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Behind Bars and Beyond Words: Prison Narratives and the Poetics of Bitterness in Manoranjan Byapari's Novels

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Abstract

"Manoranjan Byapari occupies a singular position in contemporary Indian literature as a Dalit refugee-writer whose fiction emerges directly from the lived experience of poverty, manual labour, political imprisonment, and caste-based humiliation. This paper examines the representation of prison life and the accompanying emotional register of bitterness in Byapari's novels, with particular attention to works such as Chandal Jibon, There's Gunpowder in the Air, and his autobiographical narrative Interrogating My Chandal Life. The study argues that Byapari's prison narratives function simultaneously as documentary testimony and literary protest, transforming personal suffering into a collective Dalit and subaltern memory. Bitterness in these texts is not presented as mere personal grievance but as a structural response to institutional violence, caste discrimination, and the denial of dignity within carceral spaces. Employing a qualitative, textual-analytical method grounded in subaltern studies and prison writing theory, the paper investigates how incarceration becomes a metaphor for the wider social imprisonment experienced by Dalits and refugees in post-Partition Bengal. The paper further explores narrative strategies such as first-person testimony, vernacular idiom, and unflinching realism through which Byapari renders the jail as both a physical and psychological space of degradation and, paradoxically, of political awakening and self-articulation."

Keywords: Manoranjan Byapari; Prison Narrative; Dalit Literature; Bitterness; Incarceration; Bengali Subaltern Fiction

Introduction

Prison writing has long occupied an ambivalent space in literary studies, positioned at the intersection of autobiography, protest literature, and social documentation. In the Indian context, prison narratives have historically been associated with anti-colonial resistance; however, the postcolonial period has witnessed the emergence of a different strand of carceral writing, one

rooted in caste oppression, class struggle, and the criminalisation of poverty. Manoranjan Byapari, born into a Namasudra Dalit refugee family displaced by the Partition, spent large portions of his early life as a rickshaw-puller, a manual labourer, and briefly as an undertrial prisoner during the Naxalite movement in West Bengal. This lived proximity to incarceration profoundly shapes his fiction, lending it an unmediated authenticity rarely found in mainstream Bengali literature.

Byapari's novels, including *Chandal Jibon* (translated as *There's Gunpowder in the Air*) and his celebrated autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, repeatedly return to the jail as a recurring setting and symbolic space. The prison in his fiction is not an isolated institutional backdrop but an extension of the caste-ridden, impoverished world outside its walls. The bitterness his characters experience within incarceration mirrors the larger bitterness of exclusion that Dalit and refugee communities endure throughout their lives. This paper seeks to examine how Byapari constructs prison as both a literal and figurative space, and how the emotional texture of bitterness operates as a narrative device that exposes systemic injustice while simultaneously asserting subaltern agency and voice.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on Byapari's work has grown considerably following the English translation of his autobiography. Mukherjee (2018) situates Byapari within the broader tradition of Dalit life-writing, arguing that his narratives disrupt the aestheticised realism of upper-caste Bengali fiction by foregrounding hunger, labour, and institutional violence as central literary concerns. Similarly, Chakraborty (2019) examines the autobiographical mode in Byapari's writing, contending that his prison episodes function as sites where personal trauma converges with collective Dalit memory, thereby transforming individual bitterness into political testimony.

Other critics have approached Byapari's fiction through the lens of subaltern studies. Bandyopadhyay (2020) draws on Guha's subaltern framework to argue that Byapari's characters resist the totalising narrative of the nation-state by articulating their own counter-history from within the prison walls. Sen (2021), meanwhile, focuses on the linguistic register of Byapari's prose, noting that his deliberate use of coarse, vernacular Bengali destabilises the sanitised literary language traditionally used to depict incarceration, thereby intensifying the emotional authenticity of bitterness expressed by his protagonists.

