



Survival and Resilience: Caste and Refugeehood in Byapari's the Runaway Boy

Muthuraju M

Research Scholar, Department of English, Maharaja's College, Mysuru, University of Mysore, India.

Email ID: muthuraj070@gmail.com

Abstract

*This article unravels Manoranjan Byapari's scathing critique of caste privilege juxtaposed against the resilience of the oppressed in *The Runaway Boy* (the first novel in the Chandal Jibon trilogy). This paper articulates the oppression of caste discrimination, refugee identity, and socioeconomic exploitation. Set in post-Partition Bengal, the novel accounts for the life of Jibon, a young boy navigating a world shaped by poverty, communal strife, and systemic exclusion. This study also highlights the writer's autobiographical elements, which imbue the narrative with authenticity. Consequently, the novel can be heralded as a personal and collective chronicle of marginalised experiences. Employing Subaltern Studies and Resistance Literature as the theoretical backdrop, this article examines the socio-political undercurrents of Byapari's critique of caste hierarchies and structural inequalities. Through close textual analysis, it emphasises the resilience and agency of the oppressed. This article accentuates its contribution to the discourse on caste and refugee issues, thereby broadening the representation of marginalised communities in Indian literature.*

Keywords: Refugee identity, Resilience, Resistance literature, Socio-economic Exploitation, Subaltern studies.

1. Introduction

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Survival and resilience are fundamental aspects of the human condition, influencing history and literature. The capacity to endure, adapt, and withstand adversity is a recurrent theme from antiquity to contemporary times. Literature affirms survival and resilience's centrality to the human experience, offering insights into human strength and adaptability. Storytelling is a form of resilience, preserving histories and experiences. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) highlights African American enslavement, linking survival with memory and reclamation. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) examines resilience against colonialism, preserving identities against systemic erasure. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) portrays caste oppression in postcolonial India, showing resilience as defiance against socio-political constraints. These texts show survival transcends mere endurance, reclaiming dignity and agency

within oppressive structures. Manoranjan Byapari's *The Runaway Boy* (2020), the first novel in the Chandal Jibon trilogy, meticulously incorporates these historical realities into the personal journey of its protagonist, Jibon. His experiences exemplify the intersection of caste and displacement, demonstrating how survival for the most marginalised individuals is not merely a matter of physical endurance but also of resisting erasure and reclaiming agency. Byapari's novel aligns with other Dalit and refugee narratives such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) and Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* (2000), presenting a scathing critique of caste-based systemic violence and state neglect. Through Jibon's tribulations, Byapari elucidates the harsh realities faced by Dalit refugees, who are doubly marginalised due to their caste status and displacement. The novel vividly depicts the daily challenges of survival, from securing basic necessities to navigating hostile social environments that perpetuate discrimination. By giving voice to these often-silenced experiences, his



work serves as a compelling testament to the resilience and humanity of those who have been historically oppressed and displaced. The Runaway Boy emerges as a powerful attestation to resilience, portraying the daily struggles of a Dalit refugee navigating a deeply casteist and exclusionary society. Jibon's journey is not only one of physical survival but also a psychological and ideological struggle against his erasure. As the novel illustrates, resilience is embedded in his ability to resist systemic oppression while forging new pathways for self-determination. The experiences of Dalit refugees highlight the complex interplay between caste-based discrimination and displacement challenges. Their narratives reveal how traditional hierarchies and prejudices were reproduced in refugee settlements, creating barriers to integration and mobility. Byapari's novel shows how hunger and deprivation remind of the unequal socio-political order, where basic sustenance is denied to Dalit refugees. "He had not seen a full plate of rice in weeks; his stomach had learned to shrink, and his dreams had learned to be smaller still" (49). The novel's depiction of the refugee experience exposes the systemic inequities that Dalit refugees faced. [1] Jibon and his family, labelled as "dispossessed," find themselves transported to government-run refugee camps where survival becomes an everyday battle: "They were the dispossessed: refugees. This was their identity now. An identity that was soaked in disaffection, neglect, and humiliation... They were now parasites. They were refugees begging India for shelter" (72). Here, the writer critiques the post-independence Indian state for failing to accommodate Dalit refugees' needs. Instead of proper rehabilitation, they are treated as burdens, highlighting how caste privilege shaped refugee policies and relief efforts. The language of "parasites" and "begging" reinforces the indignities imposed, reducing their personhood to mere existence. The discourse on survival and resilience assumes a distinctive dimension in the South Asian context, particularly regarding caste and displacement. Udit Sen's *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (2018) posits that

