

ITIBRITTE CHANDAL JIBAN

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ItibritteChandalJiban(2012) is by far the first well-knit Bengali dalit autobiography in recent times. The story is a thrilling and blood chilling discourse!! Byapari's story is an engaging discourse; it is militant in texture. We hardly meet a person like him who is a living example of indomitable vitality for survival in a class and caste ridden society.

We don't know his exact birth year (1950 ?) as Manoranjan Byapari's mother could not record the date of his birth. He came from Barishal, Bangladesh to West Bengal at the age of three. He was in Bankura, Shiromanipur Refugee camp for nearly seven years since he was three years old. Suddenly one day, the dole given by the government to the refugee camp was stopped and the family had to move out to the Ghutiyari Sharif, Gholadoltala Refugee Camp in South 24 Paraganas. His parents lived there till late '60s. In 1964 he left home at the age of fourteen in order to earn a living for his family. He went to New Jalpaiguri and worked in a tea stall. Then he moved on to Assam, Lucknow, Delhi and Allahabad. In 1969 he and his family (his parents, two brothers, two sisters) moved to Jadavpur, Kolkata. In 1971 they moved to Dandakaranya, Paralkot. Byapari shifted back to Kolkata in 1973 while his parents kept living in Paralkot for sometime more. In the same year he took up rickshaw-pulling as occupation near Jadavpur railway station. Both his parents were illiterate. He had no dream for a better tomorrow. In 1975 he was involved in hooliganism in the Jadavpur area. Byapari was arrested and convicted under sections 148, 149 and 307 of the Indian Penal Code. While in jail for two years from 1975 – 1977, a chain of experiences there influenced significantly in his life.

There he met a man who claimed to have turned mad reading Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya's 'Charitrahin'. It immensely surprised Byapari. The possibility of such long years of imprisonment intimidated Byapari. He expressed concern to one under trial prisoner saying that he could not imagine how would he spend so many years in the prison, when life was proving to be so frustrating already! In response the prisoner pointed out to a banyan sapling on the wall of National Library (whose adjoining Campus was visible from the jail) and asserted : if that sapling could draw its nutrients from those concrete walls, then it was definitely possible to absorb life from within this apparently dismal jail campus too! One only needs to search it out!! He then went on to sing the glories of education, which could give life to humans even in most deadening situations – he would share stories of how a character of the story accepted voluntary isolation for years in lieu of a great amount of money, but then he started reading, and how learning helped him out of maddening loneliness, and how he was emancipated to the extent of deliberately breaking the terms of the challenge by leaving the confinement a day before the stipulated time would end and thereby forgoing the prize money, as he had experienced that knowledge had enriched him far more than that awaiting money ever could! Byapari had a complete paradigm shift and the stories ignited in him the hunger for education.

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From then on the prison-friend started teaching him Bengali alphabets and he practiced them with twigs on the dust and chalk on the floors! In those days they used to buy blood from willing donors. He used to sell blood for Rs 20/- and buy pen and paper with that. He was in three jails in a span of two years time : Alipore Special Jail, Central Jail and Presidency Jail.

Byapari started pulling rickshaw and rough days followed. One day a lady got on to my rickshaw. As he pulled the rickshaw through the streets, he asked her the meaning of the Bengali word “*jijibisha*”. The lady was taken aback and asked him wherefrom he got this word. When he mentioned the source, the lady was surprised to learn that he could read! She then revealed herself as activist-writer **Mahasweta Devi**!! Thus on goes the narrative of the incredible vicissitudes of his life.

The life that Byapari has lived must be shared with many. He has come back from the jaws of death many times. Recently again he was fighting death, and he had a strong feeling that his life-story must be documented in print, or else it will be lost with him. He feels it's important for people to know that someone survived in such horrid conditions. His writings represent all those people who continue to live in such inhuman circumstances. Professor Meenakishi Mukherjee's contribution to *Economic and Political Weekly* (2007), where she voiced his works, remains a milestone in his life. She propagated Byapari's works all over India and in alien shores. Through her article, many realised for the first time that there are Dalit writings in Bangla.

Itibritte Chandal Jiban is a reading wonder indeed; a fascinating account of a miracle man!

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