

Undecidable Spaces: Rethinking Caste and the Technologies of Abandonment in Manoranjan Byapari

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Unfolding Space in Dalit Experience

Several attempts to understand the existence of Casteism and its manifold manifestations in Indian modernity has been made so far. Caste could be thought of as a historical as well as anthropological reality, which undergoes various transformations over time. This way of thinking can imagine the advent of modernity and its spread as a process of gradual annihilation of caste with the democratic ideals of liberty and equality slowly seeping in. It may also suggest other simultaneous factors such as the impact of colonialism or capitalism, reconfiguring and perpetuating caste hierarchies instead of their dispersion. The latter process may continue Casteism without acknowledging it in the egalitarian society that apparently believes in the democratic principles. Caste is pushed back into the unconscious of the privileged through its non-acknowledgement and unmention. The historical process of such negation could lead us towards another way of thinking caste. From diachronic analysis we may hence move towards a more structuralist analysis of caste which gets activated through a concatenation of synchronic factors working together, something that is close to what Ambedkar calls “social order”.¹ He brings in the question of ideology in his own way, something the Marxists in the latter half of 20th century would be compelled to grapple with. Arguing the economic determinism of the Socialists of his time in 1936, he comments (much before Althusser formulated his ideas of ‘overdetermination’ (Althusser “Contradiction and Overdetermination” 87-127) and ‘ideological state apparatuses’ (Althusser “Ideology” 232-272) or the English edition of Marx’s *The German Ideology* (was in circulation and discussion):

That the social order prevalent in India is a matter which a socialist must deal with; that unless he does so he cannot achieve his revolution; and that if he does achieve it as a result of good fortune, he will have to grapple with the social order if he wishes to realise his ideal—is a proposition which in my opinion is incontrovertible. (Ambedkar *Annihilation* 39)

Ambedkar defined this social order as comparable to religious discourse, which enslaves man to its propositions and injunctions, something which we may compare with the continuity of religion’s false consciousness in modernity in the form of ideology, often expressed in Marx. The continuity of the religious order in modern secular India is evident as “even such things as strikes and elections, so easily takes a religious turn and can so easily be given a religious twist” (Ambedkar *Annihilation* 227). Ambedkar’s assertion of the continuity of the religious within the secular could be read on one hand as the inability of Indian democracy to overcome the social order sanctioned and shaped by religious discourse. On the other hand, we can also speculate how the religious gets reabsorbed and reshaped within the structure of modernity and its own process of exploitation and alienation (Sheth 2502-2510). The apparent non-existence of caste or an erasure of the caste question could be one such appropriation by absorption of the negation, or a negation of the negation, suggesting, as if caste does not exist anymore in the modern governmental apparatus. This negation instead of being suggestive of a gradual erosion of the caste system shows its rendering unspeakable. The spaces of modernity are produced by a rarefaction of the unmodern, a pushing back and appropriation. In Indian context that

produces the uncanny² of the caste system. On one hand, it is something which becomes most familiar to the experience of modern secular India by processes of naturalization and normalization integrated to the new world order of capitalism and its own form of alienation. On the other hand, it is most unfamiliar because it challenges the internal logic of equality and liberty in democracy. If the human unconscious is made of language then caste is pushed back from the system of signs in the society. Language here does not necessarily mean words and alphabets but also the system of social signifiers – the series of practices, beliefs, mores, rites, norms or the different ways of living.

One such structural imperative that produces and maintains the modern normal is the organization of space. Space becomes a language in itself. Organization of space in a modern urban locale is apparently secular and unmotivated by any divine or religious principal. Yet it always functions on the basis of exclusion. Simultaneously the dread of the excluded returning to haunt the stability of the city structures its organization of space. The city we shall see is also a microcosm of democratic society as the people enjoying rights and entitlement in it are often called citizens. In this paper we shall see how the pre-modern system of Casteism has similarities with as well as differences from the modern democratic system of governance across the world and its distinct form of abandonment. It shall also be suggested how abandonment becomes an indispensable technique through which a governmental apparatus comes into existence both in pre-modern Caste Society in Indian subcontinent as well as modern democracy. It can also be shown how earlier forms of abandonment and exclusion continues in new forms of organization of spaces and identities and continues to perform newer ways towards abandonment.

