

READING GURDIAL SINGH: A REFLECTION ON CASTE AND GENDER IN PUNJAB

Narender Kumar

Introduction

The Indian Constitution has emphasized the equality of men and women. But the Constitutional equality does not have much space in the house where traditions have more importance than rationality. The very origin of family is based on gender inequalities. Woman is always expected to perform all household chores while man enjoys freedom from such household responsibilities. The division of work, which women do and men do not do, is legitimized by the religion and culture which discriminate between men and women. The problem of gender inequality lies in the religion and culture which propagate one's superiority over the other.¹ Right from the beginning, children naturalize the idea of superior and inferior gender by observing their parents performing their duties. In a caste society like India, the question of gender equality becomes more complicated because caste determines one's socio-economic position in the society. And a woman's position determines her subjection in the male dominant society.

In the Hindu social order, women and Dalits are the most marginalized groups. Their marginalization is propagated and legitimized in the name of religion. Undoubtedly during the medieval period Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Ravi Das and many more contested the legitimized marginalization of Dalits and women in Hindu social order.² But it was only during the colonial rule that the issues of Dalit and women began to be addressed. The educated Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jotiba Phule, M. G. Ranade, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and many more, who got benefit from colonial education policy, realized a need for social reform. It was the result of social reform movement that the British Raj introduced certain laws like the prohibition of Sati (1829), and Widow Remarriage Act (1856).³ The social reformers also emphasized on

women's education and towards the end of the nineteenth century women began to speak against the patriarchal social system. Tara Bai Shinde's *Stri-PurushTulna* (1882) is a critique of patriarchy and caste hierarchy. The tract "serves to mark Shinde's polemic as one of the first *feminist* critiques of caste."⁴

In the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of educated women had emerged on the Indian political horizon. "The formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927 was a crucial event in women's march towards equality."⁵ Such educated women, who were aware of their economic position in the family, pressurized the British Raj for certain rights in the family property. The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937 was the result of women's struggle for economic right in the family property. According to this Act "the widow of the deceased, the widow of the predeceased son and of his grandson and great-grandson – they were all made simultaneous heirs along with the son."⁶ The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937 had certain ambiguities regarding the share of daughters in the family property. To sort out such ambiguities the government appointed Rau Committee in 1941. This Committee recommended that "the Hindu personal law should be reformed and codified . . ."⁷ Due to problem of clarity on the matter "a second Rau Committee was appointed in 1944, they reiterated their recommendation . . . and presented the government with a draft Hindu Code."⁸

After Independence Ambedkar, the first law minister, presented the Hindu Code Bill (1951). The Bill was proposed to protect the interests of girls in the family property as Ambedkar writes: "The only innovation that we are making is that her [daughter's] share is increased and that we bring her in the line with the son or the widow."⁹ But the Bill could not get passed because of the lack of support. Later on, under Hindu Succession Act 1956 (HSA) equal property rights were given to daughter, mother and widow. Since then, "The states of Punjab and Haryana made several attempts to abolish or amend the 1956 Act."¹⁰ It is interesting to observe that Punjab and Haryana always wanted not to implement the HSA because in these states the structure of patriarchy exists more strongly than any other Indian states.

Contextualizing Literature: Emergence of Caste and Gender Issues

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, religious identity became an issue of concern between the Sikhs and the Hindus. Emergence

of Singh Sabha (1872) and Arya Samaj (1877) represents the construction of religious boundaries between the Hindus and the Sikhs.¹¹ Such issue began to be reflected in literature as Bhai Veer Singh who wrote the first Punjabi novel *Sundri* (1898) raised the issue of separate Sikh identity. Later on Charan Singh Shahid in his novels *Daler Kaur* (1910) and *Ranjit Kaur* (1913) and Mohan Singh Vaid in his novels *Ik Sikh Gharana* (*One Sikh Family* 1913), *Shushil Vidva* (*Cultured Widow*, 1917), and *Shreshth Kulan Di Chaal* (*Good Family's Tradition*, 1911) represented the issues of identity and women's exploitation.

