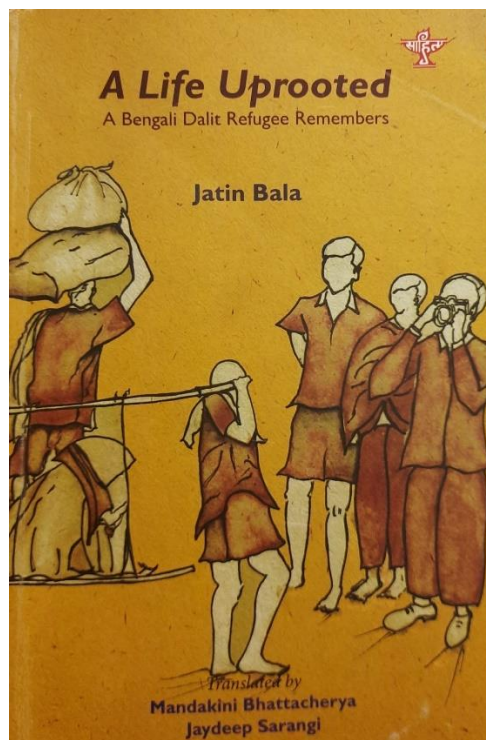


Jatin Bala. 2022. *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers*. Trans. Mandakini Bhattacherya and Jaydeep Sarangi. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 291 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5548-4048



Jatin Bala's *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* is translated from the Bangla memoir of the author's incessant rootlessness as a Dalit refugee tossed in the maelstroms of Indian Partition-Independence. Notwithstanding waves of Partition Studies, the memoir is unique as a text of double marginalisation and displacement of the anti-Brahminical Namahshudra community of Eastern Bengal. True to Dalit literary aesthetics, it is both a first-person representation of endured trauma and an insightful critique of nation formation. Thus, caste subalternity is Bala's lens for assaying a protracted three-fold ordeal – loss of homeland, dehumanised existence in Indian refugee camps, and the unending struggle for rehabilitation.

To adequately comprehend the extent of each of these ordeals unrelentingly represented through twenty-seven chapters, one can divide the memoir into four evolutionary phases. The first (Chapters 1-13) deals with post-partition violence that overwhelms the Namashudra community in East Pakistan. They are thus compelled on the uncertain exodus trail towards West Bengal, India. The second (Chapters 14-17) and third (Chapters 18-22) sections

graphically represent the brokenness of an uprooted people, and the inhumanity they are subjected to in a new land. Life in successive camps is circumscribed by the dual slurs of refugee (derogatorily labelled *bangaal* and *ripu*) and untouchables. From the latter half of the third section, there are glimpses of an activist in the making in Bala. This takes further shape in the Dalit refugee movement for rehabilitation that comes in the fourth phase (Chapters 23-27). The struggle is yet to see light of day when the narrative ends. This denial of a happy ending makes *A Life Uprooted* a realistic image of a post-partition subaltern India that is largely obfuscated in mainstream historiography.

The memoir begins in medias res amidst screams of “F...I...R...E... F...I...R...E...” (Bala 1) and cries for help in the village of Bolpota in Jessore district sometime in 1954. The lower caste minorities are under attack; the higher castes having vacated their properties and moved to the relative safety of West Bengal. Bala (then a five-year-old boy) recounts the incident of arson that abruptly ends a hitherto idyllic life, and forces an entire Dalit clan to flee. His memoir from a vantage point shows how similarly persecuted Muslims from India (West Bengal) turn persecutors of Hindus in East Pakistan.

With memory as go-between, the first section of the narrative recalls a medley of sights, sounds, even smells of emergent refugee life through a child’s bafflement. These are interspersed with throwbacks into the history of the Bala clan. The vignettes of recollection are compelling in their minutiae, while the ambivalence of Partition-Freedom-Riot uttered in one breath strikes at the fallacy of nationalist utopias. Bala insistently describes their passage through deserted villages punctuated by the stench of dead bodies amidst the surreality of beasts of prey. Simultaneously we also see the violation of women, and the blurring of lines between life and death both physically and metaphorically. The narrative strand lends complexity to the memoir through its analysis of the ensuing impacts of communal politics. Bala scathingly bares the subversive nature of caste practices fracturing Hindu and Muslim societies alike, revealing the complicity of caste-class in engendering partition.

