

Is Bengal Truly Casteless? A Reconsideration through Namasudra Autobiographies

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Bengal has historically been considered as an exception to the practice of casteism. While other states of the country experienced caste discrimination as a part of the social fabric, Bengal has been considered as an egalitarian state. The main reason attributed to this phenomenon is the progressiveness culture of Bengal which had the bhadralok at its centre. However, this paper revisits the notion of Bengal's castelessness. This article also looks at the broader historical context of Bengali Dalit history which closely looks at the plight of Bengal's Dalits after the Partition of 1947. The Dalits, mostly comprising of the Namasudra community, were forced to leave their land and migrate to West Bengal. Having become refugees overnight they resorted to help from the government but were treated indifferently. However, that was not the case for the upper caste refugees who were allowed rehabilitation facilities. Eventually the government of West Bengal sent away the destitute Dalit refugees under the Dandakaranya Project to remote places away from Bengal. Dandakaranya Project ultimately led to the infamous 1979 genocide at the Marichjhapi island of Sunderban. Dalit autobiographies such as that of Manoranjan Byapari Itibritte Chandal Jiban explicitly talk about these carefully silenced dark chapters of Bengal's history which clearly show the casteist attitude which existed in the state of Bengal. Byapari's autobiography is not just a personal story of pain and survival. It serves as a historical document that proves Bengal's progressive self-image to be false. Byapari's transformation from a refugee to author and then to legislator, shows a reclaiming of Dalit agency. It is in this context that Dalit autobiographies become important for they act as testimonios which reclaim the lost histories. They demolish the false narratives by re-examining history through Dalit perspective. And proves beyond doubt that Bengal's purported castelessness is not an absence of caste but rather an act of intellectual suppression.

Keywords: Bengal, Caste, Namasudra, Dalit Testimonios, Marichjhapi, Manoranjan Byapari, Dandakaranya, Matua.

Bengal has long been cast as an exception to India's caste-ridden social order, a place whose modernity, class politics, and literary refinement supposedly rose above the hierarchies that structured life elsewhere. Yet what has passed for an emancipatory self-portrait is, as Dalit writers and recent scholarship repeatedly shows, a political fiction maintained by those who benefited from it. It is the urban upper-caste bhadralok whose cultural authority shaped the canon and this narrative. Against this carefully tended myth, the writer-activist Manoranjan Byapari poses a deceptively simple question in his 2007 essay, "Is There Dalit Writing in Bangla?". It is a question that is less an inquiry than a

challenge to the permissions of the literary public sphere. By mapping a submerged genealogy of Dalit expression—especially among the Namasudras and within the reformist and devotional corpus of the Matua sect in the 1930s and 1940s—he demonstrates that what was missing was not writing but recognition, for the gatekeeping institutions of Bengal's letters refused to see these voices as literature at all, insisting on a casteless universality that, in practice, selected for upper-caste norms and experience. The partition of 1947 made this erasure harsher and more material: displacement dispersed Dalit communities into refugee camps where survival displaced collective cultural

production, and those most rooted in agrarian labour—above all the Namasudras—were driven from East Bengal into a West Bengal already stratified by class and caste. There, the very status of being refugees turned marginality into something nearer to civic invisibility. As Joya Chatterji records, the state's policies of rehabilitation were openly caste-coded, welcoming upper-caste, middle-class migrants into the metropolitan fabric while treating poor, agrarian, lower-caste refugees as a demographic burden to be exported from Bengal altogether (Chatterji 214).

In this sense, the logic of the “casteless” narrative did not merely ignore caste. It weaponized the denial, clearing space for the bhadralok's progressive self-image by delegitimizing caste-named speech as sectarian or parochial. That is why, as Debjani Sengupta notes, the very act of writing from a Dalit subject-position was denied recognition—not because it lacked craft or social vision, but because it unsettled the claim that Bengal was a unique zone where caste did not matter (Sengupta 60). Equally telling is what happened to the early Matua archive: the movement founded by Harichand Thakur and consolidated by Guruchand Thakur—emphasizing education, dignity, and the refusal of Brahminical domination—produced a political and literary consciousness that gave the Namasudras a language of collective self-assertion, yet the bhadralok displaced it to the realm of “folk” or devotional material, stripping it of political content and excluding it from the mainstream canon of modern literature. As Hans Harder observes, such

religious-literary formations were dismissed as sectarian, a classification that served to cordon off Dalit expression from Bengali modernity altogether (Harder 89). This ideological erasure—what Anjan Ghosh calls the substitution of caste with a narrative of linguistic and regional unity—allowed cultural nationalism in Bengal to thrive while preserving upper-caste dominance (A. Ghosh 71).