Before the emergence of Gurdial Singh on Punjabi literary horizon Nanak Singh (his novels *Chitta Lahoo*, 1932, *Tuti Vina*, 1946, and *Gangajali Vich Sharab*, 1946), Amrita Pritam (*Doctor Dev*, 1948, and *Pinjar*, 1952), Jaswant Singh Kanwal (*Civil Lines*, 1952 and *Hani*, 1997), Sant Singh Sekhon (*Lahoo-Mitti*, 1949) and Surinder Singh Narula (*Pio-Puttar*, 1946) have raised the issue of caste discrimination and women's exploitation in Punjabi society. Gurdial Singh, right from his first novel *Madi Da Diva* (1964), attracts our attention to marginalized subjects like Dalits and women. His other novels like *Unhoye* (1966), *Aathan-Uggan* (1974), and *Anhe Ghode Da Daan* (1976) also sensitize the exploitation of women. The specificity of Gurdial Singh's novels is that they bring into light the socio-economic difference that exists among the women of various castes and classes. For example, there is economic difference between the peasants and landlords. His fictional world raises questions such as: how do women of both categories (landlord and peasant) get exploited by men? How do Dalit women get exploited by the upper caste landlords as well as by Dalit men? How does patriarchy work among the Dalits?

Earlier, the problems of Dalit women and upper caste women were addressed with the same perspective but by the 1990s the scholars realized that there is a difference between the subjectivity of Dalit women and upper caste women and because of difference between subjectivity and socio-economic position; the issues of Dalit women and upper caste women cannot be addressed with the same perspective. Understanding the position of women in various socio-economic categories P. G. Jogdand writes: "...it would not be realistic to presume that the women in any society are a homogeneous lot—culturally, socially and economically. The problems of women vary from one social stratum to another, one cultural group to another and also from one economic stratum to another."¹² Later on scholars like Gopal Guru raised the issue of Dalit women's separate subjectivity

and specificity. Guru argues that Dalit women have specific social situation and subjectivity; their issues cannot be addressed as “common” with the issues of the upper caste women.¹³ By the 1990s, a group of educated Dalit women has emerged and because of their ‘lived experience’ this group has recognized the specificity of Dalit women in Indian society and “an independent and autonomous assertion of Dalit women’s identity found its first expression in the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) at Delhi on August 11 [1995].”¹⁴

Before the emergence of NFDW, Dalit women’s issues had been addressed by the upper caste women. In other words, the upper caste women used to speak on the behalf of Dalit women. In this regard Sharmila Rege writes: “Social location determines the perception of reality and therefore the representation of dalit women’s issues by non-dalit women was less valid and less authentic.”¹⁵ It was only after the foundation of NFDW that Dalit women began to raise the issue of patriarchy and inter-caste marriage among the Dalits. Earlier such issues of caste and gender among the Dalits have not been paid much attention by the scholars.

Gurdial Singh’s novels *Madi Da Diva*, *Unhoye*, *Aathan-Uggan*, and *Anhe Ghode Da Daan* are located in the 1960s and 1970s. These novels represent the situational difference between the upper caste and the lower caste women. The victimization of Dalit women sensitizes the caste and gender issue in Punjab.

Arranged Marriage: An Imposed Decision

Gurdial Singh’s novel *Madi Da Diva* represents a rebellious woman Bhani, who even after being married, falls in love with a lower caste Jagseer. In arranged marriage, a girl does not have any right to choose her husband; rather her husband is selected by her family members, either by father or brother. Arranged marriage is a system in which the girl/woman hardly has any say. The system of arranged marriage is an imposed decision upon girls. Under social obligation girls accept the boys ‘selected’ by their families. But the desire for a husband of their own choice always remains repressed in their unconscious mind. And even after marriage, if they find a man of their choice, openly or secretly they develop a relationship with such a person of their choice.