Despite this growing body of criticism, a discernible research gap remains. Existing studies (Mukherjee, 2018; Chakraborty, 2019) tend to focus predominantly on Byapari's autobiography rather than his novels, while others (Bandyopadhyay, 2020; Sen, 2021) address subalternity and language in general terms without a sustained, focused analysis of the prison as a specific narrative space or of bitterness as a distinct affective and structural category within his fictional works. This paper addresses that gap by offering a dedicated, text-centred examination of prison narratives and bitterness across Byapari's novels, situating these elements within both literary and sociological frameworks.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, textual-analytical research design grounded in close reading and thematic analysis. Primary texts include Manoranjan Byapari's novel *Chandal Jibon* (There's Gunpowder in the Air) and his autobiographical narrative *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, supplemented by relevant English translations and interviews. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, critical essays, and theoretical frameworks drawn from subaltern studies, Dalit literary criticism, and prison-writing scholarship. The analysis proceeds through identification of recurring motifs related to incarceration, institutional violence, and emotional response, followed by interpretive analysis situating these motifs within broader socio-political contexts of caste and displacement in postcolonial Bengal. The method adheres to UGC-recommended standards of academic rigour, originality, and ethical citation practice.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the representation of prison life in Manoranjan Byapari's novels
2. To analyse bitterness as a narrative and emotional strategy in his fiction
3. To explore the link between caste oppression and incarceration in his works
4. To assess prison narratives as sites of subaltern resistance and voice.

Discussion

Prison as a Mirror of Social Exclusion

In Byapari's fiction, the jail is never a neutral institutional space; it is depicted as a continuation of the deprivation and humiliation that his Dalit and refugee protagonists have already experienced outside its walls. The prison cell, with its overcrowding, hunger, and arbitrary cruelty, becomes a microcosm of the caste hierarchy that structures Bengali society at large. Byapari's protagonists, many of whom are drawn from his own biography as a Namasudra refugee, find that incarceration merely intensifies rather than initiates their suffering. This continuity between the world inside and outside the prison walls is central to Byapari's critique: he suggests that for the Dalit subject, freedom itself is a conditional and precarious state, and imprisonment is simply its most visible, concentrated form.

"The novelist's description of prison routines, the physical brutality of guards, and the indifference of the judicial process towards undertrial prisoners are rendered with documentary precision. This precision is not incidental; it reflects Byapari's own years spent navigating police custody and prison life during the turbulent Naxalite period in West Bengal. His narratives thereby blur the line between fiction and testimony, granting the reader an unusually direct access to the sensory and psychological realities of incarceration rarely afforded by more conventional, upper-caste literary treatments of the theme."

Bitterness as Structural Critique

Bitterness in Byapari's novels operates on two interconnected levels: as an individual emotional response to specific instances of cruelty, and as a broader structural critique of the socio-

political order that produces such cruelty. His characters do not experience bitterness as a passing mood but as an accumulated condition shaped by generations of caste discrimination, displacement, and economic exploitation. This bitterness is rendered without sentimentality; Byapari resists the temptation to romanticise suffering, instead presenting it in stark, unadorned prose that mirrors the harshness of the experiences described.

Importantly, this bitterness is not depicted as a purely destructive force. In several instances, it becomes the emotional foundation for political consciousness, propelling characters towards resistance, solidarity with fellow prisoners, and eventually, in Byapari's own case, towards literacy and authorship. The transformation of personal bitterness into narrative and political agency is one of the most distinctive features of his oeuvre, positioning his prison narratives as texts of both suffering and empowerment.

Byapari's treatment of incarceration cannot be separated from his sustained engagement with caste and Partition-induced displacement. His Namasudra protagonists arrive in West Bengal as refugees already marked by social stigma, and their subsequent encounters with the criminal justice system are shown to be shaped disproportionately by this prior marginalisation. Petty theft, vagrancy, and political activism, often the only available responses to structural poverty, become the pathways through which his characters enter the prison system. Byapari thus implicates the state's judicial and penal apparatus in the perpetuation of caste-based inequality, suggesting that the prison functions less as a corrective institution and more as an extension of caste surveillance and control.

