



The Faceless Millions: Subaltern Life-Worlds in Byapari's *Imaan*

¹Mr. N. Gokulraj*, ²Dr. K. Ravichandran

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar (Full-Time), Department of English,
Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore – 632 115.

¹E-Mail: ngrenglish@gmail.com

²Professor and Dean (CDC), Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore – 632 115.

²E-Mail: drkrctvu@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines Manoranjan Byapari's novel *Imaan* (2021), translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha, as a sustained literary construction of subaltern life-worlds on the margins of urban India. Longlisted for the 2022 JCB Prize for Literature, the novel follows Imaan Ali, who is born and raised within Kolkata's Central Jail system and released into an unfamiliar world of ragpickers, rickshaw-pullers, pickpockets, and street vendors around Jadavpur railway station. Drawing on subaltern studies, this paper argues that Byapari himself a Dalit writer who learned to read and write as an adult constructs a narrative in which imprisonment and freedom are inverted categories, exposing how state institutions and the "free" informal economy alike produce conditions of subalternity. The paper examines the novel's carceral irony, its ethnographic attention to railside community life, and its interrogation of criminality as a category defined by class rather than morality. It concludes that *Imaan* extends the project of Dalit-Bahujan life-writing that Byapari began in his own memoirs into fiction, giving narrative dignity and interiority to a population the "faceless millions" of India's informal economy that dominant literary and social discourse renders invisible.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Dalit Literature, Carceral Studies, Translation, Bengali Fiction, Informal Economy

Introduction

Manoranjan Byapari occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Indian letters: born into the Chandala caste, a refugee, a former rickshaw-puller, and a man who taught himself to read and write in his thirties while imprisoned, he has become one of the most significant Dalit-Bahujan voices in Bengali fiction. His novel *Imaan*, originally titled *Chhera Chhera Jibon* and translated into English by Arunava Sinha, was longlisted for the 2022 JCB Prize for Literature. The novel opens with a scene of institutional address rather than individual introduction: a "deafening cry" rings out within prison walls, calling a name "I-m-a-a-n Aliiiiiiii" that the narrator notes is, in this context, less a personal identity than "a distressed existence, the social identity of an individual". This opening gesture is significant: before the reader meets Imaan as a person, they meet him as an institutional call-and-response, a body classified and located by the carceral state.

This paper argues that *Imaan* constructs its subaltern life-world through a sustained structural irony: the freedom that awaits Imaan Ali outside Central Jail proves, in the novel's own terms, to be "a

prison only disconcertingly large," one in which, unlike the jail, no one went hungry and everyone had a roof over their heads. Byapari's novel thus refuses the conventional redemption arc in which release from incarceration represents liberation, and instead uses Imaan's disorientation to expose the precarity of life among Kolkata's informal laborers—ragpickers, rickshaw-pullers, pickpockets, and sex workers—who inhabit a social position structurally continuous with incarceration. This paper examines three dimensions of this construction: the carceral irony that structures the novel's premise, the ethnographic texture of railside community life, and the novel's interrogation of criminality as a category produced by class and caste rather than morality.

Carceral Irony and the Inversion of Freedom

The premise of *Imaan* inverts the conventional relationship between imprisonment and freedom that structures most prison narratives. Imaan Ali enters Central Jail as an infant in his mother Zahura Bibi's arms; she is imprisoned for the murder of his father and dies when he is six, leaving Imaan to grow up shuttling between juvenile homes and the prison itself. By the time of his release at around twenty, prison is not a site of trauma to escape but the only home and community he has known. This inversion is made explicit in the novel's account of his adjustment to the outside world. This free world too is a prison, like the one he came from, only disconcertingly large. The comparison is devastatingly precise: in prison, Imaan never went hungry and had a roof over his head, material securities the informal economy of the railway station cannot guarantee.