For understanding abandonment in modern biopolitics and its complicity and continuity in Indian caste system I have selected the context of Bengal where for a long time owing to dominance of traditional left the class question has obfuscated the discussion and foregrounding of the caste question. Therefore, being an apparently democratic liberal structure where untouchability does not surface with such intensity as other areas of India, Bengal can be a suitable example of how old forms of hierarchies like caste system gets appropriated and renewed in modern bio-governance, based on reasonable management of people. Likewise, caste also affects and haunts the logical democratic arrangements of life in a modern Indian city like Kolkata. This work shall focus but not remain limited to the Bengali Dalit author Manoranjan Byapari, coming from *Namashudra*, a Dalit sub-caste in Bengal who was once a rickshaw-puller by profession. Autobiographical form of writing resurfaces the quintessential question of caste pushed back in modern normative arrangement of space and its naturalized forms of exclusion. Byapari in the second volume of his autobiography renders his peculiar relationship with the city that unsettles the binary between positive and negative memory, sense of belonging and unbelonging. He roots as well as routes his remembrance to the city of Kolkata which unwelcomes the downtrodden and destitute people like him. Vacuity of his nostalgic connection with the hostile space of (un)belonging startles the reader whose psyche is trained to separate positive and negative memories. The migrant *Namashudras* who came from Bangladesh after Indian decolonization and partition were driven out from West Bengal to the barren, geographically hostile Dandakaranya. After years the author returns to Kolkata and remembers in fondness as well as pain –

This is the city which from boyhood to youth gave nothing but hunger, humiliation and torture. On several occasions it tried to kill me. Closing my eyes I can still see amidst dark recesses of time the assassin's face waiting for me with open dagger. This

city is my enemy; there is no question of loving it. But why still my heart aches? Why eyes get filled with tears? (Byapari *Itibritte* Vol. 2, 24)

The experience of Byapari is not just economic pauperization but effectively a result of historical caste discrimination which could be discussed further with the help of scholars such as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (Bandyopadhyay 191-239) or Dwaipayan Sen (Sen “A Caste Hindu State” 211-237; “How the Dalits of Bengal”) who worked on Dalit migration in West Bengal. My objective here however is to show how the unsayable³ resurfaces in their writing in terms of their belonging or unbelonging to the space. Dalit experience of spatial segregation and abandonment in pre-modern India, ruled by religious principles of *varnashrama* continues under modern democratic bio-governance, even when it is not pronounced or acknowledged. Whatever was thought to have been erased under modernity returns in the experiential narratives in the form of unsayable in mainstream speech/act. Experientially, abandonment of caste system finds a new garb in democracy. One way of such resurfacing occurs in the phenomenology of space as it gets described and articulated in life-writings. It is curious to note that a scholar like Joel Lee has used his field interview simultaneously with a memoir to illustrate the sensory experience of caste and its relationship with the space (Lee 470-490).

This also comments in some way on the nature of Dalit memoirs, which is less similar to a consciously crafted narrative of life – an autobiography and more to a field interview characterized by orality and less premeditated in nature. Lee shows in his research how the odorous experience of space performs in the subjective narrative of a Dalit with reference to his field research in Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh and Hindi writer Omprakash Valmiki’s memoir *Jhootan*. The gathering of the being of a Dalit happens through such spatially demarcated sense experience. This is how the notion of space shifts in our understanding from exteriority to interiority vis-à-vis caste identity. We get thus an embodied idea of space inseparable from the way Dalit interlocutors of the researcher experienced and articulated it. Here the experience of space in terms of environmental injustice, and social compulsion of the Dalit scavenger caste to live near filth – its odorous sensory experience, even in a modern democratic Indian city puts forth a narrative challenge towards the discourse of normalization of destitute population living in unclean spaces. We need to remember here how in the context of West Bengal the Dalit *Namashudra* migrants from Bangladesh were not tolerated in the mainstream city of Kolkata and were forced to live in temporary settlements or camps with improper sanitization and living condition (Sen “How the Dalits of Bengal”). They were often forced to occupy government lands such as the property of Indian Railways located beside the tracks or squat upon the unclaimed spaces (Chakrabarti 6-32, 405-436). These were spaces always under the threat of eviction and did not have proper living condition.

The Dalits have been thrown in permanent environmental and spatial precarity under modern democracy which continues in another form the historical injustice meted to them from centuries. The conceptualization of space and property in terms of ownership and possession in modern democracy is partly responsible for this discrimination. The alienation of the proletariat in capitalism resulting in the destitution of those who get alienated in the process of formation of private property follows the local historical trajectory of existing caste hierarchies in Indian subcontinent. The outcaste has been the one who structurally could not have the right to space and is associated with exclusion and expendability. The deep association of waste with the outcaste from antiquity to modernity vouchsafe for that.