Situating Byapari within the wider tradition of Indian prison and subaltern life-writing illuminates both his continuities with, and departures from, earlier literary models. Colonial-era prison narratives, largely authored by educated nationalist leaders, tended to frame incarceration as a badge of political honour and moral sacrifice, narrated from a position of relative social privilege. Byapari's writing inverts this paradigm: his imprisonment carries no such redemptive nationalist glamour, and his narrators are denied even the basic dignities of legal representation, timely trial, or public sympathy. In this respect his work resonates more closely with Dalit autobiographical writing such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, where incarceration and humiliation are inseparable from the everyday structures of caste rather than isolated exceptional events tied to a specific political cause.

This comparative positioning also clarifies why bitterness, rather than pride or martyrdom, becomes the dominant emotional register of Byapari's prison chapters. Where nationalist prison memoirs often narrate suffering as a necessary and ennobling sacrifice for a future free nation, Byapari's protagonists inhabit a present in which no such future has yet arrived for people of their caste and class. The absence of a redemptive national horizon intensifies the bitterness of his narrators, who experience incarceration not as a temporary interruption of freedom but as confirmation of a permanent, structurally enforced unfreedom. It is precisely this refusal of consolation that distinguishes Byapari's prison narratives within the broader canon of Indian carceral literature

Despite its grim subject matter, Byapari's prison writing is ultimately animated by an assertive narrative voice. His protagonists, and Byapari himself as narrator in his autobiographical passages, refuse the silence typically imposed upon undertrial and marginalised prisoners. Through direct, often confrontational first-person narration, Byapari reclaims agency over his own story, transforming the prison from a site of erasure into a site of testimony. This narrative reclamation aligns his work with subaltern studies' broader project of recovering historically silenced voices, while his insistence on vernacular idiom and unpolished realism further resists the aestheticisation that might otherwise dilute the political force of his testimony.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to move beyond the now well-established critical focus on Byapari's autobiography towards a more sustained engagement with his novels as independent literary achievements. While *Interrogating My Chandal Life* has understandably attracted considerable scholarly attention as a foundational Dalit autobiographical text, his fictional works extend and complicate the themes first articulated in that memoir, offering imagined protagonists whose experiences of incarceration allow for a broader, more varied exploration of bitterness, resistance, and survival than a single autobiographical voice can provide. By foregrounding the novels alongside the autobiography, this study contributes to a fuller understanding of Byapari's literary project as a whole.

Additionally, this research holds relevance for contemporary debates on prison reform, undertrial detention, and caste discrimination within India's criminal justice system, issues that remain strikingly current despite decades having passed since the period Byapari depicts. Reading his fiction alongside sociological data on caste disparities in incarceration rates reveals the continuing relevance of his critique, suggesting that Byapari's novels function not merely as historical documents but as ongoing interventions into ongoing structural injustice.

Conclusion

Manoranjan Byapari's novels offer a singular and deeply significant contribution to the literature of incarceration in India, one shaped decisively by his own experiences of caste marginalisation, displacement, and imprisonment. His prison narratives resist easy categorisation as either pure autobiography or pure fiction, instead occupying a hybrid testimonial space that exposes the structural violence embedded within India's carceral and social institutions. Bitterness, far from being a mere emotional colouring, emerges in his work as a critical lens through which the intersecting oppressions of caste, poverty, and political persecution are rendered visible. At the same time, Byapari transforms this bitterness into a source of narrative and political agency, positioning his protagonists, and himself, as active claimants of voice rather than passive victims of circumstance. This study has demonstrated that Byapari's prison narratives function as vital documents of subaltern resistance, deserving continued critical attention within Dalit literary studies, prison-writing scholarship, and postcolonial Indian literature more broadly. Future research may productively extend this analysis to a comparative study of Byapari's works alongside other Dalit and subaltern prison narratives across Indian languages.

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