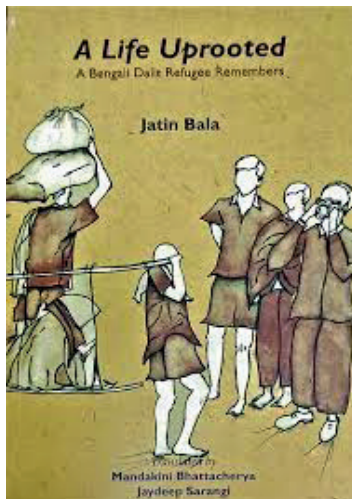


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Sapna Dogra

A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers

Jatin Bala. 2022. A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers. Translated by Mandakini Bhattacherya & Jaydeep Sarangi. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 291 pp., \$26, ISBN 978-93-5448-404-8



<https://www.ibpbooks.com/a-life-uprooted-a-bengali-dalit-refugee-remembers/p/58765>

The hegemonic discourse of partition has relegated the narratives of Bengali Dalit refugees to the periphery. Their suppressed accounts are increasingly being found to be worthy of representation and an integral aspect of history. Jatin Bala, a Bengali Dalit Refugee writer's autobiography *Shikor Chhera Jibon* skillfully translated by Mandakini Bhattacherya and Jaydeep Sarangi as *A Life Uprooted: A Bengali Dalit Refugee Remembers* brings to light the plight of the doubly oppressed section of depressed classes that bore the brunt of partition and caste hierarchy together.

Jatin Bala was born in 1949 in Jessore, now in Bangladesh, at a time when the country was beset by communal turmoil. Raised by his eldest brother, who was older than him by 25 years, Bala lost his mother when he was a little over a year old and his father died when he was barely four. The family crossed the border and reached the Indian side. In 1954 his

family settled in the Kunti Camp in Hooghly district. His education began in the refugee camps and all his memories were put together in the form of his autobiography that took him twelve years to write.

Spread over twenty-seven chapters, Bala recounts his experiences in stunning arboreal imagery. Some of the recurrent images are those of “search for roots”, “tree uprooted”, “fallen leaves”, etc. As the translators say in the Acknowledgements

This book is an act of commitment, our histories revisited. The work we have birthed is a promise for tomorrow. We dedicate this book to all displaced and uprooted people all over the world (viii).

Bala coalesces history and narratives for a compelling representation of the existential and identity crisis of Dalit refugees. The scholarly introduction sheds light on the history of Dalit Literature in India and establishes Jatin Bala’s place in it. Bala’s life, condensed into four pages in the “Introduction” is fleshed out in detail in the book. The translators call Bala “A shining star in the firmament of Bangla Dalit Literature” (xv).

History comes alive through Bala’s story as the book opens with “cries of destitute, panic-stricken people” (2) and Bala recalls how their village was attacked by a mob during a riot and houses were set ablaze. He along with his family and villagers had to shift to another village. Issue of resettlement and relocation in the wake of partition and ensuing violence, trauma and struggle for bare survival and sustenance are foregrounded. “This is life! People hate each other, men are forced to go in exile – the wounds of Partition push men into pits of distrust, doubt and suspicion” (11).

Bala remembers how many people walked and more people from other villages kept joining the crowd.

We found some hope for survival, though the thought of separation from our motherland clouded our faces. The tug at the umbilical cord was internally destroying us, our hearts were burning; we could not think clearly. We somehow packed our belongings in a trance lasting for three days and two nights. For one last time, we wept inconsolably and bade goodbye to our birthplace, Jessore district (17).

As a five-year-old Bala was too young to understand the gravity of the situation, but he could not forget what he witnessed:

Hundreds of people, irrespective of gender, were beaten up mercilessly ... Refugees were not human beings at all; they could be dealt with in any way. Young women were dragged from their sleep, stripped and hit repeatedly with boot-clad feet on their buttocks and breasts in the name of interrogation [...] Some bled from their noses and lips, some had damaged eardrums, some had broken ribs or crushed genitals, or rulers thrust into vaginas. Some had fainted from the relentless beating; some were trying to endure it with all their might. No one can imagine how low-caste people can be tortured and exterminated by vested upper-class interests, unless one witnessed the ongoing oppression at the Bhandarhati Refugee Camp (170).

At the refugee camp began Bala's tryst with education. Despite working as a child labourer, he managed to get some education that rekindled the fire of protest in him:

When a person reaches the end of his teethers after facing the traumatic experiences of hunger, hatred, apathy and injustice, he has to fight back [...] The people in the refugee camps are no more distressed as before, and hunger, hatred and injustice fail to shake their indomitable will. Now their soul is enlightened by the fire of resistance, the iron will to protest; and a surging wave of vigour to make life forever lingers inside them (214).

The book is also about Bala finding his voice. From a young boy who "lacked the word, knowledge, wisdom, consciousness" and inability to articulate anger to someone who asserted his "opinions logically" (211), Bala's story is sure to inspire as he rises above his victimhood and reconstruct his identity to emerge as someone who would later become the guiding soul in building solidarity.

Apart from the scholarly introduction, there is a glossary of Bangla words used in translation and a subtle yet powerful cover design by Prof. Hrishikesh Ingle that speaks volumes about the plight of refugees. The book sheds light on the interface of objectivity of history and the subjectivity of personal narrative that complicates the relationship between honest chronicling of history and gaps that are left to be filled or unravelled. The book will be a useful referential text for all those interested in Neo historicism, Partition studies and Dalit studies.

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