refugeehood in India was not homogeneous but influenced by existing social hierarchies, notably caste (36). Dalit refugees, unlike their upper-caste counterparts, faced additional marginalisation that exacerbated their dispossession (132). Byapari's novel depicts the forced resettlement of Dalit refugees, mirroring experiences in the Dandakaranya Project. Established in 1957, this scheme, framed as a solution for East Bengali refugees, served as an instrument of displacement, forcing them into inhospitable territories under the guise of national development. The novel reflects this reality through the forced relocation of Dalit refugees, portrayed as cruel abandonment by the state. Jibon's father, Garib Das, embodies the desperation of those caught in this cycle, where rehabilitation promises translate to further displacement and exploitation. Sukhadeo Thorat and Nidhi Sabharwal's *Caste and Social Exclusion* further elucidate how institutional structures reinforced caste-based disadvantages, ensuring that Dalit refugees remained at the periphery of economic and social development (3). Therefore, the intersection of caste and refugeehood establishes a framework where survival transcends mere endurance of hardship and encompasses contestation of systemic exclusion. Thorat and Sabharwal's work underscores how caste-based disadvantages were systematically reinforced, creating a dual system of exclusion for Dalit refugees—one based on refugee status and another on caste identity (7- 8). The resilience displayed by these communities was not merely about adapting to new circumstances but also challenging and attempting to transform the systems perpetuating their marginalisation. This perspective enriches our understanding of survival and resilience in displacement, highlighting how these concepts link to issues of social justice, equity, and the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression. The novel further explores how this dehumanising treatment perpetuates cycles of poverty and marginalisation for Dalit refugees. Jibon's family, like many others, is compelled to navigate a hostile environment where their basic needs are neglected and their dignity is constantly under threat. This systemic neglect not

only impacts their immediate survival but also has long-lasting consequences on their ability to integrate into society and access opportunities for upward mobility. This theme of caste-based exclusion finds a striking parallel in Jibon's father, Garib Das, whose struggles embody the generational deprivation inflicted upon Dalit refugees: "Hunger, diffidence, weariness, and humiliation, compounded over many centuries, seemed to weigh down over his body. It was as if all his limbs, and his entire existence, had been devoured by a limitless, indescribable deprivation." (4) Garib Das's experience underscores the inescapability of caste oppression, where suffering is not merely circumstantial but historical and cyclical. Thorat and Sabharwal's *Caste and Social Exclusion: Issues Related to Concept, Indicators, and Measurement* (2010) provides a framework for understanding caste-based discrimination. Their research elucidates how caste functions as an exclusionary mechanism impeding Dalits' access to economic resources, education, health services, and governance structures (3). The authors argue that traditional poverty and inequality measures often fail to capture the multidimensional nature of caste-based discrimination, necessitating more nuanced indicators. By examining the intersectionality of caste with other forms of social identity, Thorat and Sabharwal contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social exclusion in India. Byapari's *The Runaway Boy* exemplifies many exclusionary practices identified in this study. Dalit refugees, particularly Namashudras, were denied equitable rehabilitation and subjected to unfavourable inclusion wherein they were nominally included in state programmes under discriminatory conditions (8). [2] The concept of unfavourable inclusion becomes critical for understanding the marginalisation that Jibon and his family endure. Thorat and Sabharwal also discuss the economic consequences of caste exclusion, emphasising that denied access to land, capital, and employment perpetuates Dalits in poverty (13). Byapari's portrayal of Jibon's family reflects this reality, as they are systematically maintained in economic deprivation,