The textual and linguistic strategy of Dalit writing is different from upper caste articulations about social discrimination. Firstly it happens in terms of a certain lack of absolute explicability and objectivity. Secondly, it often does not give us a grand narrative about lower caste existence as such. They of course create their own myths, stories and discourses but they may not be integrated and directed towards giving a complete picture of their life. Their articulation is descriptive of their ways of being, their patterns of habitation and it talks about their belonging and unbelonging to that horizon of experience. Unlike the invisibilization of space in a dominant discourse or its conceptual separation from human experience (which could be subjected to such spatial organization and yet the being of such subjectivity could not be an integral part of the space), this conceptual separation of space and subjecthood is challenged in Dalit narratives. Dalit experience renders an embodiment of space as well as a spatiality of the being. The place of habitation of a Dalit is connected to his experience of the being as much as the place itself is produced by the Dalits collectively through their act of belonging. The belonging to a place could as much be an unbelonging for them. The contention here is to underscore this process of unbelonging that haunts each discourse of belonging to a place, a state or a country. In case of a Dalit we shall see that subjectivity is characterized more conspicuously in terms of a phenomenology of unbelonging – the experience of abandonment or loss of entitlement to the space. The relationship of a Dalit to space as such could be read in terms of negativity only. Therefore, there cannot be any grand narrative or objective stable story of what is a Dalit and what is her experience of space. There is some amount of vagueness as opposed to complete narration. The vagabond status of the outcaste may erupt as a sense of uncanny in its narrative vagueness⁴ to the apparently stable self of a society of sedentary people having spatial imagination based on notions of private property and rootedness to a space. The negative experience of space in Dalit writing cannot be connected into a grand narrative unless it is mutated into positive artefacts that could be woven into a tale. In different forms of power the rights bearing individuals are defined in terms of their separation from those who do not possess the rights or are not fit for possessing them. The abandonment of the latter produces the idea of a proper citizen. My contention is also to look into the structure of abandonment in Indian Caste society and see how it affects and constitutes the subjectivity of a Dalit. The peculiarity of abandonment in modern Indian democracy is mediated and structured by Caste. Similarly, Caste itself is maintained through modern forms of abandonment and its incumbent precarity on Dalit selves.

Caste and Cartographies of Abandonment

The question of caste is always about inside and outside – about inclusion and exclusion. Sudipta Kaviraj argues in one of his essays on public space and filth that the notions of *ghare* and *bair* in Bengali do not simply mean home and the world. In translation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* as *The Home and the World*, the literal meaning of the terms as inside and outside is overridden to suggest the western way of understanding the difference between the private and the public. For Kaviraj, in the Indian context, the politics of private and public spaces also gets reshaped by ideas of inside and outside or self and the other (93). One has to conceptualize space in terms of who is an insider and who is an outsider or other to it. What in modern form of bio-governance exists for countries and citizenship, in Indians subcontinent existed for centuries. Indian caste system has always insinuated a concept of space in terms of hierarchical right to belonging. Unlike democratic principal of all citizens having similar rights to open public spaces where their action is regulated by hospitality and civic behaviour towards other citizens, in a caste society villages and *muhallas* would be distributed

in terms of caste origin and the outcaste would not be allowed to belong to the spaces of the upper castes or shall have restrictive belonging. In this context we need to remember that even in modern democracy, flourished in Europe and spread to the rest of the world in the 18th century, the concept of right to space, civic rights or citizenship was officially always restrictive.

The boundaries of a nation-state have to be secured with restrictive and conditional entry. The inside of the state has to be secured from those not confirming to the reason of the state – vagabonds, mad men, rebels and delinquents. They have to be imprisoned or separated from the open spaces. The open spaces are meant for the bourgeois citizen-subject who could be managed by the state and used by the economic structure productively. Foucault has talked about the great confinement of potentially threatening individuals who can challenge the existing mode of power (Foucault “The Great Confinement”, 44-77). They had to be separated from the public sphere like the lepers or the plagued, out of fear of anarchy and contiguous spread of social malady. The fear of pollution opposed to purity has been cross-cultural and cross-temporal where the polluted individuals had to be segregated for the health of the nation. In Indian caste society we see the same performed with the name of the outcaste. In modern democracy originated in Europe and spread across the world we observe its reincarnation in terms of reasonable management of space. The body of the king has been displaced into the body politic where instead of the king’s body, the rights of the citizens had to be secured. In modern democracy the historical stereotyping of the Blacks in the US or Dalits in India as predominantly delinquent in nature, as unruly, unclean and potentially ill continues to abandon them from right to space.