The social normative, tradition, culture and popular image of woman in a society do not allow them to cross the threshold of patriarchy. But exceptions are always there. The character of Bhani

in *Madi Da Diva* represents such an exception, for she does not accept any imposed decision. As soon as Bhani comes in contact with Jagseer, she finds it difficult to repress the desire for a man of her choice. Her relationship with Jagseer touches its peak when she provokes Jagseer for physical satisfaction: "If you have some desire speak directly, a coward cannot be a lover..."¹⁶

But unfortunately her mother-in-law listens to Bhani's conversation with Jagseer and informs Nika, Bhani's husband. Her extra-marital affair does not suit to the popular image of a married woman. A married woman is expected to be faithful to her husband. As per the instructions of scriptures even the thought of a man, other than her husband, is considered a sin for her. And an affair with an untouchable is considered worse than a sin.¹⁷ Bhani has to face the consequences of her inter-caste extramarital affair. She is beaten up by her husband and mother-in-law. Nika's mother says: "Kill this Chandri. Beat, beat and cut her into pieces."¹⁸ The word '*chandri*', which Nika's mother uses for Bhani, has cultural significance. The word *chandri* is used for prostitutes or the women who used to do *mujra*. Chandri, therefore, signifies prostitute. Bhani has not only crossed the boundaries fixed for a married woman but also the limitation of caste hierarchy. Bhani belongs to the Nai community but she has an affair with Jagseer, a man who belongs to the Chuhra community. The Chuhra is considered to be at the bottom of caste hierarchy. Her affair with Jagseer is against both the norms of marriage and caste hierarchy. One of Nika's relatives, who notices Jagseer at Nika's house, raises the question: "This is very bad Nikiya! An untouchable comes to your house, this is not right. It is okay if someone is from our own caste, if he is from the neighbour. How can a camel have a relationship with a buffalo-calf?"¹⁹

His statement indicates two points: first, caste hierarchy; second, control over woman's sexuality. Since Jagseer is an untouchable, he is not supposed to visit the house of a Nai. Jagseer's presence, especially in the absence of Nika, is a threat to Bhani's chastity. His statement indirectly suggests that a woman can have relationship only within her caste. That is the reason he metaphorically said: "How can a camel have a relation with a buffalo-calf?" These words camel and buffalo signify two different castes, which Jagseer and Bhani belong to. As these two animals (camel and buffalo) have nothing to do with each other, likewise, Nai and Chuhra can have no association. Such a statement reflects social hierarchy according to which an untouchable cannot have access to the house of an upper caste. Especially, an untouchable is not expected to have a dialogue with

an upper caste woman. Covertly it is a question of caste hierarchy but it is more concerned with the issue of woman's chastity. So it is woman's chastity in the guise of caste hierarchy that Nika's relative wants to protect by prohibiting the entry of a lower caste.

Lower Caste Women as Commodities

Control over the means of production generates multiple modes of exploitation. The upper castes' control over land, which is the major source of income in rural Punjab, enslaves the lower castes. There was a time when social relation of production between the landholding and landless castes was known as *jajmani* system under which the lower castes used to work for the landholding castes.²⁰ Gurdial Singh's novels are located in the 1960s and 1970s Punjab. During this period, because of mechanization of farming, the *jajmani* system had already begun to decline. The landholding castes had realized that hiring labourers on a daily wage was better than the *jajmani* system which proved more expensive. The specificity of the system was that the male members of the lower caste families used to work in the fields of the upper caste and female used to do odd jobs in the house of the upper castes. Under such social relation of production, women from the landless castes used to be more vulnerable to sexual violence. Because of economic insecurity, the lower castes women had to do a favour to the upper caste men. The feudal tradition such as *muhdikhai* (showing the face of a newly married lower caste woman) was the result of hegemonic control of the upper castes over lower castes. Gurdial Singh makes a reference to this tradition of *muhdikhai* in his novel *Madi Da Diva*. The upper caste (Jatt) Ghela and Gheba with Jagseer go to the house of a common friend, Nika, who belongs to the Nai community. Nika is newly married and Ghela, Gheba and Jagseer want to see the face of Nika's newly married wife.

