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Marhi Da Deeva: Caste as Economics

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Gurdial Singh's first novel *Marhi Da Deeva* (1964) is one of his most famous novels. Retrospectively, it is considered the first *dalit* novel in Punjabi. It has acquired the status of a classic in Punjabi fiction. Apart from being translated in many Indian languages, it has been translated in Russian; the version selling ten lac copies. The movie version of the novel, produced in Hindi and Punjabi by National Film Development Corporation was critically much acclaimed. It bagged the best regional feature film award in 1990. Jagseer, the protagonist of the novel, was hailed as the first *dalit* hero in Punjabi fiction. Here, one is tempted to place the novel within the corpus of *dalit* writings. But, as is argues here, the text does not support such a reading. Whatever comes up during the course of the novel is only authentic experience. This authenticity is best understood if we compare this novel with *Samskara.* One readily realizes that *Samskara* lacks any direct negotiation with the reality. It is rather a distanced vision. The novelist ends up talking about himself rather than the society. *Marhi Da Deeva*, however, stems from direct experience.

Gurdial Singh's is a covert activism. Born in 1933 in Punjab, his father was a carpenter. Due to extreme poverty, he had to discontinue his studies and help his father. With the help of a neighborhood teacher, Gurdial Singh continued his education at home. He was already twenty-one when he cleared his matriculation exam.

Having this kind of background and abundant talent, Gurdial Singh is able to reproduce the subtle nuances of the rural life of his region. Speechlessness and silence are the defining features of the majority of his protagonists. This can be ascribed to the fact that he belongs to the dalit segment of society. He had seen extreme adversity/poverty in his childhood. He is also aware of the predicament of the lower castes. This is not to say that the upper caste writers cannot portray the predicament of the *dalits.* Mahashweta Devi readily comes to the mind as an exception. But the writer's caste and social position invariably affects his/her ideology. Elitism is prevalent among the affluent sections of the *dalits* as well. An intimate acquaintance with the society is, however, necessary for its authentic representation. Gurdial Singh's portrayal carries the authenticity of experience:

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> Gurdial Singh has that inwardness of feeling for village life which comes from a deep and intimate contact with rural reality and a strong and creative imagination. That is what makes his writing so authentic. Vitality in literature comes from authenticity. Authenticity comes from intense experience, commitment to life and a sense of rootedness. (Amrik Singh, 8)

Gurdial Singh has expressed what he has felt and experienced. He wants to share the predicament of the downtrodden with the readers. Art becomes a means of this expression. It is only with the deployment of artistic resources that this social reality can be conveyed with force and conviction. In his novels, Gurdial Singh has attempted something unprecedented in Punjabi fiction. He is able to convey the ordinariness of village life without resorting to any false romanticisation. So, we can study the caste-centered structure of the novel without pinning it down to an essentialist category.

The manner of the treatment of the narrative by Gurdial Singh short-circuits any attempts to forcefully reduce/fit the novel into an essential group of writings. The novel, by nature and intention, resists such classifications. There is an absolute lack of evaluative, judgmental statements in the novel. The novelist betrays no overt sympathy/preference for a particular character, nor does he show any antipathy toward some other characters. One does not observe any hostility towards the upper castes. Dharma Singh, for example, comes up as a noble, tragic character like Jagseer. Gurdial Singh's style is characterized by a matter-of-fact tone. His unconscious sympathy for the downtrodden and the lower caste people is only covertly suggested and lacks the propagandist zeal. The author's ideology is so intricately blended and fused into the fabric of the novel that it is impossible to separate the two.

The narrative is centered on Jagseer. In the expository phase, we get to know about the relationship between Jagseer's and Dharam Singh's family. Jagseer works as a *seerie* in Dharam Soingh's fields. His father Thola also worked as a *seerie* in the same fields. This is a tradition kept passed from one generation to the next. Dharam Singh's father regarded Thola as a brother, though he belonged to a lower caste. On his death-bed, he asks Dharam Singh to follow the same tradition and regard Jagseer as his brother. The relationship between a *seerie* and the landlord is closely scrutinized in the novel against the backdrop of fast-changing social situation.

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At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the apparent crisis of the novel. Jagseer is nearing forty but he is still unmarried. The reason is that his mother's parentage is not known. This being an overwhelming drawback in a village set-up, no one is ready to marry his girl with Jagseer. This crisis and the rapidly changing value system combine/coalesce to move the narrative into further complexities.