Just like the Blacks in the US (Davis 10), a large number of prisoners and mentally ill patients who are incarcerated in jails and asylums often come from the marginalized castes (Yengde). Even within the city the Dalits often flock in *bustees* and slums away from the clean corridors of upper-class and middle-class people. A concomitance of caste and class positions forces the destitute people to be separated from the mainstream, living a more precarious existence than others. Following Agamben we can think of this abandonment that flows parallel to politics of life or biopolitics aimed at securing the lives of citizen-subjects.⁵ This is politics of death as many living in these precarious conditions are threatened by environmental hazards, chronic illness and threat of eviction. There is no guarantee of education, income and security of life. We have seen how Byapari’s experience of the city is mediated by his threat to life. He like many others have resorted to criminal activities to fight back their condition of destitution and thus makes the imagination of the nation-state about the potential delinquency of the outcaste people come true. Being a criminal or engaging in unlawful activities increases their precarity, exposing them further to possibility of incarceration and police atrocities. They also become vulnerable to murder by rival group of criminals or political goons. Death becomes the shadow under which the subjecthood of a poor Dalit man would flourish. Yet this thanatopolitics (Agamben 101) is different from the Nazi concentration camps and sufferers of holocaust described by Agamben or ‘indefinite detention’ of terrorists discussed by Butler (50-100). The arrangement of Dalits in modern democratic city shares a relationship of contiguity and continuity with the mainstream population and is also a part of its economy of use. At the same time they have to be segregated. They belong to the realm of abjection necessary for the foregrounding of meaning. They are associated with waste and filth that is a part of the everyday but man wants to avoid it to live a clean life. Death being an essential part of life also needs to be segregated from the paradigm of life for it to be secured. However life itself is

haunted always by the immanent possibility of death. They share a relation of separation but also of contiguity. Here the debate between Foucault and Agamben on whether political life is chiefly biopolitical or thanatopolitical – is oriented towards preserving life or distributing death can undergo a radical shift, as the imagination of space in the context of caste would depart from the logic of separation towards logic of contiguity. The urban poor, mainly from the underprivileged caste shares a relationship of continuity and use with the mainstream upper-caste dominated society. The arrangement of space in a modern Indian city would exhibit that. Sudipta Kaviraj in his article has talked about how open urban spaces after decolonization have been gradually occupied by the urban poor who frequently disturb and destroy the cleanliness and orderliness of those places (83-113). Arguing with this work Joel Lee asserted that his interlocutors have suggested just the opposite and talked about the pouring of filth from upper caste spaces to lower caste dominated areas (472). In this essay our contention is that the separation of spaces is not absolute. Kaviraj's thinking of the transformative potential of urban poor to transmute clean and open bourgeois public spaces could be thought of as haunted by the precarity of eviction on account of illegal occupation. They cannot be romanticized as unintended rebels transforming the geopolitics of the city through their aberrant activities. There is a continuity of caste discrimination in the urban space as Joel Lee asserts –

I have argued that urbanization disrupted this spatial-sensory-social order...Yet for many others, migration to the city meant living where the municipality chose to house its sweepers, or where dominant urban communities would not hound them out: it meant living in dwellings clustered around the infrastructure of urban sanitation. Less consistently, but more toxically, than the rural Mehtartolā, the urban Valmiki *bastī* has come to perform the same referential function vis-à-vis caste ideology: it provides spatial-sensory “evidence,” however spurious, of what makes one group unlike another. (487)

Yet, despite the maintenance of this segregation, one would argue that traffic flowed between these spaces as the upper caste society both in village as well as city were always in dire need of Dalits for their menial tasks to be done. Manoranjan Byapari has written an entire novel on waste pickers in Kolkata titled *Chhera Chhera Jibon (Tattered Life)*. We see how the waste pickers are engaged in the task of scavenging but are also associated with stealing and other crimes to supplement the meagre payments they would get from selling the waste. The task of scavenging makes them essential but also a potential threat to stable bourgeois life of security and comfort. The segregation and alienation along with sharing a relationship of contiguous spaces makes the lower caste dominated urban poor dangerous and unpredictable. They constitute a kind of vagueness amidst the charted governmental arrangements of spaces and lives. Deleuze and Guattari have related the term vagueness with the nomadic communities of vagabond (367). This semantic and etymological connection becomes the anthropological signifier of natural opposition against clean governmental organization of spaces and beings. In Byapari's auto-fictional novels such as *Je Katha Itibritte Nei (The Absent Story of My Tale)* and *Chhera Chhera Jibon*, we see a host of urban poor youth, dwelling as vagabonds, occupying the governmental and public spaces of railway stations or footpaths. Without a stable job and identity they live a nomadic life of vagueness. This produces the textual uncanny for the purported reader primarily living a sedentary life, having a preordained planning of life and preconceived ideas of regulated spaces. Opposed to this, as the title of the Novel *Chhera Chhera Jibon* would suggest, each of these characters lives a ‘tattered life’, bruised by overuse and incomplete, cut in pieces, suggesting discontinuity of their spatial identity. Space in their

imagination is also one of co-habitation and belonging rather than of arrangement and urban planning.

