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WORD COUNT

3923 Words

CHARACTER COUNT

18819 Characters

PAGE COUNT

11 Pages

FILE SIZE

18.6KB

SUBMISSION DATE

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REPORT DATE

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Question of Land and Dalit Oppression in Rural Punjab: A study of Balbir Madhopuri's *Against the Night*

Abstract

The present paper entitled 'Question of Land and Dalit Oppression in Rural Punjab: A Study of Balbir Madhopuri's *Against the Night*' studies Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography, *Against the Night* (Originally written in Punjabi) which narrates a dalit's angst of deprivation, social exclusion, and humiliation, as well as of resistance, achievement and hope. The paper will explore how the subjective narrative of a dalit writer tends to universalize the caste based experience of his community. It will shed light on the plight of dalits in Punjab.

Against the Night is set in the village of Madhopur in Punjab, it traces the social history of the dalit 'Chamars' to which the writer belongs. Balbir Madhopuri was born in 1955 in the small village of Madhopur (Jalandhar), Punjab. In his childhood he used to work with his family as an agricultural labourer. But Madhopuri soon moved out of it and earned a degree in Masters of Arts in Punjabi. Thus he became a civil servant with government of India and fulfilled the dream of his childhood:

I thought of my Bua's son who was a government officer in Delhi...and also my mother's brother who was a district collector... should I remain uneducated? Should I continue to do what the rest of my community was doing? Should I work and slave for others so that they could live in luxury? No! (Madhopuri 105)

It is the spirit to change one's fortune.

The Punjabi title *Changiya Rukh* refers to "a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed" (Puri, xiii). These meanings help in understanding of the title. It suggests a tree which is pruned and beautified. Pruning at one level refers to the violence to nature but at another level it also suggests growth. This aspect of pruning runs deep in Madhopuri's sensibility as the writer uses same image in his collection of poems *Bhakhda Pataal* (The Inferno):

Many a time

I'm dwarfed

Like a tree cut at the top

Over whom passes the power line

I get pruned out of season

When in passing

Someone is curious to know what my caste is. (Puri, xxviii)

The narrator views himself as a tree “cut at the top”. However, the cutting and pruning makes him able to deal with the problems he confronts in his life.

The narrator shares the experience of a dalit who faces humiliation and social prejudice day in and out. Madhopuri remarks that there are nearly 170 million dalits in India which means that one in every six Indians is a dalit” (Puri xv). In theory, ‘untouchability’ was abolished when country got independence, and its practice in any form was declared a criminal offence— ”All such caste communities, numbering more than 750 at present, according to the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI), came to be termed as ‘Scheduled Castes’ for the purpose of a variety of constitutional and legal protections and affirmative action by the state”(Puri xv). What was meant to be “protection” and “affirmative action” turned into its opposite in social life as the term ‘schedule caste’ became in common speech of ordinary men and women a term of abuse. Thus:

Despite the abolition of untouchability six decades ago, the imposition of a variety of social disabilities on persons, for reasons of their birth into particular castes, remains a part of social reality in rural India. This social exclusion affects not only their outward lives but also their inner worlds. The practice of caste-based exclusion and discrimination was a plan to block access not only to economic but also to civil, cultural, and political rights, and has been rightly described as a ‘living mode exclusion’.” (Puri xvi)

Oppression on Dalit Communities:

*Against the Night*¹ charts a dark history of dalit oppression and humiliation by the upper caste Jats. These people are always settled in the western part of a village in Punjab. According to Hindu social order this class do not belong within the four *varnas*. The second factor is that the dirty water flows towards the west so they cannot pollute clean water. As a result these people are enslaved to live in dirt, mire and slime (Madhopuri 9-10). He introduces the reader with smelly, filth laden streets, lice infested clothes, foods like the meat of dead cattle, hard labour on the lands of others, caste abuse, insults, the body language of fear, tension, outrage and clashes and typical local language and the accents in the society. The author tells us:

If a low-caste boy were to come out on the lanes of the village, all bathed and dressed in new clothes, his hair combed, one or the other of the Jats sitting under the trees would get up and throw mud on him. If he protested, he was sure to be beaten up. If an untouchable appeared in the village dressed in new clothes, he was certain to be given a beating on the pretext that the low castes were trying to become the equals of the higher castes; no one knew or could predict when such an incident would occur and where. (Madhopuri 4)