Amidst all this is thrown the love-angle of the narrative. Jagseer falls in love with Bhani, Nikka's wife. This is a platonic relationship which never actually takes off on a realistic level. The underlining structural unity of the narrative lies in the fact that it records how a person is deprived, slowly but surely, of all the pretentions/illusions which provide him an excuse to live on. Jagseer can never get married; neither will he get Bhani. The field with which he identifies is also snatched from him by Dharam Singh's son. His mother's death destroys any remaining will to live and hastens his end.

The novel is set in a village in the *Malwa* region of Punjab. If we look for the overt structuration, the novelist intends to convey the socio-cultural complexities ushered in by economic progress. The society is shown at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. The feudal system is giving way to the capitalist one. This process of social-cultural transformation breeds hitherto unfathomed complexities. In the presence of strong cultural factors the shift to capitalist relations takes surprising turns. One witnesses the stubborn resistance of the longstanding cultural systems which refuse to give way. Jagseer's predicament, to be fully understood, has to be seen in this light.

I

The interpretation of Jagseer's character, hailed as the first *dalit* hero in Punjabi novels, must take recourse to socio-cultural factors as these play immense role in 'structuring' his consciousness. A traditional character-study cannot account for the culturally determined complexities of this character. More than an individual, he is a type. T.R.Vinod points out, "Both man and literature are cultural entities" (46). We cannot afford to ignore the culturally determined nature of the self. Although man's mind is not a *tabula rasa*, socio-cultural factors play decisive role in the 'production' of personality; more so in the Indian context where tradition still exerts huge pressure. One is born free

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but must also come to terms with the social system which exists prior to one's birth. This is more relevant in the case of Jagseer because he is born in a lower-caste family. On top of this, he is taught the lesson of morality which makes him even more passive. Pitted against a system which is too strong for him to change or revolt against, he has either to conform or break down. He fails to compromise and so breaks down. There is no outward rebellion. Continuous suppression of instincts leads to self-annihilation. Jagseer's deterioration/degeneration is continuous till he becomes a complete stranger/outsider/non-entity. This is a physical as well as psychological degeneration. He becomes thoroughly passive and there is no evidence of even a token resistance. As he has already died in symbolic terms, physical death remains only a formality.

How do we understand this process of degeneration? Can we isolate any individual characteristics that lead to Jagseer's downfall? We have to concede that it is the overwhelming pressure of 'conditions' that pre-empts the expression of individual qualities and make him what he is. The reality of his caste kills his natural self. The instinctual self is completely and irreversibly silenced. Individual reaction, whatever be its form - revolt, suicide, compromise - becomes irrelevant. Caste imposes a destiny on Jagseer. Caste forecasts his character or rather kills it. Caste becomes the norm against which to judge the extent of revolt/conformity of a character. The probableness of the narrative itself depends on this factor. This results in a unique kind of irony found in Indian novels, which is produced by the tension between the characters' personal aspirations and the futility of their fight which is evident to the readers. The pretensions of challenge itself constitute heroism.

Jagseer is caught in a system, which is not created by him. He is an 'ordinary' character who suffers a tragedy of extraordinary proportions. Jagseer's development, if one can use the word, is mapped by caste in its social, historical, and psychological forms. Caste is the origin of his economic, social, and psychological alienation. Disillusionment with the society forces him to build iron-walls around himself. This boundary is almost impregnable. An individual who was full of promise is reduced to nothing. Initially, Jagseer's persona contains all the ingredients of a potential hero. He is described as a very handsome young man:

> If by chance a young woman spotted Jagseer, her eyes would be glued to his handsome body…Only two other young men matched Jagseer in the

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> whole village: Gaiba, Shama's son and Gheela, Bhola's son. Even Gaiba and Gheela could rarely defeat Jagseer, but being his equal, Jagseer also had difficulty in defeating them. (27)

But at the same time, he is a very meek person. His father, as he was aware of the reality, had already taught him the lesson of morality and asked him to remain within his limits. So, the thought of love is anathema to Jagseer, even at the very peak of his youth:

> If Jagseer became aware of a girl looking at him, his body would go numb. He could not raise his eyes. Words of his father rang in his ears: "He who doesn't respect his village women is not a man. He who doesn't respect others, won't respect his own sisters and daughters." (28)

It is interesting to note that the burden of tradition and morality is not evenly distributed. It is distributed according to the hierarchical order of the society. In other words, the laws of propriety and just/unjust behavior are elastic and change according to one's position in society. The novel itself provides an example. Jagseer and Gheela attack Nikka after drinking. A meeting of the village council is called. The council warns both the parties. While Jagseer's father keeps quiet, Gheela's father, a Jat-Sikh, says, "When these guys can't control their stray cows, why blame our boys" (44)?