Joel Lee's article, despite suggesting spatial difference of the scavenging caste from the upper caste shelters, discusses the dire need of their function in society for which the reluctant property owners had to accommodate them. They form a part of the geopolitics of the city. They not only litter the sanitized spaces and embrace filth and dirt as their identity challenging and unsettling the bourgeois notion of cleanliness, they resist their unclean habitation as well. To reverse-essentialize the destitute as accepting and belonging to the order of the unclean – "the order of odour" is to fall back into the trap of ascribing positivity to experiences of negation and unbelonging of Dalits. In Lee's article, M. L. Singh, coming from the scavenging *Valmiki* caste and raised to the position of a neurosurgeon and a civil servant, in a public speech talks about the need for a place where children of their caste could study without the stench that characterized the *Valmiki* bustees (Lee 472). In Byapari's *Itibritte Chandal Jiban (The Complete life of a Chandala)*, Vol. 2, we see how Byapari along with other rickshaw pullers place an idol of a local deity *Shitala* beside a banyan tree so that people stop peeing at that place (37). They used to have a hard time bearing the stench. It surely suggests 'environmental casteism' (Lee 486) having physical and psychological ailments on persons inhabiting those spaces for long. Yet such habitation could not be translated into belonging. We see how that stone eventually becomes a shrine and a Brahmin occupies the space to earn from people's offerings and people like Byapari had to steal coins from the offering box when they are in hunger or dire need for money. Dalit experience in their narratives essentially forms an aesthetics of unbelonging which is not reducible to positive resistance or occupation of the space and yet it effects and affects the geopolitics of the space beyond the intentionality of governmental apparatuses.

The objective of governmental power has always been to produce precarious lives. We can measure a thin line of difference between thanatopolitics and production of precarity in the sense that the former is designated by total abandonment, confinement and extermination, while the latter remains always on the threshold of conditional and restricted autonomy, precarious of being stripped off their rights if they cross the limits. The production of precarity vis-à-vis right to space in any form of power is not always of total exclusion, but of hierarchical contiguity. The word abandonment is etymologically rooted to the notion of the ban. The ban here is not outright prohibition but "is understood as a general proclamation of the sovereign. Abandonment, therefore, is an act that delivers over to the sovereign ban" (Lesham 624). It is the proclamation of power or a structure of prohibition – of ban that may or may not function on the basis of strict separation and confinement – "The one who is abandoned remains in a relationship with sovereign power: included through exclusion" (G. Pratt qtd in Lesham 624). It can be based on unequal rights to spaces and properties – to exclude as well as maintain a population that is necessary as well as dangerous to the well-being of citizen-subjects. Foucault in his lecture series *Abnormal*, delivered at Collège de France in 1974-75, talked about two models of control of individuals in the West – "one is the exclusion of lepers and the other is the model of the inclusion of Plague victims" (Foucault *Abnormal*, 44). The second model is of "quarantine" (44) and "meticulous spatial partitioning" (45). However, in the context of Caste in the modern democratic Indian state it could be argued if such partitioning and surveillance between included and excluded spaces could actually be maintained. In order to understand this we need to expand our imagination beyond the logic of exclusion and inclusion towards the rationale of contiguity and prohibition. Whether this model can be used to rethink

modern biopolitics is another question which we shall not explore here. We shall see how caste segregation has always been under potential threat of miscegenation and impurity, crossing the limits of individual as well as political body, blasphemously making the apparatus of power precarious and ineffective. The system of *varnasharama* in Indian political and religious economy has been maintained by prohibition of sexual union between the lower caste men and upper caste women. This along with other restrictions and setting of limits for the *shudras* belonging to the lowest of the *varna* system maintained the power structure. The upper castes also had to maintain physical distance and other prohibitions with respect to lower caste individuals and their practices. Along with other punishments the greatest fear of transgressing these limits was to become an outcaste – to be subjected to total abandonment of rights and privileges delivered by the Brahminical order. They were prohibited to be touched, disobeying which would make the transgressor an outcaste as well or will have to pay a price for it as expiation of his guilt – *prayaschitta*. Therefore, the outcaste had to be separated and made to live beyond the ‘normal’ spaces inhabited by those who have not lost their castes.

