

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 3 March 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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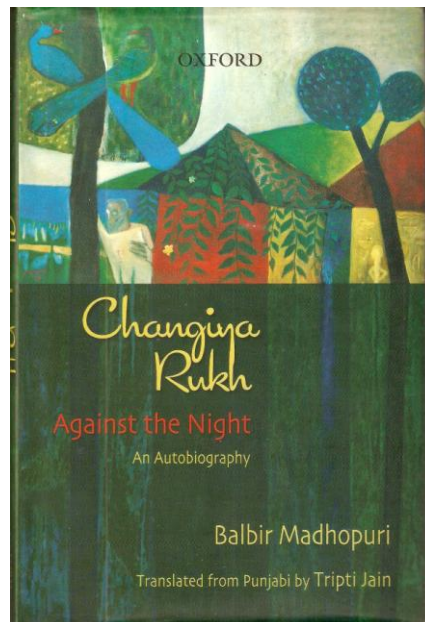
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Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* - A Critique of Dalit Identity and Politics

Ravi Bhushan, Ph.D.



Abstract

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The notion that caste is not on par with race appears to be untenable. In fact caste based discrimination is one of the worst forms of racism because it is practiced against one's own countrymen. Like race, it is determined by birth and does not end with death but passes from generation to generation. Theoretically, it is possible to escape caste (unlike race) by changing one's religion but practically caste follows us into whichever religion we convert to.

Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* is the first Punjabi Dalit autobiography translated into English. **Changiya Rukh** means a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed. The writer has used it as a metaphor for the Dalit Indian whose potential for growth has been marred by the Hindu social order.

Its English translation titled *Against the Night* conveys the hopelessness and pain the author endured and the resistance he in turn put up against the forces of night that tried to suppress him.

Significantly, the lopped tree denotes its inherent and defiant resilience that brings forth fresh shoots of branches and leaves.

A Story of Deprivation

Changiya Rukh is the story of a Dalit's angst of deprivation, social exclusion and humiliation, as well as of resistance, achievement and hope. Born in 1955 in the Ad Dharmi caste, a category of the Chamar caste of ex-untouchables, Balbir Madhopuri is a Panjabi poet with two collections of poems, *Maroothal the Birkh* (Tree of the Desert, 1998) and *Bhakhda Pataal* (The Smouldering Netherworlds, 1992).

B.R. Ambedkar pointed out to M. K. Gandhi that the most serious evil in Hinduism was not the practice of caste hierarchy and exclusion as such, but the upholding of the caste system as a religious idea. Madhopuri objects to the obsession with religion and spiritualism among Dalits as an escapist distraction from the larger project of social democracy. Contrary to the Ambedkar's idea of political solidarity of Dalits, they are oriented towards distinct caste-based religious identity.

Changiya Rukh is a powerful commentary on the intimate otherness of India's subaltern sections of population. Its translation into English has added beauty to Balbir Madhopuri's superb literary creation.

A Tree Lobbed from the Top

Chhaangya Rukh (Against the Night) as the title of Balbir Madhopuri's autobiography is significant. It means a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed. Madhopuri uses it as a metaphor for the Dalit or an 'untouchable' Indian, whose potential for growth has been 'robbed by the Hindu social order'. Significantly, the lopped tree also denotes its

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inherent and defiant resilience by its persistent act to bring forth fresh branches and leaves!

Tracing the Social History of the Dalit Community in Punjab

Set in the village of Madhopur in Punjab, *Changiya Rukh* traces the social history of the Dalit community in Punjab and brings out the caste relations constructed on prejudice and inequality. Madhopuri recounts the bleakness of life, despite all constitutional and legislative measures. The Book poses the question; how a man conducts himself among people who either do not understand him or would like to see him in the slush where they think he belongs. A saga of triumph, this real life story relates a Dalit's angst of deprivation, social exclusion, and humiliation, as well as of resistance, achievement, and hope.

Discrimination

Caste-based discrimination is one of the worst forms of racism because it is practiced against one's own countrymen. Like race, it is determined by birth and does not end with death but passes from generation to generation. In theory, it is possible to escape caste (unlike race) by changing one's religion but in practice, we know, caste follows us into whichever religion we convert to. And, by Hindu belief, it could be part of us even after death.

At first sight, Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* is a Dalit autobiography like many others with all the ingredients that shock and shame non-Dalit Indians, or ought to. The unimaginable, horrific struggle for the barest minimum of survival and the daily brutalization of human instincts are etched as is the incomprehensible capacity of people to survive, escape the tentacles of caste repression and become people of consequence.

In the words of Madhopuri himself, "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". (Bhakhda Pataal, *The Inferno*, 1998)

Testimony to the Suffering – Men and Women in the Autobiography

Changiya Rukh is a powerful testimony to the suffering, angst and attempt at rebellion of the dalit community of *chamars* in Punjab but it is something more. It is this something, which makes it significant as a literary work. It is a lively chronicle of a host of people, each significant and memorable, not as a representative of a caste in one part of the country but as an individual.