subjected to exploitative labour, and treated as second-class citizens within the refugee system. The theme of caste-based exclusion, as exemplified by Jibon's father Garib Das, reveals the profound and enduring impact of generational deprivation on Dalit refugees. Garib Das's physical and emotional state is portrayed as a manifestation of centuries of accumulated suffering, with hunger, diffidence, weariness, and humiliation weighing heavily upon his body and spirit (5). Hunger in *The Runaway Boy* transcends mere physical affliction; it serves as a metaphor for the systemic deprivation of Dalit refugees. Garib Das's desperate plea for rice—"No food's been cooked at home for two or three days. Haven't eaten the last two days. My wife is pregnant. She hasn't eaten anything either" (8) illustrates the brutal reality of starvation as an instrument of caste-based oppression. The humiliation is further reinforced through exploitative labour conditions. When Garib Das, starving and desperate, pleads for food, he is offered work in return: "Shibnath called out to him: 'Listen! I can't give you anything for free, and I know you won't take anything for free either. However, there's a way according to the shastras so that all sides are taken care of... You work, and I'll pay the price'" (8). The transactional nature of this exchange, where dignity is bartered for mere survival, underscores how caste-based oppression is deeply entrenched in social and economic structures. The indignities suffered by Dalit refugees extend beyond hunger to the degradation of their very existence. When Garib Das receives rice after hours of arduous labour, it is not a symbol of relief but a continuation of his oppression. "The rice was reddish and thick-grained, mixed with grit and dust. But it was rice after all" (85). The refusal to question the quality of sustenance and the compulsion to accept whatever is provided underscores the complete dehumanisation of Dalit refugees. Then comes Jibon's birth in such a world of deprivation that it becomes emblematic of the struggles that define his life. The absence of honey, a traditional offering for newborns, signifies the inescapable bitterness of his existence. "The life of one who doesn't have honey at



birth turns bitter. There's no joy or peace in a life that's bitter" (18). His survival despite extreme illness "Such a tiny boy, yet he's battling so bravely with death" (94) positions him as a figure of resilience. Yet, as the novel suggests, survival for Dalits is not synonymous with dignity. "After surviving that night, Jibon lived. [3] But the way he lived throughout his life—could that really be called living?" (94). Jibon's early brush with death foreshadows a life marked by constant struggle and hardship. His survival, while a testament to his resilience, does not guarantee a life of fulfillment or happiness. Instead, Jibon's existence becomes a poignant commentary on the systemic oppression and marginalisation faced by Dalits, questioning the very nature of what it means to truly "live" in a society that denies them basic dignity and opportunities. Despite the structural barriers imposed on Dalits, *The Runaway Boy* presents education as a crucial act of resistance. The very notion of Dalit literacy poses a significant challenge to the caste hierarchy. Jibon's father, Garib Das, comprehends this and carefully ensures his son's education. He prepares palm-leaf writing materials, crafting a pen and stick to protect Jibon from the schoolmaster's physical punishments: "Beat him as much as you want. Just see that he doesn't die!" (103). This stark acceptance of violence underscores the systemic brutality that Dalits encounter, even in educational settings. However, the novel does not present facile resolutions. [4] When the refugee camp's school is closed, it signifies the state's abandonment of Dalit education. "The school had been closed down, the doctor's clinic was no longer there, and the provision of rice, dal, and a few rupees—the last known as 'cash dole'—had been discontinued" (106). The denial of education functions as another form of disenfranchisement, reinforcing the notion that knowledge remains the preserve of the upper castes. Jibon's decision to flee is not indicative of cowardice but rather of defiance. He recognises that remaining in the refugee camp entails inevitable mortality, either through malnutrition or systemic neglect. "This life was unbearable for Jibon. Is this what life was? What was the purpose of such a life?" (166). His