This carceral irony operates as more than a plot device; it functions as social critique. By having his protagonist actively "wish to return to the security of a prison cell," Byapari forces the reader to confront the possibility that state incarceration and the "freedom" of India's informal economy are not opposites but variations on the same condition of structural abandonment. Both are systems in which the poor and lower-caste are managed, contained, and denied full agency: the prison through walls and surveillance, the railway platform through hunger, precarity, and the absence of any institutional safety net. As one reviewer notes, Imaan is told that while there is only one door out of prison, there are a thousand through which to return—a line that suggests the carceral system does not simply punish but actively produces the conditions of its own repopulation among the poor.

The Railside Community: Ethnographic Texture and Subaltern Solidarity

Once released, Imaan finds shelter and work among the community at Jadavpur railway station: a world of "rickshaw-pullers, scrap dealers, tea-stall owners, those who sell corpses for a little bit of money, who 'welcome him into their fold' despite his complete unfamiliarity with life outside institutional walls. Reviewers have noted that Byapari's rendering of this community carries an almost ethnographic density, portraying "the vulgar disparities faced by them in society" alongside "personal human emotions of love, attraction and jealousy" in a manner that recalls the social realism of Bengali writer Manik Bandopadhyay. This combination of unflinching attention to material deprivation alongside full interiority and emotional complexity is central to the novel's subaltern politics: it refuses to let socioeconomic marginality flatten these characters into symbols of suffering alone.

At the same time, this rendering is not without critical limitations, which are themselves worth noting for a balanced subaltern reading. At least one reviewer has observed that many of the novel's secondary characters have very little development, appearing largely so far as their description rather than as agents who shape the story's development. This raises a productive tension for subaltern criticism: does the novel's documentary-style attention to a marginalized community risk reproducing exactly the kind of sociological cataloguing presenting subaltern lives as *types* rather than fully individuated subjects that Spivak's critique of representation warns against? Byapari's own position as a writer who has lived this precarity complicates this question, but it remains a productive site of debate rather than a settled matter.

Criminality, Morality, and the Question "Who Is a Criminal?"

The novel's most pointed subaltern intervention lies in its interrogation of criminality itself. Reviewers of *Imaan* have emphasized that its protagonists are "mostly criminals or... at risk of becoming one" ragpickers, pickpockets, sex workers, and others whom mainstream society marks as morally suspect yet the novel insists that each character has an innate honesty ingrained in them. Byapari uses this apparent contradiction to pose a direct political question: "who is a criminal, and why? Are criminals the ones who get caught? What about those respected in society committing the same crimes but living unexposed?"

This line of questioning positions *Imaan* within a broader subaltern-studies tradition of interrogating how categories like criminal, deviant, and respectable are distributed unevenly along lines of caste and class rather than actual conduct. The novel's title itself performs this irony: *Imaan*, meaning "honesty" or "conscience" in Urdu/Bengali usage, is given to a man defined by the state as a criminal from infancy a naming that asks the reader to hold the protagonist's inherited social identity prisoner, criminal against his actual ethical character throughout the narrative. In this sense, the novel gives what one reviewer calls "a quiet dignity to the lives of people on the margins," those who "live with grime in their bodies but follow a certain code of conduct with others reclaiming moral legitimacy for a population that dominant discourse defines primarily through suspicion and criminalization.

Conclusion

Imaan extends into fiction the project that has defined Manoranjan Byapari's body of work: the insistence that the lives of India's most marginalized the imprisoned, the casteless, the informally employed possess a complexity, dignity, and interiority that dominant literary and social discourse persistently denies them. Through its carceral irony, which exposes the false opposition between prison and "freedom" for India's poor, its dense rendering of railside community life, and its interrogation of who society permits to be called a criminal, the novel constructs what this paper has termed a subaltern life-world: a fictional space in which characters excluded from the "national imagination" are restored to narrative centrality. The novel's title figure a man named for honesty who has never known anything but incarceration stands as the novel's central irony and its central claim: that conscience and dignity persist, and indeed take root most stubbornly, among precisely those populations the state has marked as its "faceless millions" Future scholarship might extend this reading through comparative analysis with Byapari's own memoir *Interrogating My Chandal*



Life, tracing how the author's lived experience of incarceration and caste marginalization informs the fictional world of *Imaan*, or through closer attention to the novel's female characters, whom reviewers have singled out as a particular strength deserving separate critical treatment.

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