There is the sensitive boy in the book, planting a mango sapling, acquired with great labour, in his mud hut to have it roughly snatched by his father (Bhaiya), telling him not to ape upper-caste Jats. He is too small to understand the meaning of caste or of

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defilement, for which he is taunted, abused, beaten, and denied basic human needs. But he has no option but to understand quickly or suffer more humiliation.

There is the Dalit grandmother, Daadi Haro who, by sheer force of personality and an acrid tongue rebukes everybody. “If a Jat woman (or any other woman) passed near her without wishing her, she would say loudly, “Wonder which arrogant bitch just passed by.” Daadi's authority is unchallenged. One day, Taro Tai (who belonged to a Jat family) and Chachi Chinni are on the swing ... when Daadi sees them, no one knows what happened but she shouts, “Is this the only work left for these wanton women? They are not bothered about their husbands... Loose women! Bad ones! The swing stopped... the onlookers slunk away.”

There is the rebellious Phumman, who tells a Jat landlord, “Threaten someone else; those days are gone when all of us bowed and scraped before you. Think before you speak or else I'll pluck your beard.” Alas, ‘those days’ are not really gone, as Madopuri realises when he becomes an Assistant Editor of a magazine in the city. “It seemed to me that the curse of caste had permeated our society and there was no indication of its dying out soon.

The oppressed and hapless father, Bhaiya, too declares time and again in the *chamarli* of the village, “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 own selfish motives.” Though his ranting and railing serves no purpose and he often ends up thrashing his sons, his rejection is heartening. As is his instilling a yearning in Madhopuri to study and escape the drudgery of his birth and help others do it too, through political action.

The mother, *Bua*, and other women are more down to earth. They accept their so-called fate but find ways of dealing with it with courage, determination, even benevolence. They somehow manage to retain their personhood and deal with life as women and mothers do, anywhere, anytime. There are innumerable minor characters who, transcending the caste-stereotypes, show their human face, to make the writer title a chapter as ‘an oasis in a desert’.

Rural Poverty

Changiya Rukh, which means a chopped tree, is a metaphor of mutilation and a symbolic image of enforced stunting of something made small and inferior so that the others appear larger and superior, an excellent parallel to the position of the Dalits in this deeply divided society.

Balbir Madhopuri movingly describes rural poverty and the hunger in the dry, wintry months, the closely-knit relationships among the Ad Dharm community to which he belonged and the centrality of his 100 year old grandmother in shaping the lives of not only her immediate family, but almost every women in that village. Burdened with the

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stigma of untouchability in the Jat heartland, he grows up to learn that tea is an inferior drink because only the lower castes drink it, whereas milk was the staple beverage of the upper castes.

The Inner Turmoil

In *Changiya Rukh*, the author documents the inner turmoil to which Dalits are reduced whenever they have to conceal their caste identity. We observe instances of how, sometimes, the Dalit people themselves internalize the view of caste-Hindu society and develop a feeling of inferiority. Simultaneously, Balbir reveals how he was so upset with his Hindu-sounding surname that he dropped it and instead took up the name of his birthplace Madhopur. By expunging one identity, and taking on another, he succeeds in rejecting an entire history of oppression.

Orphaned Cause

Balbir notes how neither the Communist movement, nor the movement for an independent Khalistan actually addressed the problems of the Dalits. The pleasures of discovering Communist literature and writing revolutionary poems is short-lived since Balbir's immediate task at hand is to take up a job and support his family. He moves to Delhi, and with his wife and children, struggles to even find a house since caste-Hindus are unwilling to rent their flats to a person whom they suspect is a Dalit.

The Genre of Dalit Autobiographies

Modern literature is replete with instances of what it means to find one's home, and literary discussions are rife with the idea of returning home, but from a Dalit perspective, the stark reality associated with 'home' is managing to find accommodation.

Dalit autobiographies, address such divisive issues that refuse to go away. Autobiographies are also the most prominent and marketable genre of Dalit literature today.

The caste-Hindu elites' interest in Dalit autobiographies spring not only from the fact that they satisfy the voyeuristic curiosity of the non-Dalits by documenting the lived experiences, but they also provide them the necessary guilt-trip.

Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* dealt with the Bhangis in Uttar Pradesh, Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* portrayed the life in rural Maharashtra, Vasant Moon's *Vasti* (translated by Gail Omvedt as *Growing Up Untouchable in India*) spoke of life in an urban Dalit slum, and Kesharshivam's *Purnasatya* highlighted the plight of Gujarati Dalits. Narendra Jadhav's memoir *Outcaste* probed what it meant to be a highly educated Dalit.

The publication of Dalit autobiographies, coupled with their literary assertion has recast and revitalized the literatures of the regional languages.

