Recording the Refugee: Jatin Bala's Legacy of Persistent Subcontinental Marginality

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Abstract:
This paper seeks to situate the literary expressions of Bengali Dalit refugee writer Sri Jatin Bala amidst the paradigmatic terms ‘refugee’ and ‘exile’, and their political, humanitarian, cultural and literary ramifications. His autobiographical novel “Shikarh-chhēnra Jibon” (My Uprooted Life) is one of the few Indian Refugee Dalit Autobiographies in existence. In what way does JatinBala’s claims of uniqueness of refugee narrative answer to the present debates of marginality centred inside and outside the Indian national boundaries? - is a question this paper goes on to explore. The exile in Edward Said both distinguishes between the refugee and the exile, and yet agrees to their interdependence for a meaningful existence. On the other side of the spectrum, exiled critics like Hannah Arendt raise humanitarian doubts about the forced speechlessness and amnesia of the refugee community for the sake of rehabilitation. How does JatinBala’s literary expression negotiate the interstices of these marginality theories and to what gains, is a dilemma this paper persistently seeks to unravel. In conclusion, this paper juxtaposes JatinBala’s contemporary existential narrative against the persistently-ticking Rohingya humanitarian time-bomb that threatens to engulf the Indian sub-continent, and seeks to discover certain common parameters of analysis. This article is divided into three parts. The first part enquires the implications of ‘Refugee’ versus ‘Exile’ theories. The second part finds its way forward by exploring how JatinBala’s works reflect the exigencies of these theories. In the third part, it then investigates very briefly how the similarities and challenges inherent in this discussion respond to the Rohingya crisis which is reaching explosive proportions in Bangladesh, with devastating consequences for the entire Asian subcontinent.

Keywords:  Marginality; Refugee; Exile; Literary Narrative; East Bengal; Dalit; Rohingya.

The spatial and social displacement of people is accelerating all around the world. In such a scenario, words like ‘refugee’ and ‘exile’ have become common parlance. However, subtle differences exist in their configuration. They are certainly not synonymous terms. Firstly, the term ‘refugee’ is supported and monitored within a legal architecture and framework. There is no legal support for the term ‘exile’, but the latter has powerful cultural ramifications. Secondly, the ‘refugee’ lives in a situation of extreme physical threat. The ‘exile’, on the other hand, signals psychic and social distress more than physical threat to existence. Thirdly, the figure of the ‘refugee’ is invoked more in geo-political discussions, as a victim of sectarian, communal or border conflicts. The figure of the ‘exile’ enjoys more literary sympathy as an uprooted and detached person uniquely able and eventually obliged to synthesize. Exile scholars go beyond boundaries to read, discuss, debate and compare transnationally. Fourthly, the status of the ‘refugee’ is always forced. But for an ‘exile’, his/her status can be forced or unforced. For Edward Said, the status of the ‘exile’ is a condition of permanent sorrow. Fifthly, the ‘refugee’ can go back or can be repatriated. In contrast, the ‘exile’ is forever handicapped by the loss of something from the past now permanently out of reach. This condition can be seen in the desperation Said (1986) felt as a Palestinian in the USA.
Said observes (1979, 1986) that the ‘refugee’ and the ‘exile’ can co-exist. He finds a similarity between the legally certified bereft figure of the refugee, and the exile who speaks of his loss through narrative and memoir, a characteristic sometimes also shared by the refugee. The muteness of the refugee is a defence mechanism against losing his identity into the mainstream and merely exist as a sample of “good reads”. Thus, the journey from the refugee to the exile, according to Said, is a journey from mute suffering to expression, but not reconciliation. It is definitely an uncomfortable and humiliating experience. Important exile writers include Caribbean Nobel Prize winners V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott.

The interesting observation is that Refugee Law, elaborated in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, is grounded in Article 14 of the UDHR or Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees to those who are persecuted the right to seek asylum in another country, but not necessarily the right to enjoy shelter and to be received as citizens.

Anthropologist Lisa Malkki (1992) says that refugees are silenced subjects introduced to the mainstream. In order to make this merger successful, refugees are coerced to give up their history, their politics, and their narratives of the past. This is precisely what happened in the case of the East Bengal Dalit refugees.

A refugee is a figure in flight, and in denial of his identity. On the other hand, the exile is a rebel who seeks to assert his past and his roots through his narrative. As both Said (2000) and Hannah Arendt (1973) stress, amnesia is never the answer to a legacy of domination.

Born in 1949 in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, Bengali Dalit writer JatinBala has several poetry anthologies, two novels, a collection of short stories, a series of research articles on the Namashudra and Motua communities in Bengal, and a slew of awards to his credit. Having lost his parents at a very early age, Bala survived with his brothers’ support and was forced to eke out a treacherous living in post-Partition refugee camps in West Bengal. In this life full of struggle, education proved to be his only succour. His major works include several anthologies; a short story collection; AmriterJibonerKathaa (A Life of Elixir), a novel; Dalit SahityaAndolan — a collection of research articles; Shikarh-chheñraJibon (My Uprooted Life) - his autobiographical novel; and, A History of the Namashudra and Motua Communities.