Seeing the face of a newly married woman was a common practice in Punjab as it happens, two upper caste boys (Gheba and Ghela) pressurize Nika to show the face of his wife. The language which they use for Nika's wife and their attitude to Nika reflect their upper caste psyche:

"How are you, oye! Looking like a spinning post. Just escape to show your wife, you do not talk to us. Is she a *Pari* (fairy) of Indra's court? Marrying a Barber woman of two and a half anna, you consider yourself Alexander the Great! Look at brother-in-law's monkey face." Ghela said by making a face.²¹

This joke is not an ordinary joke; rather it reflects the collective

consciousness of the upper castes. Since Nika belongs to the Nai community which used to work as subordinate of the upper caste landlords under *jajmani* system in north India; not only Nai but almost all the castes used to do be assigned job for the landlords. *Jajmani* was a system under which the lower castes were completely dependent on the landlords. For example, if a male Nai would do the job of a messenger, his wife would do domestic work at the house of the landlord. Ghela's comment that "marrying a Barber woman of two and half anna, you consider yourself Alexander the Great" suggests caste subordination. Caste rule is the ultimate determiner of Nai's occupation in the Indian society. Bhani is a Nai woman and being a Nai woman she is obliged to serve at landlord's house. Ghela's words "a barber woman of two and a half anna" indicate the caste superiority complex. It also points out Bhani's economic status. For survival the Barber women used to do menial work in the house of upper castes:

[A] barber woman renders personal services to the women of the jajman's family—or a family which engages the barber woman on cash payment—which include the cutting of nails, the decoration of feet (with special colored solutions), a special oil massage and a bath for a new born baby and its mother, the supplying of leaf cups and leaf plates for feasts and the role of companion to the bride during the wedding ceremony.²²

Being the domestic helper they were easily available to the upper caste men. Ghela's statement about Nika's wife has sexual connotation. Because of economic vulnerability of the lower caste women, it is a common perception among the upper caste men that the lower caste women can be easily won for a sexual favour. This perception is almost common among the upper caste men without regional disparity.

Ghela and Gheba are not satisfied with a momentum look of Nika's wife. Ghela reflects his dissatisfaction in the following words: "This is just a glimpse; we could not have a proper look. It was a worthless exercise."²³ Ghela was dissatisfied because he could not enjoy the beauty of Nika's wife for a long time. His dissatisfaction reflects his desire for a lower caste woman. Nika's mother understands Ghela's dissatisfaction and tries to console him by saying: "My son, how long she will stay like that! Only for two or four months she will stay in the house. After that she has to work in your house at the occasion of marriage and other ceremonies."²⁴ Nika's mother understands the power imbedded in the personalities of Ghela and Gheba, as they are the sons of landlords. She, being a Barber woman, also recognizes her family's economic vulnerability as well as the unspoken agreement

under which a lower caste woman is expected to offer her services to the upper caste men. That is the reason she consoles them with a hope that after few months Nika's wife would work in their houses.

Here in the context of Ghela and Gheba, the tradition of '*muhdikhai*' is an exercise of power. There would hardly be any lower caste man who could dare to pressurize any upper caste friend to show the face of his newly married wife. Only the upper caste men have this privilege. Caste hierarchy does not permit a lower caste man to have a look at the upper caste women. This is not because Ghela and Gheba are young and at this growing age men generally have desire for women. Rather having a desire for lower caste women is part of the upper caste feudal culture. The similar desire for a lower caste woman's body can be noticed in an old man Buta, who looking at a Barber woman, recalls his past:

"This Nain [Nai woman] was so beautiful in those days. Perhaps, you did not see Dasondiya."

"Now she has lost her beauty; in those days she had so sharp nose like sword. Whichever side she looked, men used to run after her. Four hands long height. When she walked, she walked like an elephant. . . ."²⁵

Ghela and Gheba's desire for a look of Nika's wife and Buta's lusty narrative of a Nai woman focus on the sexuality of Nai women. Buta's narrative exposes how the Nai women would have been treated by the upper castes, especially by the Jatts. Buta's "gaze" is not a normal "gaze" with which men generally look at women. Rather Buta's "gaze" represents the upper caste men's "desire" for the lower caste women. In the context of 'gaze', Laura Mulvey writes:

[S]copophilia arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. . . . In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.²⁶