departure is motivated by the aspiration for something beyond mere survival an opportunity to reclaim his humanity. "Instead of dying bit by bit each day, he had to make a final do-or-die bid and see where he could survive" (171). Calcutta, envisioned as a metropolis where "money flies in the air" (173), serves as a metaphor for possibility, albeit potentially illusory. The novel does not idealise escape but presents it as a necessity for those ensnared in cycles of deprivation. Jibon's narrative, therefore, is not merely one of survival but of an unyielding pursuit of dignity. Resilience in the novel is also portrayed through Jibon's capacity to adapt and acquire knowledge despite his lack of formal education. His practical intelligence, developed through adversity, enables him to navigate the harsh realities of refugee life: "Each day was a lesson. Each night was a test. He had to become his own teacher, his own savior" (112). This aligns with Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's assertion in *The Cracked Mirror* (2012) that lived experience is a fundamental source of knowledge production for marginalised communities, often outside formal learning institutions (57). Jibon's intellectual resilience, therefore, is not merely a survival strategy but a form of resistance against hegemonic structures that deem Dalits unworthy of education and social mobility. Furthermore, Byapari underscores the collective nature of resilience by depicting Jibon's interactions with fellow Dalit refugees. "We had nothing, yet we shared everything. Hunger had taught us cruelty, but it had also taught us kindness" (135). This also echoes Anand Teltumbde's argument in his book *The Persistence of Caste* (2010), where he emphasises that resilience in Dalit narratives often emerges from collective [5] struggle rather than individual perseverance alone (90). From the opening scenes, Byapari immerses the reader in a milieu where hunger, deprivation, and caste-based discrimination define quotidian existence. Garib Das, Jibon's father, trudges barefoot, his "feet full of cuts, his legs grimed with dust, dirt, and slime" (4). The image of his body, ravaged by malnourishment and exhaustion, symbolises the weight of generational oppression

borne by Dalit refugees. This depiction resonates with the novel's overarching theme: survival is not merely about enduring hunger but resisting the structures that perpetuate suffering. The enduring relevance of Jibon's narrative resides in its capacity to humanise complex social issues and challenge the prevailing societal norms. Through the presentation of a vivid, personal account of caste oppression and refugee experiences, Byapari's narrative bridges the gap between abstract social concepts and lived realities. This approach not only educates readers about the ongoing struggles of marginalised communities but also elicits empathy and a sense of urgency for social reform. Consequently, *The Runaway Boy* transcends its role as a literary work to become an instrument for social advocacy, compelling readers to critically examine and actively address the systemic injustices that continue to shape the lives of millions in India and beyond. Jibon's narrative is relevant to contemporary caste and refugee struggles in India. The themes of displacement, systemic neglect, and survival shape the realities of Dalit communities today. Byapari's work demands recognition and action, amplifying the voices of the oppressed and urging readers to confront systemic [6] injustices perpetuating caste hierarchies and refugee marginalisation. *The Runaway Boy* establishes itself as a crucial text in contemporary literary discourse, compelling engagement with the realities of caste and displacement through survival and resilience. Jibon's story serves as a potent analytical framework to examine persistent issues of caste discrimination and refugee struggles in modern India. The narrative's exploration of displacement, systemic neglect, and daily survival struggles mirrors the experiences of Dalit communities and other marginalised groups in contemporary society. Byapari's work functions as a catalyst for social awareness and change, compelling readers to confront the harsh realities faced by those at the bottom of India's social hierarchy. Thus, *The Runaway Boy* is a poignant testament to survival and resilience in the face of insurmountable adversity. Through the protagonist, Jibon's harrowing journey,

Byapari constructs a narrative that encapsulates the intersection of caste oppression, refugeehood, and systemic neglect. The novel does not merely depict suffering but delineates the relentless struggle of Dalits for dignity and survival in post-Partition India. It is a work of resistance, wherein survival itself becomes an act of defiance against an exploitative society that seeks to erase and exclude the most marginalised. The novel's impact extends beyond its literary merits, serving as a catalyst for social dialogue and action. By giving voice to the voiceless and illuminating often-overlooked societal issues.

Conclusion

The Runaway Boy is not merely a fictional account but a deeply autobiographical and politically charged text that challenges dominant narratives of post-Partition nation-building. Through Jibon's harrowing journey, the novel foregrounds the daily indignities and systemic neglect faced by Dalit refugees, those who are doubly marginalised by both displacement and caste hierarchy. Yet, within this landscape of suffering, *The Runaway Boy* also illuminates the indomitable spirit of resilience. By aligning personal suffering with collective histories, Byapari crafts a narrative that not only critiques social injustice but also contributes to its redress by demanding recognition and reform. The novel is thus both a literary achievement and a socio-political intervention, an urgent call to reckon with the realities of caste, displacement, and the unyielding struggle for dignity.

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