Apropos the categories of the ‘refugee’ and the ‘exile’, that co-exist yet have important diverse characteristics, the following observations come to arise upon a close analysis of these texts by the author —

1. Documentation of the Partition effects upon Bengal and Bengalis is very less, unlike in the other partitioned state, the Punjab. In Bengal, it is mainly limited to academic books and research articles, with only two prominent non-fiction texts - Urvashi Butalia’s The Other Side of Silence (1998) and Rupkumar Barman’s Partition of India and its Impact on the Scheduled Castes of Bengal (2012) - and RitwikGhatak’s film based on the book TitasEkti Nadir Naam (1973) discussing the phenomenon of the Dalit refugee. The two proposed Kolkata Partition Museum Projects are totally oblivious as yet of the Dalit angle. As Sri JatinBala says in an interview to Dr. Jaydeep Sarangi, “…the partition of India has been particularly tragic for the Namashudras.” He clarifies that he gives importance to description of life at the three refugee camps over personal history in My Uprooted Life, but regrets that none of the Dalit refugee narratives are yet part of the canon.

2. We tend to visualise refugees as a homogeneous group of people, what can be termed as “the myth of homogeneity”. However, the caste-segregation of East Bengal refugees was present even before the Partition. The Namashudra Community of JatinBala performed menial tasks, signifying
the physical and social boundaries of their villages in East Bengal. Thus, words like *chandal/charal, chamar* and *chasha/chashare* came to signify entire communities.

This politics of segregation was carried forward post-Partition, when upper-caste refugees secured respectable rehabilitation with their relatives in West Bengal, education and jobs, while the lower-caste refugees were rehabilitated in the inhospitable terrains of the transit camps, the Andaman Islands and the Dandakaranya forests of Odisha.

Thus, the entire process of crossing over is marked by dual caste and refugee identities – a Double Identity.

3. The history of the Namashudras and their role in spreading the boon of education among the backward communities can be known by reading the works of Sri JatinBala - particularly the contributions of Sri Harichand and Sri Guruchand Thakur; his own family's role in establishing schools for backward caste children, and his own struggle to gain education even by studying under railway station lights, that sustained him several times when he contemplated suicide. Thus, the seeds of the transition from refugee to exile, and also a refusal to be the silent subject a.k.a. the refugee are sown early on. The self-educated exile refuses to let his narrative disappear and pens his thoughts with dogged and disturbing tenacity.

4. There is the persistent trauma of the exile which Sri JatinBala says has poisoned every moment of his life despite his journey from education to expression to a government job to recognition to translation. “Those camps may well have been demolished but horrifying memories of those days still haunt me….That’s why you find it in my creative writing.” (Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi)

5. Sri JatinBala’s works highlight the contrast between mainstream Bengali refugee narratives and Dalit refugee narratives (all emerging between 2010 and 2018), just as Manoranjan Byapari, another Dalit refugee autobiographer, points out the difference between Manik Bandyopadhyay’s Brahminical narrative *Padma Nadir Majhi* and Adwaita Mallabarman’s *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*. Thus, a unanimous or homogeneous narrative of refugee trauma is not achievable. Sri Bala mentions in the same interview : “There were some who did not want to go out of Bengal to be rehabilitated at the Balagarh camp at Dandakaranya….the refugees embarked on a hunger strike and I got directly involved in it…..Naturally my autobiographical novel stands out for being more of a realistic portrayal of the larger Dalit condition than a projection of the plight of an individual Dalit.”

6. Sri JatinBala’s works also focus on a fabricated story of self-respect; they reveal how upper-caste Bengali refugees have been called enterprising for settling themselves through independent efforts, while the Dalit Bengali refugees are labelled as lazy for depending on government dole, psychologically branding them as uncivilised and lacking the will to excel — in short, creating an Other of the Other.

7. Sri JatinBala’s works also help us to understand the political rise of the Namashudra and Motua communities. The alienation from Left politics after the Marichjhapi (1979) and Nandigram (2007) incidents, and a definite leaning towards the Trinamul Congress camp has resulted in splitting the two communities ideologically and politically. Also, Left-leaning refugee activists have been accused of sidelining their Dalit identities, as Leftist politics denies caste problem in West Bengal. Sri Bala also wonders how they should situate the dual identity of Dalit and refugee within the wider caste movement in India.

8. The notable interstices in Sri Bala’s refugee narrative, especially with regard to gender, need a special mention. There is only passing reference to sexual labour of Dalit refugee women as something perhaps unpalatable to the author. The dual labour of Bengali Dalit refugee women both inside and outside their homes to sustain their families is ignored. Though the plight of Bengali Dalit
women in the pre-Partition era is highlighted through descriptions of some of the author’s female relatives as also descriptions of camp torture on Dalit refugee women, there is no psychological profiling of these women. His narrative is also absolutely silent about patriarchy in refugee Dalit homes.