While recalling the beauty of Santi, Buta enjoys the sexual pleasure. Looking at her body, Buta not only narrates the beauty of different parts but also turns her into a sexual object. This is not a common practice in Punjab that the elder and younger brothers discuss a woman's sexuality as openly as Buta does with his younger brother Dasonda Singh. Especially an old man would never talk in such a derogatory manner about women of his own caste. But here in this context, Buta and Dasonda Singh discuss the sexuality of a lower caste woman without bothering about the existing moral code. So the "gaze", with which Buta looks at Santi, is determined by caste,

class and gender. In case of Bhani and Santi (both are Nai women), caste is the ultimate determiner. It is the caste rules which make them a resourceless class. Being a resourceless class they survive on the castes which have control over the means of production. Lower caste women's economic dependency determines their subjection. They find it difficult to resist against the advances of the upper caste men. Lower caste women's silence strengthens the 'desire' of the upper caste men for the lower caste women's body. Under such hegemonic relationship men from the landholding castes always expect a sexual favour from the lower caste women and such traditions exist in the society in the form of an unspoken compromise between the so-called upper castes and lower castes.

Ghela and Gheba's desire to have a look at Nika's wife and Buta's erotic narrative of Santi's beauty are also part of the upper caste feudal culture. Both narratives represent the subjection of the Nai women in two different times and in two different relations of production. Under *jajmani* system Ghela and Gheba pressurize Nika to show the face of his wife. Nika's mother herself accepts the fact that after a few months Bhani (Nika's wife) would work in Ghela and Gheba's house during the marriage ceremony and other auspicious occasions. In such social relation of production between the landholding caste (Jatt) and landless caste, a Nai woman is not completely engaged with the domestic work of the landlord. Rather she would work in the house of the landlord only during the marriage and other auspicious occasions. Such engagement of the lower caste woman with the work in the house of the upper caste points out to the presence of the *jajmani* system.

Madi Da Diva was published in 1964 and 1960s was the time when Green Revolution had already begun in Punjab. With the mechanization of farming, such social relations of production had already begun to decline. The landholding caste, Jatt had realized that *jajmani* system was expensive while the lower castes had realized that it was an exploitative system. But to some extent *jajmani* system was still in practice. Therefore, Ghela and Gheba exercise the unspoken agreement to pressurize Nika to show the face of his newly married wife.

Buta's statement about Santi is taken from *Aathan-Uggan* which was published in the 1974. There is a gap of 10 years between the publications of these novels. During this period the mode of agricultural production got changed along with social relations. The lower castes are no more engaged with the upper castes under *jajmani* system. For instance, Santi is hired by landlord Dasonda Singh on

a monthly salary. This new mode of work such as salary system or daily wage did not liberate the lower castes and rather generated new modes of exploitation.

Both novels *Madi Da Diva* and *Aathan-Uggan* expose the sexual exploitation of the lower caste women. Though caste hierarchy does not permit sexual liaison between the upper caste men and Dalit women but such norms are limited only to the Hindu scriptures. In everyday life the upper castes do not follow such rules. The sexual liaison between Rati, a young Dalit widow from the Chamar community and Bachchna, an influential Jatt in the novel *Aathan-Uggan*, is not an imaginary account. Such sexual liaison points out to social reality. Rati lives an independent life and does not have any connection with anyone from her community. Being an influential landlord, Bachchna has easy access to Rati.

Undoubtedly, Rati willingly has sexual relationship with Bachchna. But sometimes “will” is not “will”; it is rather a socio-economic compulsion. This is what happens to Rati who being a landless Dalit widow does not have any other option but to oblige landlord Bachchna with a sexual favour. Rati’s sexual favour is a means to survival rather than an act of her will. Bachchna not only keeps a sexual liaison with Rati but also invites another landlord Jarnail to share Rati. Bachchna through his invitation wants to make Jarnail realize that he has access to Dalit women. His access to Dalit women is a way of power projection. Here a Dalit woman’s body signifies a site on which the landlords exercise power. Keeping Dalit women as concubines is a symbol of power practice.

