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## Combating untouchability through education: A study of Changiya Rukh

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### Abstract

Changiya Rukh by Punjabi Dalit writer Balbir Madhopuri is the first Dalit autobiography in Punjabi to appear in English. First published in Punjabi in the year 2002, it was translated into English by Tripti Jain as *Against the Night* in 2010, and was nominated for the Crossword Award in 2011. Due to its widespread popularity and universal appeal, the book has been published in some other languages including Hindi and Shahmukhi (in Pakistan). Moreover, it has been serialized by nine Punjabi, Hindi and Shahmukhi magazines, and certain chapters of it have even been published in some English magazines and newspapers. It is mainly because of this autobiography that the writer Balbir Madhopuri has achieved recognition in the literary world. The autobiography is set in the village of Madhopur in district Jalandhar, Punjab and is primarily focused on the issue related to the oppressed, depressed class of Punjab especially the Dalits. The autobiography tells us how not only discrimination and marginalization, but poverty also had become the fate of these lower-caste people in these backward villages of Punjab. Due to abject poverty, they were not even able to meet their daily needs and had to struggle hard for the barest minimum of survival. The narrative also gives an account of the living standard of the Dalit women in comparison with that of the not-Dalit women. Education helped Madhopuri achieve his desired goal although after much struggle and hardships. His sheer determination, hard-work and strong will-power earned him a respectable place in the society.

**Keywords:** Struggle, determination, untouchability, education, achievement

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### Introduction

*Changiya Rukh* by Punjabi Dalit writer Balbir Madhopuri is the first Dalit autobiography in Punjabi to appear in English. First published in Punjabi in the year 2002, it was translated into English by Tripti Jain as *Against the Night* in 2010, and was nominated for the Crossword Award in 2011. It was also included in the 100 classic books of the world for five years. Due to its widespread popularity and universal appeal, the book has been published in some other languages including Hindi and Shahmukhi (in Pakistan). Moreover, it has been serialized by nine Punjabi, Hindi and Shahmukhi magazines, and certain chapters of it have even been published in some English magazines and newspapers. It is mainly because of this autobiography that the writer Balbir Madhopuri has achieved recognition in the literary world.

The autobiography is set in the village of Madhopur in district Jalandhar, Punjab and is primarily focused on the issue related to the oppressed, depressed class of Punjab especially the Dalits. It took the author four years to complete this work the essence of which, as Balbir Madhopuri put it, "...To explain the dalit heritage and culture to contemporary India and to the future, and to both depict the poverty amongst the dalits and expose the cruel reality of the oppression they suffer at every step"(I X-X).

The literal meaning of the word 'Changiya Rukh' in Punjabi is a tree lopped from the top, slashed and dwarfed. Madhopuri " has used it as a metaphor for the Dalit Indian whose potential for growth has been marred by the Hindu social order" (Bhushan 2). Thus, the title of Madhopuri's autobiography represents the Dalits as a subaltern class that has been robbed by a tradition that places the people belonging to low caste, beyond touchability. And significantly, as the lopped tree brings forth fresh branches and leaves and proves its innate worth through defiant resilience, Madhopuri's real life story also proves to be a saga of triumph not only for the author, but for the entire Dalit community by showing the author struggle hard to emancipate himself from the shackles of Hindu caste system in order to get a place in the society. The English title of this autobiography *Against the Night* is also significant as " it conveys the helplessness and the pain the author endured, and the resistance he in turn put up against the many forces of the 'night' that tried to suppress him" (Jain xii) in order to get the editorship of a socio-economic journal, thereby proving how Dalits can seek their identity and look forward to a society free from caste discrimination.

In the very first chapter of this self-narrative, Madhopuri describes how they, as Dalits, were always discriminated against by the upper-caste people. Whereas a 'zaildar' in the village was given a very special treatment and was even forgiven five to seven murders by the government and nobody in the village had the courage to look him in the eye, the Dalits were given a totally different treatment:

The treatment meted out to the lower castes, specially untouchables, was oppressive and terrifying. The zaildar compelled them to do *begaar* 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 village. (4-5)

The fact that even the government supported this social and economic inequality made him really upset. Providing a list of the duties that the low castes like carpenters, poltters, blacksmiths, barbers, scavengers, chamars, cobblers, dhobis and jhiwars were supposed to perform according to a land settlement and what they will get in return of these duties, Madhopuri laments:

The above list makes it clear that the rights of the scavengers/Chamars - that is, the untouchables'-encompassed only the right to provide free labour. In return for the bejaar given by them, these downtrodden people, deprived of all human rights, were conferred the right to remove carcasses of animals, and that also as a gesture of kindness on the part of the master who owned them. Government support to keep this social and economic inequality in place, and the support given by its advocates to see that it stayed intact, raised many painful questions in my heart. (7)

Madhopuri's autobiography stands as a witness to the effect of casteism in religion also as the author tells us how he and his other friends belonging to the Dalit community were discriminated against on account of their low-caste by the 'Jat Bhai' of the Gurudwara when the latter used to distribute prasad to the people gathered there on religious occasions like Sangrand and Gurupurab. Feeling the shame of being driven off by the high-caste 'Jat Bhai' of the Gurudwara, Madhopuri writes, "Give these Chamar brats a shout and drive them off,' the Jat Bhai of the Gurudwara would say to whosoever stood near him on the occasion of *Sangrand* - the first day of the Indian solar month - or *Gurupurub* - the birthdays of the Gurus, when he saw us standing on our toes and clinging to the bars of the window, as he distributed the prasad to the congregation" (11).