Life of dignity is not acceptable for an untouchable¹ because that would entail equality with the rest of them. This kind of social injustice is starkly presented in *Against the Night* as the deep-rooted prejudice of the upper caste and their fierce hatred of the low-caste becomes all too evident. Ironically the upper caste cannot do without the group they intensely hate, for this group does the menial jobs for them—the Jhiwar (water carrier) caste people would bring pots full of water for the upper caste household—“I would often go to Ratta Brahmin’s shop which was in the central lane of the village, early in the morning and see Khichi and Pashu, of the water-carrier caste, fetching water for the Jat and Brahmin families. Each carried a large earthen pot on his right shoulders with a smaller pot on top. Though young, both were out of breath and had backs bent like old men” (Madhopuri 15).¹ That children of the Jhiwar caste at a young age should have their backs bent like old men is a form of acute cruelty. Jats and Brahmins cannot manage their everyday life smoothly without these people? They are dependent on this section of society still their work is unappreciated. Contrarily we find in the text that the upper caste wouldn’t come close to them because they are untouchables—“Give these Chamar brats a shout and drive them off” the Jat bhai of the gurudwara advises others on the occasion of Sangrand... ‘You can’t control this litter. I myself will drive them away,

the mother's—'and he would jump up mouthing an obscenity, which we all completed in our minds" (Madhopuri 11).¹ The low caste children are spoken of as "litter" by the Jat bhai at the gurudwara that tells us of the status given to the dalit community.

The narrator expresses his despair in the chapter "The Tale of the Cracked Mirror" thus:

Defilement—I had confronted this word time and again, the way the rope in our well had frayed by constant rubbing against the wall. My thoughts would suddenly grow wings like the ones insects sprouted during the rains. I would think of the care the zamindars took of their animals—scrubbing and bathing, and tending them tenderly. Their dogs roamed freely in the courtyard and even entered the kitchen. Their children petted the cat all the time, feeding the kitten milk and...and... Bhaia and others like him have to carry their own tumblers and bowls from home, work hard for them the whole day, and still their animals are treated better than we human beings! (Madhopuri 33-34)

The narrator becomes aware about haves and have-nots in his early childhood. ¹ It fixes an identity on him of belonging to the caste of the 'polluted' lot.

Another agent of oppression on the Dalits is state authorities who misuse their power on powerless people thus:

All the villagers were afraid of the zaildar, jagirdar, safedposh and nambardar. A zaildar had many villages under him. He presided over a court and passed judgements. He enjoyed judicial powers. One had to comply with his decisions and pay fines etc. judgments were delivered after considering all the circumstances. It was said that a zaildar was forgiven five to seven murders by the government and people did not have the courage to look him in the eye. The treatment meted out to the lower caste specially untouchables was oppressive and terrifying. The zaildar compelled them to do begaari in his field and on his construction sites. If there was no such work available, then he got them to dig up the fields and throw the mud excavated in this way outside the village. This meant that he did not the days fixed for forced labour. One can still see small mounds of earth outside the villages. (Madhopuri 4-5)

As witnessed above, the power in the hands of state officials becomes a deadly form of oppression. It mocks the democratic institutions in India with the view of establishing equality and justice, that a “zaildar was forgiven five to seven murders by the government” is a case in point. Nobody we are told had “the courage to look him in the eye” as the zaildar ruled the village as a dictator. Dalits were forced to work on the zaildar’s field and construction sites as part of beggar. The upper class/caste could not see them idle or enjoying. They made dalits excavate mud outside the village unnecessarily when there was no other work to be done.

Question of Land and Dalits:

The landlessness continues to be a major source of deprivation and cause of the exploitation of dalit communities. Government has supported the deprivation of all human rights and land to these downtrodden people. According to the Land Settlement Rules in 1914-15 under the British various restrictions and responsibilities were imposed on the dalit communities. This makes it clear that the right conferred to dalit communities is the right to provide free labour. In return they were granted the right to remove the carcasses of animals as a gesture of kindness of the master who owned them. These rules put a big question mark in one’s mind regarding British attitude towards, and treatment of, the untouchables. They did not give the untouchables the rights of equality, education, property and freedom of expression. The Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 remained in force even during the British rule in Punjab which prevents the untouchables from buying a piece of land even if they had the money to buy it. One such example narrator brings in the text is that a person from the narrator’s community buys land in the name of a jat (a person from upper caste in the village) because they could not buy it in their name. Thus these people depended on the landlords and jagirdars to earn their livelihood. The landlords were oppressive towards these low caste people. They were often humiliated and beaten up by the landlords.

Not having a piece of land deprives Madhopuri as a child from being a participant in the cultural song sung by his childhood friends who belong to upper castes. The meanings of the song exclude his community. In the song they pray to god thus:

O God let it rain,

And thus give us grain!