For survival sometimes Dalit women have sexual relationship with the upper caste landlords. Such economic vulnerability can be noticed from Rati’s words: “Welcome! Welcome! Today, how does the God put His feet into the house of an ant? Come, come and have a seat! It is a fortunate for me, an unlucky woman!”²⁷ The popular image of God is as the protector of everybody. God is one on whose mercy everybody survives. Jokingly Rati addresses Bachchna as God but her joke reflects her unconscious mind. For a landless Dalit widow like Rati the image of a landlord, on whose resources Dalits survive, cannot be less than God. The socio-economic power, which Bachchna carries in his personality, turns him into a God for Rati. By addressing Bachchna as God, Rati accepts Bachchna’s power and surrenders herself to him. Her humility, which she shows to Bachchna and Jarnail when they come to her house, is the reflection of her socio-economic compulsion.

The socio-economic vulnerability of Dalits generates exploitative

social relation of production. It is under such social relation of production that the exploitation of Dalit women continues till date. Bachchna is familiar with Rati but the way he looks at Rati's body raises the question of male gaze: "He begins to look at each and every part of her peanut like round body. Her sound shoulders, full breast, heavy hips, and strong thighs like wrestler. He feels a sense of heat coming out of her body."²⁸ Bachchna's excitement can be noticed from the way he takes pleasure in looking at Rati's body. In the context of visual pleasure Freud writes:

Visual impression remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused; indeed, natural selection counts upon the accessibility of this pathway—if such teleological form of statement permissible—when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object. The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with the civilization keeps sexual curiosity awake. This sexual curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts.²⁹

Being the influential landlords both Bachchna and Jarnail sexually exploit Rati. In the day, social norms and practice of untouchability do not allow the upper caste men to enter into Dalit localities. Night is the safest time for the upper caste men like Bachchna and Jarnail to visit to the house of Dalit. At night there is darkness everywhere and in dark, human beings feel free from all social norms and rituals. Taking advantage of the night, human beings perform all such acts which they cannot perform in the day. This is what Bahchna and Jarnail do. And this is how observing such sexual relationship we realize that whole discourse of caste is hypocrisy.

Furthermore, there is no scope of resistance against such sexual liaison which happens with the consent of Dalit women. In the context of Rati, the sexual liaison happens with her consent and the landlords Bachchna and Jarnail take her to the farmhouse. But as soon as Dalits come to know about the incidence, it becomes a question of prestige for them. They try to bring the issue to the notice of the village chief. Their efforts do not bring any positive result. Rather, Bachchna and Jarnail, with the help of police and government, implicate them in false cases.

The nexus between the upper caste landlords, government and police reveals that the whole state is under the control of landlords. The landholding castes determine which political party will make the government. Being economically sound, the landholding caste, directly or indirectly, controls government and government machinery to some extent. So, the nexus of landholding caste, government and government machinery always suppress the voice

of the marginalized groups. Such use of the government machinery by the dominant caste raises the question about the function of democracy. Democracy is considered the government of the people, by the people and for the people. In the context of Indian democracy Vivek Kumar writes:

Indian democracy is the maintenance of monopoly of certain ‘*jatis*’ over the institutions of governance, production and education. For the real analysis of the role of ‘*jati*’ in Indian democracy, therefore, we will have to analyse the social composition of the aforesaid institutions. . . . These institutions are polity, judiciary, bureaucracy, industry, university, civil society and media. . . . the present data of the composition of these institutions does not indicate that these institutions are democratizing.³⁰

In the Indian context, democracy, if we analyse on the basis of the above mentioned paragraph and increasing atrocities against Dalits, can be categorized as caste democracy. The Dalit novels such as Joseph Macwan’s *The Step Child* (1988), which is located in colonial Gujarat, exposes how the landholding community before India’s Independence had established its control over bureaucracy in Gujarat. Such dominance of the upper castes in politics and bureaucracy is nicely represented in the novel: “Dehlavala is now the member of the regional assembly. [Dehlavala is a landlord and he has played a major role in atrocities against Dalits] These are all signs of the so-called swaraj for us. Look at it. Even I do not want foreign rule to last, for us it will be like the thugs have gone, and left the robbers behind”³¹ Similarly, P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* (2006) narrates the collaboration of the landlords, bureaucracy and politicians. Basically it is the landholding community which determines the action of both the politicians and the bureaucracy. With their political influence and capital, the landlords never get punished whatever injustice they have done to the Dalits. As in the novel Paranjothi Udayar an upper caste landlord, even after raping and badly beating a Dalit woman, manages a deal with the police:

‘Money is not a problem,’ Paranjothi quickly assured them. ‘I’m willing to spend. Please solve this problem for me.’ . . .As the two policemen rose to leave, Paranjothi disappeared into a room. They could hear the sound of a safe being opened. He soon returned with two 10-rupee bundles. He handed one bundle to each policeman.³²

Undoubtedly, the Indian Constitution provides certain provisions for the protection of Dalits. But the political power and government machinery always remains in the hands of the upper castes. “An unofficially established trend exists today of police collaborating

with dominant caste perpetrators to file false cases against the Dalit women or their families in order to pressurize them to withdraw cases or make out-of-court settlements.”³³ This is what happens in the case of Rati. Instead of investigating the case the police inspector implicates those Dalits into false cases who raise voice against the landlords. For this favour Bachchna and Jarnail not only bribes the police inspector but they also plan to make Rati sleep with him (inspector). However, they could not succeed in their plan:

Bachchna had already sent one person to ask Rati to come to the farmhouse. But she has not come; they keep on waiting till the dawn. Again they send one person but he returned with a message that she is not feeling well. Then Bachchna and Jarnail went themselves but they were surprised to see that Rati was not there in her house. When they enquired, they came to know she was sleeping in the house of Sadhu Baba.³⁴

Bachchna eagerly looks for Rati as he considers her as a commodity that can be shared with anyone: either with Jarnail or with police inspector. The caste hierarchy privileges the upper castes in such a way that they assume a right over Dalit women. The search for Rati by landlord Bachchna and Jarnail is a reflection of such an assumption. Rati is not the only Dalit woman who has been subjected to sexual exploitation by the landlords. The novel *Aathan-Uggan* further underscores the prevalence of Dalit women's exploitation. Munder, the protagonist in the novel, narrates how his mother was abducted by Nehru Fauji:

This happened 20 or 22 years earlier. There was law and order situation in the state. Nehru Fauji took advantage of such a volatile situation and took his mother somewhere. They did not get any news of her till five months. Leaving him alone at home for 10 days, his father visited to police station, tehsil, unknown villages and cities but he could not trace her.³⁵

This narrative points out to the volatile situation after Independence. Lal Singh Dil, a Punjabi Dalit poet, in his autobiography *Dastaan* (1998) also narrates the kidnapping of the lower caste women by the upper castes.³⁶ In fact the novel *Aathan-Uggan* exposes the subjection of Dalit women in two generations. In the previous generation, when Munder's mother was abducted, his father, as narrated in the passage above, went to police but police did not trace his mother. Now in the case of Rati, instead of investigating the case in a fair manner, the police collaborate with the landlords. There is a gap of almost 22 years in these two incidents. But during this span of more than 20

years, there is no change in the police's role. Earlier, police did not help Dalits, as it cooperated with the landlords.

Conclusion

Dalit women's rape, exploitation, murder and atrocities were the common practices in the pre-Independence India. In post-Independence India, the situation could not change even after the Constitutional provisions, Protection of Civil Right Act 1976 and The Scheduled Castes and The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. Undoubtedly, change takes place at a very slow pace, especially in terms of traditions and mentality. But the Supreme Court's recent order regarding the SC, ST Prevention of Atrocities Act said that the Act is misused and there must be a preliminary inquiry before registering a case under the Act.³⁷ Though National Crime Record Bureau's latest report shows that the crime against SCs increased by 5.5 per cent in 2016 while crime against STs has increased by 4.7 per cent. The highest numbers of cases recorded were against women, including cases of sexual assault and rape.³⁸ Such contradiction between the Supreme Court order and ground reality will hamper the change which is taking place in the upper caste mentality.

Notes and References

(Note: All translations from Punjabi to English are mine.)

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