

TRACING THE CONTOURS OF DALIT EXISTENCE, IDENTITY AND BEYOND  
IN BALBIR MADHOPURI'S *CHANGIYA RUKH: AGAINST THE NIGHT*

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**Abstract**

*The current paper is an attempt to highlight the elements of Dalit consciousness, Dalit Existence and Dalit identity in Balbir Madhopuri's Changiya Rukh: Against the Night. This paper focuses on the initial growth and development of Punjabi Dalit literature as a part of dalit contention and spark in postcolonial India. Though, it has a short history, it is very famous. This autobiography talks about the sociologically constructed environment of the dalits and tries to expose the dalit identity. The author shows his journey from a child grappling with extreme poverty to a well-established writer and an officer with the government of India.*

**Key words:** Dalit, Autobiography, Caste, Humiliation, Self, Resistance, Identity, Existence.

It is interesting to note that a considerable number of dalit autobiographies have come up in India today. There are many autobiographies which are penned by relatively young dalit writers and, interestingly, some of them seemed to have become famous due to this. Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* and Sharankumar Limbale's *Outcaste* are the classic examples for that. Similarly, Balbir Madhopuri was not known as a major poet in Punjabi, but *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night*, his autobiography, established him as a major writer in Punjabi literature. The sociological significance of autobiographies has been frequently highlighted by many sociologists. Autobiography makes this position very clear by interrogating the tribulations of autobiography, of past, and of their interactions in society.

Madhopuri's (2004) *Changiya Rukh* is the narration of a successful man, which obviously brings in an element of pride in expression. *Changiya Rukh* is an autobiography by Balbir Madhopuri was first published in Punjabi in the year 2002. It was translated into Hindi as *Changiya Rukh* in 2007 and in 2010 it became the first Punjabi Dalit autobiography to appear in English. Madhopuri lives in New Delhi and is the Deputy Director (News), All India Radio. He retired as in charge of Punjabi publications in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India and Editor of the magazine *Yojana*. Since retirement, he has been serving as the Director of Punjabi Sahitya Sabha New Delhi. He is an established poet and has published several collections of poems besides his autobiography. His autobiography narrates how Balbir Madhopuri and people of his community, struggle to negotiate their way in a society ridden with strict caste prescriptions. Madhopuri writes in the author's note to his autobiography:

"As I unravelled myself and held conversations with myself, I found I was writing the autobiography of my community. It was no longer just my story" (ix)

*Changiya Rukh* is the story of Balbir Madhopuri's angst in the midst of this cycle of deprivation, social exclusion and humiliation, as well as a narrative of resistance, achievement and hope. Madhopuri was born in the village Madhopur, in district Jullandhar of Punjab. His parents were agricultural labourers. He had an elder brother and three younger sisters. His father motivated him to study and Madhopuri received his M. A. in Punjabi from Layallpur Khalsa College in Jullandhar.

Balbir Madhopuri, a Panjabi poet and autobiographer is a Chamar, (a Dalit Caste) by caste has written the first Panjabi Dalit autobiography *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night*. It represents the world the social isolation, inner anguish, traumas, humiliation on one hand and fights for identity, dignity, achievement, and hope of the Dalit writer on the other. The Punjabi title *Changiya Rukh* is used by the writer is a metaphor for the Dalits whose growth and development has been robbed and garroted by the Hindu's caste based discrimination.

*Changiya Rukh* brings out the impact of the caste system on Dalit life. The author describes the familiar setting of squalor and filth in the Dalit quarter and underline filth as a part of Dalit life. Madhopuri attempts to analyze it in the structural context of society. He ascribes

the filth in Dalit *basties* to the Varna system. He writes that Dalits are made to live in the outer and lower parts of a village because "*this class of people, in accordance with the Hindu social system, are not a part of the caste system and do not belong within the four varnas; even their shadows are to be avoided*" (9). He adds:

"The second factor was that the dirty water of the village flows towards the west, which is the lower part of the village; and it is believed that not only should they not

pollute clean water but also that these people should live in dirt, mire, and slime. This hateful, inhuman system still prevails in the villages of India” (10)

Madhopuri's hatred for *jativad* is expressed repeatedly and lucidly in *Changiya Rukh*. Even his love for poetry is reflected in his autobiography as the words are arranged in such way that it looks like prose in poetry. It presents his life story since his childhood up to his middle-aged life. The writing style of this autobiography is different as it is not written in traditional way of writing autobiography. Writer's first hand experiences and of his community is presented in form of stories which are depicted in an appealing manner. Balbir Madhopuri has presented the history of Dalit life of the village in particular and of Punjab in general. He has written caste-based prejudices of the Madhopuri village. He has depicted that the non-Dalits of the village wanted the autobiographer to be a farm labourer as their forefathers were. This creates anguish in the mind of the Dalit writer. This inner anguish comes out in form of *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night*. The autobiographer's life at village Madhopuri in Punjab is narrated in it.