By the late 1950s the Dandakaranya Project had become a machinery of refugee dispersal which exported Dalit refugees to a distant terrain, outside of Bengal. On paper the project was described officially as an exercise in rehabilitation and development. However, in practice this “solution” moved thousands from Bengal to forests areas of distant land such as Chhattisgarh and Odisha. These territories were considered as “wasteland” awaiting productive labour. It was an act of abandonment by the government of West Bengal. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay rightly notes the policy as an effort “to safeguard social and political order by exporting caste tensions elsewhere,” (Bandyopadhyay 188). As Debjani Sengupta emphasizes the memory of displacement, for the Dalit refugees, was not a single shock but a chain of uprootings—Partition, refugee camp, dispersal, and the recurrent experience of being administratively uprooted rather than socially included (Sengupta 64). In that chain, Marichjhapi—a small island in the Sundarbans—became the name of both possibility and catastrophe. In the late 1970s, thousands of refugees—largely Namasudras returning from Dandakaranya—settled there and set about building a common

life: they cleared mangroves, dug ponds, built schools and clinics, organized fisheries and cooperatives, and attempted a civic experiment that Paula Banerjee has called a “refugee democracy,” a citizenship from below crafted out of work and reciprocity rather than patronage (Banerjee). The Left Front, which had courted these refugees while in opposition by promising resettlement in Bengal, now in office, reversed its stance, declaring the settlement illegal under forest-conservation law and imposing a blockade that cut off food, water, and medicine. In May 1979 it moved to direct violence—demolitions, arson, shootings, and forced deportations—that have never been adequately counted or acknowledged in official documents. Oral histories preserve what files do not. Annu Jalais records the bitter epitaph of a villager—“The poor became tiger food, and the tigers became citizens”—a line that distills the moral economy of the massacre, where wildlife preservation served as the language through which human lives could be morally discounted (Jalais 1760). The Left’s environmental justification functioned as a mask for caste disciplining. The point was not simply that a reserve forest had been encroached upon, but that an autonomous settlement of Dalit refugees had asserted a right to belong that was incompatible with the state’s calculus of demographic management and political control. As Ranabir Samaddar stresses, the refugee question in Bengal was never merely about shelter but about deciding which lives could belong on Bengali soil and which must be moved elsewhere (Samaddar).

It is within this history that Byapari’s autobiography, *Itibritte Chandal Jiban* (Interrogating My Chandal Life), acquires its force. The book gives testimony from within the childhood of a displaced Namasudra boy, the camp, the casual labour of a rickshaw-puller, prison, and finally a path to writing that appears almost by accident and then becomes a vocation. He touches upon the invisibility that caste enjoys among the powerful and the slow violence it enacts among the poor. It is no abstraction for him that the myth of castelessness is sustained by suppressing Dalit experience; his life is the counter-archive to that suppression, a narrative that aligns with Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s historical analysis but with the immediacy of lived injury. In Byapari’s autobiography literacy becomes agency. In prison he learns to read, encounters Ambedkar and Marx and, with the mentorship of Mahasweta Devi he discovers that writing can be a form of political presence. “They called us Chandals, untouchable,” he recalls, “but when I wrote, I was no longer untouchable—I was heard” (Byapari 210). It is not incidental that what begins as literacy becomes authorship and then electoral politics: when, decades later, he enters the West Bengal Assembly he summarizes the continuity of these roles with disarming clarity—“My pen and my politics are the same, both speak for those who have been silenced” (Mondal 14). Critics have been right to claim a double significance for his work. As Sengupta argues, it exposes the bankruptcy of Bengal’s progressive self-image demonstrating the ease with which a leftist state could inherit the *bhadralok*’s caste

evasions (Sengupta 68). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay adds, the very act of a Chandal writing his life is already an assault on cultural hegemony because it insists on naming what the canon prefers not to know (Bandyopadhyay 194).

Marichjhapi is where these theoretical claims become non-negotiable. For those who settled in the island return from Dandakaranya was an act of home-making. But the state's response in the form of blockade, starvation, and armed eviction revealed not merely administrative ruthlessness but a deeper indifference. As Byapari puts it "We weren't asking for much—only a small place in our own Bengal—but they treated us like enemies" (Byapari 201). Even the justifications—conservation, legality, order—are familiar instruments: they translate a political decision into a neutral principle so that violence can be executed without acknowledging its caste target. No wonder the massacre lingers mostly outside the state's memory regimes, sustained instead in survivor testimony and in the literature that listens to them. When Udit Sen writes that the event revealed "the face of sovereign violence" behind the state's humanitarian mask, she names the particular clarity Marichjhapi yields: that a state can narrate itself as progressive while executing exclusions at scale (Sen 230).