Black are the bricks and the stones,

Let it pour, let it rain! (Madhopuri 53)

The song seems ironical because the family of Madhopuri never gets enough grain without having their own land.

4 Young Madhopuri wants to plant mango saplings in the limited yard of his house, and this is how his father reprimands him:

It was when I was digging in our courtyard to plant the sapling that Bhaia snatched the hoe from my hand, and said, ‘Maama, you are trying to ape the Jats! They have large lands and large havelis! We only have this much space where we can sit and relax! . . . My heart wilted like the plant. A storm had blown away the flowers of my desire. (Madhopuri 13)

Interestingly owning a piece of land is the deepest desire of narrator’s father and finally the narrator earnestly aspires to own a house in Delhi. Owning land in the village is a mark of power and also a way of gaining freedom from the exploitation of the landowner who is also the upper caste. Both caste hierarchy and ownership of resources coalesce in the text as the jats maintain supremacy over the dalits on both grounds. The reaction of the dalit community to this subjugation can be seen when they constantly desire a piece of land. In post-independence phase even when the law allows these people to buy land they are unable to move out of the clutches of poverty and can’t buy land. They remain dependent on the landlords, which immensely suits the latter. They are given poor wages for working on the fields of the Jats—“They all dole out a bare handful to you after you’ve worked hard the whole day! It is not even sufficient to subsist on!” (Madhopuri 68). Instead of taking their wages in cash, these people receive jaggery, onions, garlic, potatoes, wheat, maize, or other such commodities from the jat families they worked for. The price of these commodities is often increased but their wages are not raised. Thus it is a vicious circle the members of the dalit community find themselves caught in. Let’s look at a passage from the text to understand this predicament better:

As I recalled the sarcastic comment, another thought occurred to me and my father’s dark visage flashed before my eyes. It was not my imagination but a reality. When I reached home, Bhaia tried to advise me, “The athletes have twisted around and hurt themselves, but these zamindars have not given them even a word of praise! They say that the low castes must entertain and serve

them! I say this stigma of low and high will never end in this country without a violent struggle. If only we had a few acres of land, then we would have not bothered about these mean zamindars! You see for yourself how much they hate us! But one has to tolerate many things to survive. What else can one do? We can only fret and fume about all this! (Madhopuri 68)

It is clear that “if only” the dalits “had a few acres of land” they “would not have bothered about these mean zamindars”. They would have carried on with their lives in self-sufficiency. Helplessness can be seen in the father’s statement—“What else can one do? We can only fret and fume about all this”.

Upper caste is dependent on the dalits. The narrator discusses that one of his relatives told him that the *Sardarni* she work for as a sweeper had one day happily told her, “Sister, *Khalistan* is about to be created. That would be great. The Hindus will all leave, and you people will live with us in *Khalistan*!” (Madhopuri 182). *Sardarni* wishes that low caste people stayed with them in the newly created place when there is general animosity between the two groups? Opening up the question of land again the narrator’s relative inquires “*Sardarni* it would be great for you, but will we also get some land? Then again, why are you insisting that we should stay here with you in *Khalistan*? For us Hindus and the Sikhs are the same”. *Sardarni*’s reply reveals the true nature of the relationship between the two. She claims “We like you, that is why I am telling you! Who will clean and sweep for us in *Khalistan*?” (182). Thus these people are accepted as only sweepers and cleaners by the upper caste. Immediately the narrator here draws a parallel between the present call for *Khalistan* and 1947, the emergence of Pakistan, by noting: “I thought of Jinnah and what he said at a meeting about this problem of the untouchables at the time of Partition. He said that the untouchable population should be divided into two. It was much later that I comprehended the meaning of what he had said” (Madhopuri 182). The hypocrisy of the leaders is exposed here. It becomes clear that for dalits, Hindus and Sikhs are the same as they equally exploit them and wish them to remain their slaves and serve them throughout their life.