So, the meekness and cowardice associated with the Jagseer's character can be understood only with reference to his caste. He is chained to his caste. These characteristics are not intrinsic but produced by his condition. Jagseer's personality is defined by the alternate feelings of desire and frustration. He does not live in a make-believe world. He has reconciled with the impossibility of any success in his relationship with Bhani. He doesn't harbor any utopian ambitions. Generations of subjugation has pre-empted that possibility. As there is no possibility of revolt, he becomes more and more silent. At one occasion when Bhani reminds him of the old times, he says:

> "No use searching the ashes, Bhano! You won't find anything. I'm no longer strong enough to bear the pain…let's leave the past alone. All I'm doing now is to move towards my death a bit closer everyday." (51)

According to Attai Singh, Jagseer's plight is brought about by four factors- 1) he is a dalit, 2) his mother's lineage is not known, 3) he is virtuous, and 4) his old age (34). But marriage is not the main issue in the novel. Marriage, even if it had taken place, would not have changed the matters much. The evident crisis of the novel is actually a

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marginal one. The whole emphasis of the novelist is own depicting the basic human condition or the fundamental social relation; which influences the identity and existence of the people. Jagseer inherits his situation from his parents. This bitter truth destroys his individuality. The given situation is the basic cause of his predicament. The resultant loss of faith in human dignity and esteem is not strange:

> "Hundreds of worms like me die everyday- well we are also worms, who counts us among men anyway? Yet I don't want to die… I don't understand." (66)

This kind of identity crisis is all pervasive among the *dalits*. This is rather a cultural crisis; as Dr. Joginder Singh points out, "In Gurdial Singh's novels, identity crisis is realized as cultural crisis" (qtd. in Attai Singh 31). Although this crisis also veers towards universality, it must be contextualized within a particular cultural system.

The naming of the character as "Jagseer" is itself ironical. "Jagseer" literally means-a share in the world, as described in the novel: "Nandi's long prayers had brought her a son after four daughters. Now that she had a stake in the world, she had named him Jagseer" (13). But Jagseer himself remains an outsider in the world, both in physical and spiritual terms. Symbolically, it signifies that the dalits have no share in the world. They have to lead a woeful life of subjugation. They can't even think of freedom.

Jagseer's character is a study of the destruction of personality in the crossfire of social norms. The objects that keep him alive are progressively snatched from him. The first object of his adoration is "the field". Jagseer has always considered it as his own field, though it belongs to Dharam Singh. Since Jagseer's father also worked as a *seeri* in the same field, he has an emotional attachment with it. He considers it a legacy of his father. He never sells the produce of this field:

> On reaching the fields, Jagseer looked at 'his' own field first. The wheat plants looked like hungry and hurt children. In the neighboring field which Jagseer had watered a few days earlier, the plants were healthier and taller. Jagseer looked at both the fields turn by turn and sat on the dividing ridge. His legs had no strength to support him. (75)

Jagseer's life can be explained in terms of various 'recognitions' which come as a shock for him. This is journey from innocence to knowledge. But knowledge does not bring enlightenment but sorrow.

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II

Caste also affects the writer's description of the space. Space can not be regarded as the neutral/fixed background of the narrative. It is an active participant in the story. Space is not a device of embellishment. Neither can it be dismissed as 'local color.' It is an organic/integral part of the narrative. The description of space in a particular novel also helps in categorising the mode of narration. The analysis of this aspect of *Marhi Da Deeva* reveals that it doesn't fit in the 'realist' frame. The novel stands somewhere between the traditional narratives and the 'modern' realism. No description of space in the novel is purposeless. As I said, Gurdial Singh is a minimalist, so the question of useless descriptions does not arise.

The readers who expect an exotic description of an Indian village in the novel are bound to be frustrated. This may be one of the reasons that the novels in Indian languages have failed to attract the attention of the Western audience. The novels frustrate a foreigners' expectation of getting the Indian 'exotica'. The village that Gurdial Singh describes is not the idealized (and so unreal) Indian village. Neither is it an insulated space where traditional, pure customs are preserved. Gurdial Singh, instead, presents a village in the midst of a historical/ideological/cultural crisis. The interaction between traditional values and modernity leads to new problems. Modernity is not viewed as an emancipating phenomenon. On the contrary it leads to a host of crises – for instance – the way it affects the hitherto stable social fabric of the village, affecting human relationships in a big way. The modern outlook not only leads to Jagseer's alienation, it also makes a person like Dharam Singh, who still wishes to stick to the traditional value-system redundant. Caste acquires more ominous proportions in the changed circumstances.