The same clarity reframes the Dandakaranya Project and therefore to call it rehabilitation is to stay at the level of the file. To inhabit it through refugee accounts is to see how exile is imposed through policy decisions- through the selection of sites far

from cultural and economic networks, the absence of cultivable land, the epidemiology of malaria, sparse water, instructional optimism of development slogans that never materialize in support. If Bengal's upper-caste refugees fit seamlessly into the administrative and cultural life of the metropolis, Dalit refugees were assigned to the spatial margins, their labour figured as the instrument by which an interior "wasteland" would be made productive. The hierarchy of belonging thus took a geographic form: the city and its institutions for the already entitled, the frontier and its risks for those whose presence in Bengal was unwanted. In such a scheme, the "casteless" self-image is not only untrue but it is a cover story for a sorting mechanism that treats caste as an organizing principle while claiming not to.

To track these mechanisms is not to deny the genuine accomplishments of Bengal's intellectual and political traditions; it is to insist that their accounts are incomplete without the histories they have rendered peripheral. Byapari's intervention is to center those histories and to insist that literature is not an autonomous aesthetic field but a site where claims to voice and authority are negotiated. That is why, in Bengal, Dalit writing has long been treated as something that must be translated out of its own idiom—relegated to folklore and devotionism, before it can be welcomed. What is feared is not merely anger or accusation but a rival account of modernity itself, one that measures progress not by the sophistication of the canon but by the distribution of dignity. The example of Maharashtra—where Dalit writing formed a

recognized movement in dialogue with Ambedkarite politics—shows that it is not “culture” as such that blocks recognition but the decisions of particular institutions about what counts as literature. The problem in Bengal, then, is less a deficiency of Dalit writing than a surplus of gatekeeping, a surplus buttressed by the prestige of a universal humanism that refuses to acknowledge its caste predicate.

Remembering Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi is, in this light, a political act because it refuses the double erasure—of lives moved and lives lost—and because it reframes Partition as unfinished. Displacement did not end with 1947, it continued through dispersal schemes and police actions and the act of forgetting. To remember is to restore scale and sequence: to see exile and eviction not as anomalies but as functions of a policy regime that made lower-caste refugees into exportable populations. It is also to recover the grammar by which they made life anyway—cooperatives, ponds, clinics, schools—and thereby articulated a form of citizenship whose claims the state could not absorb without ceding power. It is, finally, to insist on what Sharankumar Limbale’s contemporaries, and Sharan Kumar Limbale himself in the broader Dalit autobiographical tradition, have taught us about the genre: that autobiography is not simply a record of pain but a theory of justice in the first person. K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu have made similar claims about the corpus. But the most compact formulation remains of G. N. Rao who believes Dalit autobiographies are “manifestos for justice” as much as they are testimonies of injury (Rao

239). Itibritte Chandal Jiban is exemplary in this sense because it is simultaneously literature, history, and political thought; it does not ask to be admitted to a canon so much as it demands that we change what we mean by literature when the excluded speak.

follows from this demand? First, that the myth of castelessness is a symptom, and not an error. It is produced by a system that needs denial in order to function as it does. Second, that the corrective cannot be merely additive. One does not “include” Dalit writing and keep everything else as it was. The canon must be re-situated within the social world that sustains it, and the institutions that curate it must be answerable to those they have historically excluded. Third, that policy cannot be read apart from caste. When a project relocates refugees, when a department allocates land, when a conservation order is enforced, the analysis must ask which bodies are being moved, who is rendered disposable, and how law is made to wear the face of neutrality while administering hierarchies. Finally, that the work of memory—of oral history, testimony, and counter-archive—is central to democratic life, because without it the record will reproduce the view from above. Byapari’s trajectory—from camp to page to assembly—makes this program legible as an ongoing practice rather than an abstract prescription. It shows that the refusal of invisibility can begin with literacy, that writing can be a way of standing one’s ground. Yet the arc of the work is unmistakable: it cuts through euphemism with example, returning the reader to the actual lived experience—refugee camps, police boats, poisoned wells, and the

plight of hunger. Thus, the myth of castelessness loses its authenticity. It becomes clear that it is a story told to silence the reality. To insist on hearing those narratives is to change what counts as history, politics, and reality in Bengal. In this case, it ushers the restoration of the voice of the marginalized Dalit community.

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