

Story of a 'Chandal'

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He was a mean man. he is a great man. He is known as Manoranjan Byaparee. In reality, he is Madan Chandal. It is difficult to dissociate this mean and great man of the fifties of the last century still going strong at 2012 with his cooking job at the deaf school in south Bengal from his illiterate and hungry past with his present status as a foremost subaltern writer of renown who has turned, single-handedly, Bengali literary world upside down with his anger, hunger, protests and fears and unalloyed struggle to live the life of a total man. And after reading his memoirs* one feels that here is a man who could have been anything between a brawny and a brainy child to a man-hunter to a man-eater. But this is the joke or the result of struggle waged throughout and for life which turned him from a foe to a friend of mankind, especially oppressed and tortured ones.

All these changed, paradoxically, in jail, under false charges when he had to share a cell with a scholar turned cheat, who, smelling the hunger in the young man, taught him to read and write. And even more paradoxically, or in pure proverbial Bengali, 'ulatpuran' some die-hard policemen helped him too, going against rules, to write and read Bengali scripts. That changed Madan's hunger from food to words.

A refugee from the erstwhile East Pakistan of the 1950's, he at a very tender age had to go to Dandakarnya not for rehabilitation but for resettlement of the stony, hilly and wild animal-infested jungles there which were manned by Adibasis having no connections with the extant Indian civilized society a few miles away on all sides. The struggle for living started that early and that took Byaparee through various phases of his life. He became a Rickshaw-puller in Kolkata, mixed with, willy-nilly, local goons and uplifted himself to be associated with the Naxals in the 70's of the last century.

After his jail term for two long years on false charges for a living he again became a rickshaw-puller and a chance meeting with a lady-professor of a Kolkata college turned his life and world upside down. The professor turned out to be Mahasweta Devi and evinced interest in the stout Rickshaw-puller who was reading a book. On her enquiry Byaparee had to show her the book which turned out to be a book by the famous authoress herself. She invited him to her house and learnt about his life and struggles, his meanness and fearlessness in a fight, be it a street brawl or a fight for life with local CPI(M) goons. She just asked him to write, briefly about his journey through life. In between his return to Dandakaranya and especially the Paralcote area he had come into contact with the legendary Sankar Guha Niyogi who had been instrumental in harnessing his fighting spirit for the oppressed and tortured in the Democratic way and not by street fighting.

It was a very difficult task for Byaparee because though he had learnt to read and write at a very late age it was reading which would take away all his recess time and he had no business till then to write anything of substance, not even letters to his near and dear ones. Because by that time he had lost all connections and communications with them. But as had always been a trait with him that he never relinquished a battle, after a few months he wrote a piece on his life in his broken and jumbled up words and gave it to Mahasweta Devi who, in her inimitable style edited and forwarded for her own journal *Bartika* and thus Madan Chandal alias Manoranjan Byaparee became a writer.

The turnaround is not as simple as that. Even now, after more than thirty years of writing he is being thwarted every time he tries to write. And mostly the asphyxiation comes from the erstwhile rulers and champions of Proletcult.

What the present reviewer feels after a first reading of the autobiography of a Chandal or a charal in common lingo, Sub-altern or Dalit in Philosophical and political category, is that it is a blatant, savage attack to the civil society, not for attacking but for bringing out the social truth how they are born, live and die.

Manoranjan chose his own way of battling the civilised society with words, unlike Sartre, like Gorky may be, as he learnt his lessons from the schools and universities of life, to live on and to stare at the society with his fierce eyes. □□□

*ETIBRITTE CHANDAL JIBAN (PRATHAM KHANDA)—HISTORY OF A DALIT LIFE

(vol.1) By Manoranjan Byaparee, Priyashilpa Prakashan, Kolkata, Price : Rs 250.