Ambedkar in his speculative anthropological account generates a story of how the untouchable castes have come into existence (Ambedkar “Untouchables”, 271-288). He talks about the outcaste as the broken men who were defeated by a different tribe when man was nomadic in nature. These individuals had to be given limited autonomy and rights for the maintenance of racial purity of the mainstream community which eventually became settled from nomadic. As these broken men were alien and from another tribe the dominant society had to specify a designated and separate space for these outcastes outside the village space with restricted entry to their space. This could be understood as the beginning of spatialization of caste. The Casteist mode of power created its own form of abandonment which is based on contiguous arrangement of space with laws of separation. In Omprakash Valmiki’s description of the *Chuhra* dwellings (his own caste) the space is separated and marked by a large pit from the village dominated by upper caste Tagas (Valmiki 1). The difference between the two spaces is glaringly visible in terms of the less formidable construction of *Chuhra* houses and sensorially perceivable stench of open latrine where the *Chuhras* had to defecate and also live by. But the two spaces shared a contiguous relationship as most of the *Chuhras* were engaged in menial work in Taga houses. The dangerous closeness and traffic between the two spaces created the sense of deprivation and anger, making the boundaries potent with desire to transgress. Omprakash as a child was admitted to an upper-caste dominated school where he suffered humiliation by the teachers and students and was once asked to clean the space instead of attending classes to put him to his proper place (3-7). Placing an individual can mean both giving a place to occupy as well as giving a place that is already designated. Place also suggests position and rank and is loaded with meaning. Valmiki was forced to perform the designated relationship of his caste with space. He was bounded by his caste, even though he attempted to transgress it. Sumit Guha comments in his historical and anthropological study, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia* – “Boundary’ is a spatial metaphor transformed into a social one. Any caste was delimited by both.” (Guha 45)

Habitation as Incarceration

With a structure of abandonment in place, with boundaries and limits preordained for the outcaste, habitation seems to be like a permanent transit camp. The transitory nature of households and the bounded relationship of Dalits to their space of (un)belonging gets translated in modern democratic Indian cities. The legacy of caste discrimination bears its mark in the form of generational economic impoverishment and lack of access to cultural capital.

The relationship to space remains precarious in another way. Instead of a designated outside contiguous to the main village where the Dalits used to live, in a city like Kolkata, the existence of the lower caste migrants is one of incessant precarity. The outside of the mainstream gets reproduced in manifold ways, thus laying bare the unbelonging of a Dalit to his space – to which he belongs but to which he cannot lay his claim. Therefore, we can designate the vanishing point and double-bind between the apparently opposing ideas of belonging and unbelonging by using the expression (un)belonging. In Byapari's autobiography we have seen how after joining a school for deaf and dumb children he had to face discriminatory behaviour. A broken cup was kept separately for him to serve tea (Byapari *Itibritte*, 70). The food cooked by him was purified in fire by another lady before being served to the students (69). He was frequently asked to fence the garden, suggesting his designated role as a Dalit to do the manual labor (95-97). His relationship to the city space has been of contiguous discrimination. Even when he became a writer and was invited to Jadavpur University, he was restricted at the gate and interrogated because his dress and appearance was not found congenial for entry into a University space and he was suspected (289). In a modern city, a culturalization of caste takes place where as Balmurli Natarajan suggests –

...caste groups (led by caste elites) attempt to (re)construct and (re)present themselves as cultural groups such that caste comes to be viewed, narrated, embodied, and performed by social actors simply as pre-existing “natural”, cultural difference or identity rather than as socioculturally constructed relationships of ascribed status and antagonism (inequality, domination and exploitation). (Natarajan 5)

