Byapari relinquishes the cringing identity associated with his lower caste status. He investigates the journey to liberation into a new identity among the so-called '*bhadralok*' class by engaging with education while imprisoned, thereby establishing stability in his previously tumultuous life by founding his own family. Byapari's attraction to the Naxalite movement began upon his return to Calcutta, West Bengal, but his transformation truly took place during his time in jail. At the age of 24, he was introduced to the alphabet there, which fostered a passion for reading within his veins. Over time, he delved into various literary genres. Fortune meets with his experiences; after his release from prison, while working as a rickshaw puller, his meeting with the renowned Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi sparked a profound awakening in him. Despite enduring numerous struggles, he eventually found himself on the right pathway. Being inspired by Mahasweta Devi, he developed a burgeoning interest in writing, which culminated in his first essay, *Rickshaw Chalai* (I Pull a Rickshaw), in 1981. This pivotal moment transformed his life, rescuing him from a potentially dark future, and set him on the path to becoming a writer. The severe oppression of the upper caste helps the author realize the power of words. To expose his pain, miseries, and anger, he utilizes his pen as a weapon (Bhat, Nair 28). So, the Phules rightly considered that education would liberate the marginalized sections, as education had the strong potential to arouse consciousness among them, which could eventually bring about actual transformation in society (Kumar 46-47).

I had only my pen. So those whom I detested of oppressors of the human spirit and humanity, I waged a war against them through my writing. I killed them off in my pages. (Byapari 344)

As Byapari's life was changed when he was introduced to letters, simultaneously, it reminds Malagatti's autobiography, *Government Brahmana*, where Satyanarayan's father, Baliah, never compromised with anything to educate his children. Both writers demonstrate that Dalits can challenge the thinking of the caste-ridden Indians and can also change their social position through education. To learn the alphabet inside prison was not only an educational step but also a rebellious act against the numerous challenges and heinous atrocities imposed on him by the caste system.

Literacy unlocked his intellectual liberty, which enabled Byapari to envision a self beyond the ‘Chandal’ identity. This transformation aligns with Albert Camus’ assertion that art and creation are forms of rebellion which empower the marginalized to reclaim their agency (Multani 6-7). Therefore, Byapari constitutes his identity within the literary and cultural society through his lifetime, not only by establishing himself as a writer but also by protecting the history of his community and challenging the social structures which perpetuate their oppression.

Byapari’s memories, reflecting the outer experiences of his Dalit community, are conveyed through his autobiography. His experiences shape the historical narrative of the community. In this literary work, his memories serve as a medium to connect personal experiences with those of the community. In this context, this text

captures the collective struggle against the caste-based hierarchy and oppression associated with it. It encapsulates the collective emotion of anguish resulting from being downtrodden for centuries in the name of rituals and traditions associated with religion. (Vyas 158)

The history of a marginalized community who have always been ignored by the upper caste people in society is demonstrated through the experiences of the writer in his life narrative. This life narrative not only documents the history of the community but also deliberately connects with Camus’ ‘aesthetic resistance,’ which considers every significant creative work to be a challenge to injustice. His autobiography transforms the real-life experience into a literary space which resists the erasure of Dalit histories, and in this way, it reclaims dignity for himself and his community. This creative intervention is directly associated with Albert Camus’ belief that art can unite the existing disorder by challenging oppression and injustice and offering a morally charged alternative vision of society. Therefore, this autobiography not only reflects an individual story but also serves as collective resistance of his community against caste-based violence and oppression in Indian Hindu society. Camus believes -

...creation is an aesthetic resistance. He considers resistance to be a pre-condition for civilization as well as art. He asserts that resistance allows man to live with dignity. He also holds that aesthetic resistance fabricates universes and intervenes in the perceived order to bring unity in the disorderly world. Therefore, he is of the conviction that a good literary work maintains a balance between the real and the imaginary and rejects injustice and indignity in order to reconfigure the world (Multani 30).

## Conclusion

To sum up, it can be deduced that Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, like other Dalit autobiographies such as *Karukku* by Bama and *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutta, is not just a personal narrative but also serves as an act of absolute resistance which reshapes Dalit identity through aesthetic expression. This life narrative discloses the heinous caste-based discriminatory experiences faced by Bengali Dalits, specifically by the Namashudra community in a caste-laden Hindu society, as well as creates community consciousness. Camus has provided an appropriate theoretical framework to explore how Byapari, through his autobiography, transforms his individual sufferings into agency, collective resistance, and the voice of his community, challenging the dominant Brahmanical system, which marginalized them for centuries. This act of narrative creation provides new perspectives that empower the Dalit community to reclaim their dignity and respect. This research asserts that Byapari's autobiography not only represents pain, anguish, and sorrow but also breaks down the prevailing hegemonic structure and establishes a new ground of equality and justice for his community. Future research can study how the language and narrative techniques of this Dalit autobiography contribute to subvert dominant narratives. The findings of this research will contribute to the understanding of Dalit autobiography as a tool for social and political transformation.

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