The paper takes a brief look at the Rohingya exodus taking place into Bangladesh, which presents a terrible tragedy comparable in scale and effect to the East Bengal refugee crisis, with certain similarities and contrasts in the displacement of marginal communities. The Rohingyas are Muslims unaccepted by the predominantly Buddhist community of Myanmar, and labelled as illegal Bangladeshi settlers. Currently there are more than one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. The problem originated in 1970s and came to a head in August 2017; and once again, Bangladesh is the backdrop to this unfurling human tragedy, described by the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres as “the world’s fastest-developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare.”

“The partition of a country, of a nation, did not signify merely political or geographical division — it also bisected, rather tore apart, the Namahshudra nation’s society, culture, ethos, language and way of living….For the brunt of the Partition is borne by the countless homeless people of the Namahshudra community to this date.” (Bala; My Uprooted Life; pg.36; translated by this author.) Just as the East Bengal refugees were escaping from a communal backlash in Bangladesh, the Rohingyas are also escaping religious persecution. However, as Sri Bala describes in his autobiographical novel, it would be too simple to consider only the religious angle; primarily, the Rohingya crisis is also a backlash against economically and socially backward minorities who have been turned homeless and rootless again and again.

The social and economic ramifications of the Rohingya refugee crisis are horrific. The Rohingyas have been involved in serious clashes with the locals over land. Crops and the tourism industry have suffered considerable damages due to these animosities. Petty crimes and smuggling are on the rise in the Teknaf region due to lack of education and jobs, which was not the case for the East Bengal refugees. Bangladesh, however, lacks a Refugee Commission to deal with such issues.

Militarily, the influx of Rohingya refugees has caused changes in the demographic composition of the settler areas. Security fears are also being fanned because of ARSA’s (ArakanRohingya Salvation Army, the militant arm of the Rohingya population) links to terrorists. To cite just one example, in India the 2014 Bodh Gaya bomb blast case was erroneously linked to Rohingya refugees. This indicates that there is an upper-caste majoritarian backlash against these refugees in India too, just as against the Dalit refugees from East Bengal.

The struggle against environment is immense too, as elephant corridors have been destroyed in building the Rohingya refugee camps. Because of these issues and constant bickering with the local populace, the administration has pondered upon shifting these refugees to an inhospitable island - Bhashan Char - of Bangladesh. Similar settlements of East Bengal refugees on inhospitable terrain and the hardships involved to merely survive and eke out a living have been described graphically by Sri Jatin Bala in his autobiography. His resolve to become the exiled narrator came from his humiliation as worse than a second-class citizen in refugee camps of the nation he was supposed to call his own because of his religious identity.

Childhood and its struggles against a hostile world, form a large part of Jatin Bala’s narrative. Rohingya children, too, are affected by malnutrition and trauma, used as distributors of “Mad Drugs” and for child-trafficking. BRAC, the Bangladesh NGO, and UNICEF are setting up temporary schools and madarsas for these displaced children. The lack of any formal education among these children
and their parents signals the loss of a major chunk of historical narrative of persecution. But the steely resolve of the exile never to forget, as when Sri Bala describes surviving similar persecution as a child, remains something to hope for. “Just think of it - a boy, just about four and a half years of age, walking into a refugee camp in India...I was uprooted, I was a Dalit...The day I had fallen to the ground with a headload of hay, I had sworn that I would educate myself and that was the day I wrote my first letters.” (Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi). Perhaps, when better educational opportunities emerge for the Rohingya refugees, they too would shame violators of humanity with experiential narratives.

Lack of expression is the most problematic aspect of the Rohingya crisis. Though a number of research papers and news articles are being written about their humanitarian plight, no first-person authentic narrative accounts are emerging, primarily due to lack of education among Rohingya refugees. The only major literary expression so far has been at the Dhaka Literary Festival of 2017, where concerns about their plight were raised by European film stars and journalists alike. In this context, Sri Bala’s scathing criticism is particularly memorable. “The life lived by Dalits in Bengal in particular and in India at large, is very different from the way it is portrayed in modern Bengali literature. It is a make-believe world.” (Interview with Jaydeep Sarangi) The bhadralok Bengali intelligentsia on both sides of the border needs to take note of this criticism of its complacency. It needs to stop looking the other way whenever the Rohingya refugee looms on the horizon, and instead approach the new marginal identity with empathy and recognition in its discussions and literary endeavours, and more importantly empower the Rohingya ‘Other’ with narrative rights.

In the absence of refugee laws in Bangladesh - and without the right to freedom of movement, education and employment - the Rohingya refugee narrative is effectively silenced through five decades of informed institutional and intellectual neglect. In conclusion, we may note, that as we see the Bengali Dalit refugee break free of his clandestine status and pen the pain of an exile in solidarity with marginalised and displaced people all over the world, we hope that the subcontinent comes to grips with history and with its subhuman treatment of the Rohingya refugees, and charts the course to a new dawn.

“Tell me, what is my country?
The country where I was born
Why am I a foreigner?
I have only one name : refugee.
I have no nationality
I carry my baggage as a refugee
Tell me,
What is my land?
Where can I stand for a while?....

(Extract from REFUGEE, by JatinBala, translated by Jaydeep Sarangi)

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