The spatial descriptions in the novel are thus, ideological. Let me refer to some of them for illustration. One description that recurs many times in the novel is that of the field. The field that Jagseer cultivates and considers his own, does not actually belong to him. But he is not aware of this fact. He venerates the field as his father also worked in it:

> For thirty years his father had ploughed this field, for thirty years his sweat had saturated this soil, and now when Jagseer ploughed it, he smelt his father's sweat. He had never experienced such a smell from any other field of Dharam Singh. (22)

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He doesn't sell the grain produced in this field in the market. This field is his source of strength in a hostile world which lacks any promise for Jagseer. His commitment to this field veers towards reverence. There is another reason for his attachment with this field. It gives him a false notion of his own status. By owning a field, he automatically becomes an elite among the dalits. Space itself becomes an ideology. The field keeps intact his connection with the world. It is also a source of strength:

> Jagseer had a good look at 'his' field, his eyes cooled with satisfaction. The field in the vast expanse of other fields, looked to him like an outstanding flower printed on a scarf. He stood looking adoringly at the swinging plants. The fresh shoots looked intimate to him like the soft hair of his own body. His eyes were intoxicated and his body swayed in ecstasy. (54)

The field is not something outside Jagseer. It is an extension of his own self. Reality, for an Indian, is not an alien phenomenon conceivable through the senses, but an extension/projection of the self. Both of these are mutually affective. The damage to his crop, leads to Jagseer's falling severely ill:

> On reaching the fields, Jagseer looked at 'his' own field first. The wheat plants looked like hungry and hurt children. It the neighboring field which Jagseer had watered a few days earlier, the plants were healthy and taller. Jagseer looked at both the fields turn by turn and sat on the dividing ridge. His legs had no strength to support him. (75)

The devastation of the crop, leads to Jagseer's destruction. He cannot come to terms with the loss of the crop. The loss of the crop doubles his already sorry state:

> He slowly scanned the field from one corner to the other: dry earth with thirsty plants, nobody had ever watered or weeded it. The fragile, dying leaves of the plants pricked his eyes. Patches of half grazed crop made the field look like a leper lying on his bare body. (113)

As can be easily observed, the field is not described objectively; it is a very personalized description in terms of Jagseer's inner space which has progressively become barren in a hostile world. Interestingly, as the crop has not failed because of a natural disaster like draught, the predicament is impossible to be rationalized. The field is symbolically a *dalit* – the 'inferior' half of the society. While the elites are prospering (Plants in Dharam Singh's field are taller & healthier), the dalits are suffering.

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Snatching away of the field is a catastrophic incident in the novel. It alienates Jagseer completely. The tree in the middle of the field is another recurring symbol in the novel. The tree represents stability and rootedness. As it was planted by his father, Jagseer reveres it. He feels a strong solace/satisfaction when he sits in its shade:

> When Jagseer lifted up his head, he saw that the sheesham had grown twice in size since last year. He held one of its twigs and felt its leaves, the touch made him feel good. His father's face emerged in the faded moonlight through the branches. For some time, he kept looking at the tree from the trunk to the top in admiration. (21)

The tree, for Jagseer, stands for his father. His father's *Marhi* is built under this tree. His father is a living presence through this tree. The felling of the tree is the catastrophe of the novel. The violence of the act can be understood only if one takes into account its importance for Jagseer. It gives him a sense of belonging. With the felling of the tree; Jagseer's alienation from the world is complete:

> The drooping leaves of the felled tree slowly looked like the crinkled fingers of a dying man. The early rays of the sun, reflected from the dew drops on the leaves, seemed to be the last sheen of the fading eyes of the sheesham. Jagseer's anger gives way to sadness, his fast steps slowed down; he entered the village with a lowered head. (77)

This is, in fact, the first instance in the novel when he comes to acquire knowledge of his own situation. This is a movement from innocence to experience. The real cause of his alienation is now clear to him as many random words fill his head: "farmer..., seerie, labourer .., owner, Dharam Singh, Bhanta" (77). This is also the moment when he looks at his home and the houses around it with this newly acquired knowledge:

> Jagseer lifted his eyes, the houses in the village looked sad and dreary like the shapeless ridges of a ruin. At the foot of the ruin was his *wehra,* the ghetto of the untouchables. The houses, like dog dens, were inhabited by the boded laborers on whose heads ended all the dirty water and scum of the farmers flowing from the 'ruin'. (77)

In terms of caste, the upper castes have not only acquired the major portion of the space, but they have also polluted the *dalit's* space. This violence is both physical and psychological. For instance, it kills Jagseer's sense of beauty; and the happiness that he

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experienced on seeing the fields is now gone forever, as the fields have become 'alien' for him. Notice the following description of the fields:

> It was dark when Jagseer reached the fields. The dense trees looked scary. There were high ridges with thorny bushes on both sides of the wide ancient path. From a distance, the stars at the edge of the sky seemed strung on thorns. In earlier times, when Jagseer went to water the fields on dark nights, this sight always enchanted him. (84).