Therefore, the relationship of a Dalit to his space even in a modern city is constituted by banning and irredeemable cultural difference restricting his access and limiting his rights to otherwise democratic spaces. He is always and already incarcerated in such a structure. But in a city the incarceration is not absolute. Its form of abandonment is mediated by internal limits, rather than external ones. The limits are contestable spaces – undecidable in character and in the process of becoming. The contiguous relationship which was repressed in a traditional society and was given a garb of complete exclusion in the idiom of governance, surfaced in a more conspicuous way in an urban space. We will see in Byapari's novels such as *Je Katha Itibritte Nei* and *Chhera Chhera Jibon*, the space of the destitute challenges the intended isotopy (Lefebvre 37-38) of governmentality to give it a heterogeneous character. The contiguity of spaces destroys the absolute segregation of spaces. These underdogs discover themselves in an occupied land; they inhabit what Ambedkar called *bahuskrit bharat* (Guru 75) within the economy of Indian nation-state. Do they re-occupy the space – make it their own? Or does this ownness get haunted by the precarity of eviction and further disenfranchisement? In *Je Katha Itibritte Nei* the narrator trying to connect with the site of the city where he was returning after a long time, remembers – “Jadavpur. That place of homeless people. Now its topography has transformed completely. Those shanties are there no more, they have been displaced by huge concrete establishments” (Byapari *Itibritte*, 24). In Kaviraj's urban anthropology, his reference point Deshapriya Park also changed over time. The homeless vagabonds have been restricted entry, the temporary stalls have been partly cleaned for the beautification of the city and its emergent upwardly mobile classes. The heterotopic arrangement of urban spaces suggested by Lefebvre succumbs to incessant change. He comments – “In urban space, something is always happening. Relations change. Differences and contrasts can result in conflict, or are attenuated, erode, or corrode” (Lefebvre 29). It is a space of becoming, or relating it to Dalit experience we can call it a relationship of

(un)becoming. Then what is the uncanny of Dalit experience that the mainstream upper caste dominated society wants to erase and keep at a distance? What intervention could be made by the poor migrant Dalits and destitutes to understand the evolution of the idea of space? Memory, remembrance and narrativization of the impossible experience of (un)belonging to the city could be the crux of Dalit intervention to the notion of space. It is volatile and unstable for them. It challenges the sedentary understanding of space through a nomadic assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 351-423) and also exposes precarity as a mode of existence under capitalist management of space. The exposure of the usability and expendability of humans under capitalist biopolitical arrangement of space unsettles the myth of right to space and disturbs the autochthonic structure of human thinking in terms of belongingness and rootedness. The Dalits would understand and foreground space in a different way in their memory. Memory, writing and exposure of spatial precarity form the road towards transformation of our ideology of space.

It has already been pronounced in this essay how Dalit writers relate to their space of habitation in terms of (un)belonging. This (un)belonging gets shaped in terms of banning – an implicit form of abandonment. It is implicit because in an egalitarian democratic society it may not be a part of legality. But the process of habitation is one of contiguous boundaries. These boundaries suffer invisibilization for the upper caste dominated civil society whose idea of public space excludes these people and their lives from consciousness. Byapari's novel *Je Katha Itibritte Nei* is auto-fictional in the sense that it transverses between the fixed lines of autobiography and fiction. If his *chandala* life – the life of a downtrodden is excluded from public memory which he wants to bring back, then his fringe existence as a homeless individual doing odd jobs and often engaged in petty crime is negated even from that autobiographical narrative. The metaphoric space of a biography or an autobiography would not allow that. Therefore his novel here takes an auto-fictional form transversing both genres (I use the word transversing in the Deleuzian reconfiguration of our geometrical thinking and how a transversal imagination could be incorporated intersecting and deterritorializing the geometric coordinates of parallel straight lines) (Deleuze 25). His autobiography in two volumes has been titled *Itibritte Chandala Jiban*. That literally means *The Complete life of a Chandala*. But the word *Itibritte* means “in details” and *britto* means a circle. So on one hand it means the complete circle of a *chandala* life and on the other hand it may also suggest the life of the *chandala* in the circle (of life or existence as such). So, it also suggests the unspoken *chandala* life in the circle/cycle of meaning. In *Je Katha Itibritte Nei* he expresses the absent episode of *Itibritto* – the circle of his life – his autobiography. However we can see how the excluded returns in the form of an uncanny spectre to his present self of an established author.

The fictional character of author Kalidas Kathak in this novel gets himself arrested deliberately on some petty issue to revisit jail as a detainee to memorize his old life as a prisoner. There he meets his alter-ego in the adjacent cell, completely wrapped in darkness. That almost disembodied voice from darkness claims to be another Kalidas Kathak, having similar experiences. This alter-ego narrates to him the episode of his life which the author did not pen in his autobiography. This is a tale of a group of vagabond boys who were homeless and who occupied public spaces in and around Jadavpur Railway station and were engaged in petty crime to live their lives. The author brings several characters like Kalua and Kalosona among others. The names suggest blackness, giving a racial character to their existence in terms of blackness of their colour and also existence. We need to remember the anthropological dimension of Dalits in scriptures as dark complexioned. Darkness also becomes a conceptual

metaphor to suggest the lives of these people as unseen in the mainstream structure of narrative, though they occupy and share a space contiguous to the mainstream. The continuous evocation of the names and characters with shared precarity suggests a nomadic assemblage of broken men sharing a spatial contiguity with the propertied citizens. The narration of such assemblage is an act of resistance as much as their unintended eruption and spread in the public spaces. They are transversal between the parallel lines of economic and caste segregated society and demonstrate the contiguous arrangement of the city space. The author's going back to the jail to find his alter-ego in order to narrate the story is a sign of abandonment and condition of incarceration through which one must speak. The significance of the tale is that it is excluded from the *itibritta*—the circle of narration.