Madhopuri was only a small child perhaps studying in 2nd or 3rd standard at that time when he had to face these humiliations in the name of caste. Although he got the opportunity to get education, yet his school and college life was not free from exploitation and humiliation. The author clearly remembers when he and his uncle's son Roshi were in their primary standard, the school teacher Mr. Sodhi, instead of teaching them like the other upper-caste boys, used to force them to clean the school ground in the morning. Not only this, he would even send them to tend his animals in the fields, cut the grass, and bring it to his house:

Gudd, you and Roshi (Roshan Lal) go home and cut some fodder and chop it up!' ordered Master Sodhi, suddenly coming out of his opium haze. Taking a pinch of snuff from a long, round iron box, and sniffing it, he added, 'Go quickly! The buffaloes must be hungry and bellowing away. Wash them also. (69)

Due to such a discrimination, many of Dalit children even stopped going to school in the first standard itself. But the author, anyhow, decided to continue his studies in order to fight against the prevailing caste-system. The autobiography tells us how not only discrimination and marginalization, but poverty also had become the fate of these lower-caste people in these backward villages of Punjab. Due to abject poverty, they were not even able to meet their daily needs and had to struggle hard for the barest minimum of survival. In an interview with Sivasankari, Madhopuri tells him about his life spent in extreme poverty:

My father carried on the family's hereditary profession of shoemaking while he lived in Lahore for six months. After shifting from there, he became an agricultural laborer again. The circumstances were very difficult. We were seven children in all. We lived in a small, makeshift shed, where we co-existed alongwith the cattle. During monsoon, the house would be in floods. The kerosene lamp would be lit up only on occasions and as such, we would be surrounded by darkness. I have worked as an agricultural laborer right up to my graduation. (70)

The narrative also gives an account of the living standard of the Dalit women in comparison with that of the non-Dalit women. Seriously concerned with the pathetic condition of the Dalit women both inside and outside the house, the author recounts many incidents that show them maltreated not only by their husbands but also by some higher caste landlords for whom they worked as bonded labourers. Not only this, they were also considered inferior by the higher caste women who always exploited and harassed them and never let these poor creatures mingle with them even on social or religious occasions. Madhopuri narrates one particular occasion of Gugga Navami to show how instead of all the inhabitants of the village bowing their heads at place, the Dalit women and the women belonging to higher castes used to bow at separate places:

On Gugga navami, all the women of our mohalla, all my aunts, would light mud lamps and worship the banyan tree at Gurdas' place. Sprinkling milk mixed with water on the tree, they would then distribute Sawain carried on thalis to the children milling around them, holding their katoris and bowls.

The two-wheeled well stood on the eastern edge of the village, and only the women of Jat, Brahmin, and Goldsmith communities went to this well with their offering of Sawain. (63)

Aggrieved and enraged at the social structure based entirely on Hindu caste system, and the inner turmoil to which the Chamars and other lower-castes of Punjab were always subjected due to the atrocities of such a social structure, Madhopuri started getting a strong dislike for the Hindu sounding surname 'Chand' in his name and ultimately thought of dropping as it seemed to carry the entire burden of Hindu religion with him, instead affixing the name of his village Madhopuri to his first name Balbir, the meaning of which he really liked:

Right through the time I spent in college, I liked the meaning of my name-- Balbir. To me, it seemed in true with the style that the Sikhs used. There was also a hidden challenge in it. More significant was the fact that it had no caste undertones. The latter part of the name 'Chand' however, echoed with Hindu beliefs, a system which still held us captive. There was an odour of abasement and humiliation in it which was all pervasive. (167)

And it was due to this odour of abasement and humiliation attached to his surname, that Madhopuri developed a contempt for it and gave his Hindu name a different form by replacing the surname 'Chand' with 'Madhopuri'.

Thus the autobiography while presenting the ground reality of the Dalit way of life in the state of Punjab, also depicts the emergence of the feelings of revolt and anguish in the minds of the oppressed Dalits.

The author Balbir Madhopuri knew very well that the “mobility and dynamism of a deprived community is a function of the education of its members...They can grow only if they become educated” (Singh1). Inspired to fight for achieving the desired goal with a revolutionary zeal and an argumentative point of view, Balbir never turned back in spite of the unfavorable and hostile circumstances and social conditions because he had very well realized that “lack of education was the key factor that restricted the lower strata break the vicious social circle” (Ahmad1).

And no doubt, as the narrative describes, education helped Madhopuri achieve his desired goal although after much struggle and hardships. He wanted to rise above the barriers of caste and it was education that served as a guiding light for him.

His sheer determination, hard-work and strong will-power earned him a respectable place. He started being recognized as a poet and won many awards. He was also widely acknowledged as a good translator and translated *Lajja* for Arsi publications, and *Edwina and Nehru* for Navyug Publications. His education not only earned him a good job, but also gave him a voice which he raised against the very social system that had victimized and humiliated him and which in turn became the crusader of the many voiceless, thereby bringing about a change in the thinking of the caste-based society by making them sympathetic to the plight of the Dalits and also by urging the Dalits to come forward and carve out a niche for themselves.

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