Semi-fictional narratives like Bama's *Karukku* and Sivakami's *Grip of Change* recorded what it meant to be young Dalit women under the shadow of casteism. Urmila Pawar's *Aydaan* (rendered into English as *The Weave of My Life*) is not merely testimony but also manifesto—seeking to locate the position of the Dalit woman within the stifling constructs of casteism and patriarchy without sensationalizing or romanticizing suffering.

Every narrative has unfailingly recorded how the rural structure is strict in its segregation: Dalit *wadas/ cheris/ colonies/ bastis* were all set away from the caste-Hindu village, a banishment that was brutal not only because of the geographic exclusion but also because of how easy it became for the oppressors to launch violent attacks on the Dalit people.

The Effect of First Person Stories

These first-person life stories are a means of expressing angst and assertion, they reverberate with an experience of pain and discriminatory politics, and they uniformly seek to exorcise the ghost of untouchability that has haunted their communities. For a nation that loves to live in denial, such authentic narratives will hopefully lead to a greater engagement with understanding, and possibly, eradicating caste.

Madhopuri uses the metaphor of *Changiya Rukh* to describe the Dalits' lives, robbed from traditions and slashed and dwarfed by the society. This book is a reflection of Indian society, customs and her social order. The author has used his literary skill very nicely. Words are interwoven gently, prose reads like poetry. The events are described in a well manner and catch the imagination of reader. The humiliation of Dalits is a bolt on any civilized society but this humiliation does not look like, that sort of thing due to the response of Indian society.

Globalization Only Affects Economic Situation, Not the Social Front

The effect of globalization seems to exist only on economical front not in social front. Social front of this nation should develop. People should respect the others life, and regard other fellow beings as their brothers and should give space to every one to grow prosperously. The book is not just an autobiography written by a Dalit, it also shows human suffering.

Focus of Dalit Literature

Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and negativism, as it is intimately linked with hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as `untouchables`, are unfortunate bunches

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of social, economic and cultural inequality. Dalit literary movement, therefore, is just not a literal movement but is the logo of change and revolution where the primary aim was the liberation of dalits.

Indian Dalits in post-Independence India had sought new avenues of liberation, which was to later turn into an integral part of the Dalit theology. One of the best representatives of this new wave of Dalit liberation and literary movement was the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra, which made the term 'Dalit' a household name in nearly every Indian region. Further, as has been witnessed before, there was also seen a rise in Dalit literature during the 1960s. Black American Literature indeed had immensely influenced Dalit literary movements.

The word "Dalit" represents a political identity rather than just a caste name. And this precise idea is the nucleus to the Dalit movement, which aims to raze down the caste system and earn for Dalits the rights and freedoms they deserve. Certainly it would help gain many rights restored and also to obtain essential necessities of education, job, etc. However, the aim of razing down the caste system is only a remote possibility, since the Dalit communities are also prone to assert their distinct "caste" identities. They also may tend to retain the age-old prejudices against each other and caste-ranking notions within the Dalit phylum.

Postures toward Dalits among Novelists of Repute

Dalit authors presently are able to show not only the hostile circumstances in which Dalits live, but also their struggle for emancipation from caste. However, non-Dalit authors - such as Premchand (a high-caste Hindu) and Khushwant Singh, are authors based more on a benevolent level as opposed to one urging change and abolishment of caste. Religion has played a decisive part in the writings of both Dalits and non-Dalits.

In one short story (called *The Poisoned Bread*), a young boy enquires from a Brahmin man supporting Hinduism's caste system, "if a religion can't tolerate one human being treating another simply as a human being, what's the use of such an inhumane religion?"

Millions of Dalits have precisely wondered the same thing. Thus, in the hope of breaking away from their inferior status, millions of Dalits have converted from Hinduism to other religions, yet again leading to a series of Dalit literary movements perhaps ending in no fruitful consequence.

Not Merely a Record of Subjective Perceptions

Madhopuri's narrative of his struggle is not merely a record of the subjective perceptions of a dalit. It opens a window to the objective conditions that existed in the past, as well as to the social relations that have been changing after India's independence. The new generation of Dalits have learnt to confront injustice with reason and with a sense of

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confidence. Hopelessness and despair of Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* was in the past. An important characteristic of this change was a marked determination in the author's community to overcome obstacles and raise their status.

The key to that change was education: *parhai kar ke zaat badalni* (altering caste status by acquiring education). This was the mantra that B.R. Ambedkar had given to his people. But the humiliation of caste prejudice persisted even after joining the elite club of the educated. Though Balbir Madhopuri does not expect an early end to the deeply embedded caste mindedness in Indian society, his writings exude confidence and hope.

Madhopuri wants Dalits to raise their status by their individual effort but at the same time suspects that an individualistic "mobility syndrome" negatively impacts their desired collective struggle for justice and dignity. Madhopuri's dilemma is that while he seeks his identity in his *dalithood*, his Ad Dharm caste, he yet looks forward to a kind of social change whereby an individual would not be identified by his caste.

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