Religion and Caste:

Dalits realize that religion is used by the upper caste to keep them enslaved in poverty. The narrator believes that like Hindu religion no other religion in the world supports a system which upholds customs which incite hatred, and traditions that are discriminatory

and inhuman. Such an unjust and oppressive system has survived for so many centuries because of the books like *Manusmriti* (Madhopuri 7-8). The narrator's father claims in the text "No one has the time to listen to our plea that this caste system was not ordained by god, but has been made by man for his selfish motives" (Madhopuri 101). Later "God is a complete fraud! If he does exist then why doesn't he heed our prayers? We are better off without the help of this oppressor!" (Madhopuri 102). After the rejection of the Hindu religion, the Dalits turn to a new locus of morality, which is called 'Ad Dharm'. 'Ad-Dharm' refers to the native's religion and *Adi Dharmis* to the natives of the land. The movement stood as a rejection of the Hindu *varna* system and caste system. It fostered a unique Dalit identity for the people of the community. Madhopuri culls out the figure of Baba Mangu Ram Mugowalia and his contribution in upliftment of untouchables. He also established contact with Dr. Ambedkar. He also started a newspaper under the name, *Adi Danka*, to protest against social oppression and inequality (Madhopuri 8-9). After realising that dalits had no future within Hinduism he demanded that the *ad-dharmis* be listed as a separate religious community. This was a major step in the direction of emancipation of the Dalits. The Britishers conceded their demand and they were listed separately in the 1931 Census. But the Indian state once again put them in the list of Hindu scheduled castes after the independence". Thus *Ad-dharam* is a kind of assertion of the Dalit community particularly of its independent religious-cultural identity.

Education among the Dalits:

Narrator in *Against the Night* understands clearly that without education like the rest of the community he would work in intolerable conditions on the fields owned by Jats. He expresses his feelings thus:

Knotting my tumbler in the corner of the *angocha*, I carried, I flung it over my shoulder and went off towards the *nambardar's* fields to plant paddy saplings. My limbs were stiff, my dark complexion had turned darker because of the hot sun, and my skin was as coarse as a buffalo's hide. I would see the young sons of landowners strutting on the edges of the fields, scolding the labourers, showing no respect for their age, and be upset that our men did not even protest! It occurred to me that if I was unable to complete my education, I would have to face and bear all this all my life! This thought troubled me, and it seemed to me that some weevil was eating into my vitals. But

simultaneously, and strangely, I felt like a log of the sheesham tree and believed that no woodworm could harm me. (Madhopuri 107)

Thus education seems the most important way to move out from the cycle of oppression and exploitation. Narrator's father keeps on emphasizing the importance of education for the narrator. The anger and desperation of the father can be seen in his assertion, "Maama! You must study or else you too will have to endure this enslavement" (Madhopuri 68).

Attaining education for these people is not an easy task. The narrator tells us:

I thought of what my life had become. Walking 4-5 km to the middle school in Geeganwal, and on my return, I would often carry two bundles of fodder for the animals, and sometimes a load of millet or barley. I would also help Bhaia and my elder brother scrape the sugarcane, and also fetch twenty kilos of flour from the flour mill. What more could I do? (Madhopuri 111)

People from other communities view education of Dalits as a threat to their supremacy. Bhujjar, a landowner in village raises his voice and states: "All the Chamars have started studying and are growing swollen headed! If they all get jobs, who will work in our fields?"... This set me thinking. Our parents had worked hard on low wages or no wages at all; they had borrowed to educate us; and we also worked for daily wages to pay for our education. We did not cheat anyone, and yet these people always resented us and were forever planning to get their sons appointed to high offices" (Madhopuri 163).

Caste and Modernization:

Even after completing studies and becoming an officer he experiences the extent of caste-prejudice that runs through cities. Education and modernization has not changed the mindset of people even in cities also. The narrator observes, "The curse of caste had followed us to the city—though it is said that people living in cities are educated and open minded" (Madhopuri 205). Harish K Puri in the present context notes:

Nearly 90 per cent of dalits (barring a section of the Valmikis) have moved out of their hereditary occupations; no more than 15 per cent work as agricultural labourers any longer. Education, urbanization, modernization, and jobs in higher civil services have given them a consciousness of self-respect and hope. Yet, a dalit, even after a high level of achievement in secular and material

terms, apprehends a subtle form of caste prejudice. The emotional experience of insults in public spaces—the village, the school, the rented house—or in the company of colleagues in the higher civil service, represents a kind of apprehension that non-dalits are generally unable to understand. (Puri Xxviii)

Against the Night is a critique of deeply entrenched caste-biased society we live in. It ¹exposes the hypocrisy of leaders who believed in attaining freedom from white colonizers but denied equal rights for the untouchables. Dalits may have achieved equal rights in free India politically and legally but not in reality. Caste prejudices exist not only in villages in India but also in the supposedly progressive and modern cities. Madhopuri discusses the question of religion and its role in the lives of dalits. At the same time Madhopuri emphasizes the importance of owning land for dalit communities. Education too becomes an important tool to alter the lives of these long oppressed, humiliated and exploited people.

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