It is clear that the physical space in the novel is described in terms of the mental space of Jagseer, whose psychology, in turn, is determined by his caste. Space becomes an ideological phenomenon that plays the role of a character in the novel.

III

The unprecedented success of *Marhi Da Deeva* can be ascribed to its appeal to a cross-section of readers, lay as well as experts. While the common reader is invariably reduced to tears by the tragic character of Jagseer and the ill-fated love-story that is not much unlike the numerous folk legends of Punjab; the critics appreciate the thematic diversity of the novel and its fertile openness to various interpretations. It is considered the first truly 'regional' novel in Punjabi, depicting the culture of Malwa region. The novel is also hailed for its portrayal of the crisis brought about by capitalist relationships. But as T.R. Vinod reminds us, almost all interpretations of the novel are ultimately derived from the caste-factor:

> But in my opinion, the supreme praise of the novel is in the fact that it is a realistic portrait of the tragedy of caste-culture, realized in the basic mutual relationship between the landholding farmer and the landless *seerie*. (63, my translation)

Even the recurring symbols and metaphors are linked with the theme of caste. For instance, the folk saying with which the novel opens. This folk saying is the key to the text itself as it predicts, qualifies, highlights, stresses and emphasizes various meanings of the novel. The quote is as follows:

> Man, you were destined for ten turns of fate in your life. The first came and consumed you, what happened to the other nine. (11)

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The lines refer to the traditional belief in ten turns of fate during the life span of an individual. The lines raise certain expectations about the narrative itself. As the events of the novel unfold, one is led to question the very validity of these axiomatic sayings. If at all, these are valid for a specific section of the society. The lower-caste people don't experience any unexpected turns of fate; and whatever shifts are there, are for the worse. Their life is mapped by their caste.

The strategic positioning of this quote at various junctures of the narrative helps to judge the actual in the light of the traditional. This leads to an interrogation/revision/questioning of the validity of the tradition itself as it is only a selective tradition. The connection between the folk and the novel is thus established.

Caste-induced silence emerges as one of the most significant themes of the novel. These silences are induced by tradition and custom. Silence includes, along with speechlessness, inaction, inertia etc. Silence is, therefore, a metaphoric term implying the inability of people to cross cultural barriers. The opposition between the upper castes and lower castes is often represented by the binary of speech/silence; articulate/inarticulate as U.R. Anantha Murthy has observed:

> There are two kinds of consciousness today, depending on the caste or social class to which one belongs. There is one type of family set up where people talk to each other... They usually belong to the happen in the lower castes. (qtd. In Sharma 18)

Centuries of subjugation bring about silence. For example Jagseer is a very reticent person. Now this silence is as much individual as cultural. As we scrutinize the families described in the novel, there is hardly any dialogue between Jagseer and his family members. His father was as quiet as Jagseer. People in Dharam Singh's family are, however, outspoken. The platonic relationship between Jagseer and Bhani is marked by silence. The inherent silence of this relationship has to be explained with reference to tradition.

The novel is often interpreted in terms of the conflict between tradition and modernity. The novel, according to this view, describes a village in the midst of a crisis as it is in the transition state. This transition is from the feudal system to the capitalist system. This transformation of the system has different consequences for different people as it affects all social relationships. For example, Dharam Singh becomes a totally

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'outdated' figure in the changed scenario. He becomes an outsider in his own house. In the changed system, the farmer has started to take the economic factors into account. This leads to an even more severe exploitation of the dalits.

As is clear, caste cannot be kept out even from this kind of 'economic' analysis of the novel. This interpretation does not explain the prevalence of quasi-feudal systems in the villages even now. Significantly, only those elements of the older system, which are suitable to the dominant castes, prevail. The exploitation of the lower-caste people becomes even more severe in the changed circumstances.

Although it is clear that the novel is about how capitalism influences human relationships. The action is placed in a backward village of Punjab. The novel itself becomes a site of interaction between capitalism/modernism and caste. Caste, as re-contextualized in a new system, not only becomes conspicuous but also a more oppressive phenomenon. As money becomes the driving force, relationships become depthless. In the changed scenario, poverty is the direct consequence of your being a dalit. Honesty, in such a system, becomes a drawback rather than a virtue.

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