Curiously, another novel by Byapari which we mentioned already – *Chhera Chhera Jibon* also starts with prison as the protagonist Iman, an eighteen-year-old boy born and reared inside jail gets released for being an unconvicted prisoner. As he passes through various interstices of urban periphery – its margins – the other spaces or the supposed heterotopias— he realizes the confinement and precarity of people outside jail is no less than inside. The dwelling among degenerate spaces of the city makes one realize the contingency of the project of life and its intended stability. The perception of space of Dalits has to be historically and phenomenologically different from the upper caste sedentary community. The waste produced by the project of development connects with the individuals wasted and made outcaste in the narrative horizon of history. They form the contiguous outside of biopolitics – of the project of life. The understanding of heterotopias as exceptional spaces within the mainstream could be shifted here from Foucauldian paradigm to a more Lefebvrian one. In Lefebvre, heterotopia is that exception which shares a contiguous relationship with the mainstream rather than being marked by absolute difference. It challenges the isotopy of the space and moves towards the unknown and the undecidable concatenation and assemblage of people and their stories. The narrative of caste is not only of subjugation but also of the fear of being touched – of getting polluted. Relationship of Dalit and upper caste spaces have historically been one of use and expulsion. The two are tied together in an entanglement. Hominization demands segregation and purification from what have been purged off to produce the clean body – the space, the narrative and the project of life as such. What is most intimate to the being – the shit, the dead body or the exhausted residue of human use has to be forgotten. People are expelled to construct the cleanly organized spaces. However, those organized spaces are constantly transversed by the traffic of homeless men (in the Deleuzian sense of the 'transversal', discussed in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which cuts across linear organization of spaces and movements to de-territorialize the geometric organization of the sedentary communities). So far the histories of intentional expulsion have constituted our geopolitical imagination. We are aware of how the historical formation of Kolkata in the eighteenth century happened through maintenance of caste and professional separation of the city into separate *paras/muhallas* based on traditional caste system in villages (Ghosh 5). The maintenance of caste hierarchies however has been frequently disturbed and interrupted by migrations of poor and destitute people from villages and then owing to partitioning of Bengal in 1947 from Bangladesh (the-then East Pakistan). The lower caste migrants were always unwelcome in the city and had to live occupying open public spaces or controlled temporary establishments like camps. Yet reading the novels of a migrant Dalit writer like Byapari makes us realize how the isotopic management of spaces are constantly failed by the uncharted habitation and (un)belonging of lower caste men and women, forming strange and undecidable assemblages. Likewise, his writings tangentially touch the

circle of our discourse to insinuate the uncanny and de-territorialize the middle-class citizen-subject.

[All translations from Manoranjan Byapari are by me.]

Notes:

Ambedkar interrogates the socialists giving economic interpretation of history – “Can the socialists ignore the problem arising out of the social order?” (Ambedkar *Annihilation of Caste* 226)

² The Freudian concept of “uncanny” is evoked here to suggest how the most familiar or the most homely can at the same time through a process of negation may turn out to be the most unhomely (as the word *unheimlich* used for uncanny in original German may mean both). (Freud “The Uncanny” Kindle Edition)

³ For further discussion on negativity in language and the concept of unsayable, see Jacques Derrida’s essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (73-142)

⁴ The etymological relationship between vagueness and vagabond is derived from Deleuze’s discussions in *The Thousand Plateaus*. He comments: “Husserl speaks of a protogeometry that addresses *vague*, in other words, vagabond or nomadic, morphological essences. These essences are distinct from sensible things, as well as from ideal, royal, or imperial essences. Protogeometry, the science dealing with them, is itself vague, in the etymological sense of “vagabond”[...]” (Deleuze 367). For further discussion on conceptualization of space in terms of vagueness and its relationship with nomadic/vagabond people see “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine” (Deleuze and Guattari 351-423)

⁵ Agamben writes: “*The originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment*. The matchless potentiality of the *nomos*, its originary “force of law,” is that it holds life in its ban by abandoning it.” (27-28; emphasis original)

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