The second phase is all about the ‘bangaal ripu’s’ perforce endurance of the proverbial “Tryst with Destiny” along the displacement trail. Whether in East Pakistan or in India, atrocities and apathy of the new nation state(s) are writ large everywhere. For instance, one can classify three distinct destinations for the ‘squatters’ on Sealdah railway station – transit camps or platforms, footpaths/roads, or the undertakers’ carts. Bala’s first destination is the Kunti Transit Camp in the district of Hooghly.

The third phase of the memoir again displaces Bala first to the Bhandarhati Workside Camp, and then to the Bolagarh Refugee Camp. Significantly, it is at Bhandarhati that the demand for rehabilitation is first heard, and the camp is soon dismantled violently. These cumulative travails lead the

young boy to grasp the crux, that is, “refugee life was truly tough, and it was tougher to escape from it” (Bala 167). Life at the third camp is a reiteration of the fact that the Indian administration would “never allow the (lower caste) people of East Bengal to live honourably, or even exist comfortably, in this country” (Bala179). The local population is equally wary of the refugees, both as intruders and with their caste ordained untouchability. The furore over a woman from the camp drawing water from a community tube well connects *A Life Uprooted* with Ambedkarite movements and the larger stream of Dalit literature. The government’s coercive tactic of discontinuing dole to further displace Bengali refugees to uninhabited parts of Central India gathers menacing proportions in this phase. It is perceived as a renewed caste conspiracy to sever the uprooted anew from their ethnic moorings in language and culture. This runs parallel with Bala’s travails as a child agricultural labourer and his ardent efforts at pursuing studies. Cumulatively, this section reveals the hardships that confront a Dalit subject in search of sustainable living.

As the movement for rehabilitation in Bengal peaks in the fourth and final phase, the memoir embraces the Dalit literary aesthetic paradigm of evolution from erasure to assertion. There is palpable action in the constitution of the Bolagarh Camp Refugee Welfare Association, which becomes part of the larger refugee movement. An interesting aspect of this phase is the visibility of the female subaltern as a figure of protest. She is eulogised as the mother figure representing not just the nation as abstraction, but is also the point of convergence for the mother tongue, its culture and the egalitarian ideal. The memoir ends with Bala himself beaten up in police action of the worst kind. He falls flat on the metalled road – profusely bleeding, uneasy of breath, and numbed all over. Yet, as he keeps crawling ahead, Bala feels a blazing “F...I...R...E” in his defiant eyes. While this recalls the opening of *A Life Uprooted*, over the span of the narrative the bewildered child has definitely evolved into an adolescent activist.

As translators, Mandakini Bhattacherya and Jaydeep Sarangi deserve praise for identifying the memoir as one that merits wider dissemination for its latent “message of courage, determination and hope” (xx). Their “Introduction” serves to contextualise the caste system as one of graded inequality, and hence speaks for the subaltern. They importantly identify the distinguishing feature of the Dalit movement in Bengal as amalgamating dual paradigms of refugee and caste identity. Bala himself refers to this work as fictional autobiography; the “Introduction” clarifies that the text is a blend of fact and imagination working on true details. In this context, the chapter titles bear special significance for their evocative choice of words. As a language, Bangla is more layered than English, and the translators have dealt with the challenges of translation adeptly. On one hand they have remained entirely faithful to the original work; on the other, they

have candidly mentioned that dialectical inflections have been ironed out with standard English. It is true that any act of translation negotiates not just source and destination languages but cultures too. With *A Life Uprooted* however, the 'ironing out' does not impede the non-native readers' understanding; as the crux of the narrative lies in the authenticity of Bala's reminiscences. The translators have faithfully brought out this essence for us.

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