The book opens with geographical description of rivers and places of Punjab. Since their childhood atrocities are experienced by the Dalits and Madhopuri is not an exception. He has presented the prejudiced behaviors of the orthodox Jats, upper-caste in Punjab. The Dalit autobiography first focuses on objective narration and then subjective narration. There is no exception in *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night*. The narration of atrocities is common in Dalit literature and is realistically presented in the memoir:

“If low-caste boy were to come out on the lanes of the village, all bathed and dressed in new clothes, his hair combed, on or the other of the Jats sitting under the tree 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)

Madhopuri has presented that Dalits were conscious enough not to surrender any threat or atrocity of the non-Dalits. Further, Dalits were aware of their dignity. They would not ready to do work at the cost of their dignity. When zamindar (landlord) tried to threaten the Dalits, Banta, Madhopuri's uncle did not afraid of them:

“Fine! You will find out at the police station. I'll see you there. You are talking rubbish and so arrogantly!’ ‘Thoo-thoo’ threatened us again. ‘Threaten someone else; those days are gone when all of them scraped and bowed before you,” . . . (31)

Poverty is authentically portrayed in the autobiography. Madhopuri has presented how he and his sister-in-law went to collect meal at the houses of the non-Dalits. Those non-Dalits humiliate the author and his sister-in-law by throwing food at them:

“Leaving my younger sister at home and picking up a small thali and cloth, I set off with my sister-in-law . . . we would go to the houses of these zamindars, sit in their courtyards and put out our bowls for rotis. Their women threw the rotis from top and we would adroitly catch them. The dal and vegetables were also ladled out from above into our bowls, and sometimes blistering hot splashes fell on our feet”. (33)

Time and again, though constitution of India has abolished untouchability forever. In many parts of Indian society it is practiced. This very fact is presented in the autobiography. Madhopuri has narrated anguish of his father. He remembered how hard his father worked in the fields of landlord to grown grains. And the same grains when ripen, could not be touched by the Dalits; because it defiled if the Dalit touched them:

“I had seen my father storing the grain in the granaries and bins at Iqbal Singh’s house, and heard him mutter, ‘Today, we walk barefoot on this mound of grain, but once it is stored, we would not be allowed to touch it, our touch contaminates it.’ Who will let us come in here tomorrow!” (33)

Use of regional vernacular is one of the distinctive elements of the Dalit writings. Madhopuri has written the autobiography in the same way. Use of bitter-tongue through his Daadi (grandmother) adds mark of authenticity in the autobiography. His Daadi is very bold personality and could scold anyone who tries to get nasty with her. She even not spares Tai Taro, the non-Dalit woman. Even Tai Taro has to shut her mouth:

“Daadi’s fair, wrinkled face was red with fury. . . . As he passed by me, he said, “Satto has many lovers, some sweepers and other cobblers! I say, Satto may be your favorite mare”—bastard!’ Daadi banged her stick on the ground, and the ‘thak-thak’ of the stick sounded like an assertion of her anger and pride. It seemed to me that she had an inexhaustible treasure of sharp and bitter words. . . ‘You are always ridiculing one and all, you sharp one. You start babbling about things, without learning the facts.’ Daadi scolded Tai, shutting her up. It had to be accepted that Tai Taro also did not behave saucily with Daadi” (41-42)

From his village he moved to Delhi. He thought that he would not face such caste based discrimination there but in vain. Even the capital of India is not free from the prejudices and atrocities of the non-Dalits towards the Dalits. He experienced similar humiliations in Delhi as he used to in his village. Then he realized the importance of writing. He used writing as a powerful weapon to fight for his identity, equality and dignity. His autobiography ends with his decision of writing about Dalits’ problems, sorrow, sufferings, etc. Thus, he wrote his life story:

“I realized that life was a struggle and there was no escape from it. If I wanted to expand my horizons, I needed to put all the tumult within me into my writings . . . .”(209)

Thus, Madhopuri's narration skill is admirable. The autobiography exposes the reality of Indian caste-based discrimination. The book presents tyrannies, atrocities, ignominy, and inhumanity of the orthodox and shallow minded non-Dalits. Dalit autobiography writers have presented genuine portrayal of saga of oppressed. Unlike the mainstream autobiography, Dalit autobiography presents a different taste in the field of literature. He gives a comprehensive picture of Dalit life which narrates the oppression of Dalits but, at the same time, emphasizes the struggle, resistance and progress of Dalits. While doing so, he has kept away from highlighting the wretchedness of Dalits excessively and has rather brought out the progressive aspects of their lives which create hope under an ugly social order (xxiv). This is also reflected in the English subtitle *Against the Night* that highlights the resolution to overcome hardships and resistance against the night of despair. Despite being challenged by the *jati* system and its ramifications, the author pursues education and makes a good career. Therefore, like *Joothan*, *Changiya Rukh* presents the journey of a person who is born Avarna, but goes beyond social structure and becomes a Dalit with a strong identity and a deep engagement with Dalit consciousness. Through this discourse of writing, he yet looks forward to a kind of social change whereby an individual would not be identified by his caste and even a dalit should significantly retrieve Dalits' human identity through literature

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