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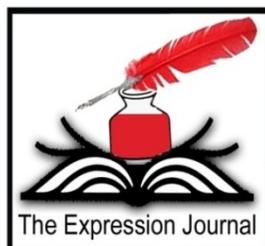
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A SAGA OF PERSONAL STRUGGLE AND A VALUABLE SOCIAL DOCUMENT – THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SHEORAJ SINGH BECHAIN P. S. Krishnan, IAS (Retd.)

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I. DALIT RISE AND DALIT LITERATURE INCLUDING DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Rise of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEdBCs) in Modern India – Partial but Significant

The most significant aspect of modern Indian social history is the rise of Dalits (Scheduled Castes) [SCs], Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) [STs] and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes [SEdBCs] from the depths to which they had been relegated through the centuries by the Indian Caste System (ICS) i.e., Caste-with-“Untouchability”. Their rise is still a work in progress and has been much slower than required and possible, because most of the individuals of the Socially Advanced Castes (SACs), who have been occupying and still occupy the commanding heights of politics, administration, economy and public and private institutions, have been at best casual and indifferent, and at worst hostile, to this process, which is essential for the humanization and democratization of Indian society, and for laying the foundation for the optimal all-round progress of the country.

Emergence of Dalit Literature including Autobiographies

One of the outcomes of their rise is the emergence of Dalit literature. While the word “Dalits” usually refers to SCs, in the present context, I would refer to literature by or pertaining to these three classes as Dalit literature. Dalit literature encompasses all branches of literature – poetry, fiction, drama, treatises of anthropology, sociology, historiography and even philosophy and epistemology.

General Features of Dalit Autobiographies

One specific genre of Dalit literature is autobiography of individuals of these communities who have been successful in life. Their success has been achieved through their own efforts, propelled by upsurge in social consciousness, inspired by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and his counterparts in different regions, and supported by Constitution-based State policies of Social Justice – Reservation being one part of such policies –, which, though not comprehensive as mandated by the Constitution, have been helpful to the extent they go.

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I have read a number of Dalit autobiographies, starting with “*Ente Jeevitha Samaram*” (“My Life Struggle”) in Malayalam, by C. Kesavan, who was the earliest political leader of Travancore to emerge from the Ezhava community, which was at that time “Untouchable” and which ceased to be “Untouchable” by its own efforts well before Independence. Dalit autobiographies reveal the extraordinary struggle and efforts that went into the success of the individuals, the obstacles they had to face on account of the discriminatory and oppressive social system and how they overcame these systemic obstacles. Some of these autobiographies also throw light on the social system, the social practices, the social movements and social changes that took place in the latter nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Prof. Sheoraj Singh Bechain’s autobiography, originally published in Hindi by Vani Prakashan in 2009 and translated into English by Zeeba Zafir and Tapan Basu under the title “My Childhood on My Shoulders”, published by Oxford University Press in 2018, is one of the very valuable contributions to this genre.

II. SAGA OF AUTHOR’S STRUGGLE AGAINST SEVERE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ODDS AND INDIVIDUAL SUCCESS

Prof. Sheoraj Bechain’s Autobiography and its Personal and Social Features in Outline

Prof. Sheoraj Singh’s autobiography contains heart-rending accounts of his forlorn childhood, of which rays of hope were cast by his passion for reading and his innate poetic talent, which paved the way, later, for his escape from the deprivations he was born into and which he inherited over the centuries from the generations of his forefathers.

In the process, his autobiography also becomes a valuable social document of the plight and vicissitudes of the SCs, with particular reference to the Chamar community, the most numerous among the SCs of India, and with reference also to the Balmiki community. It also contains references to and comparisons with the SEBCs like Yadavs, Lodhs and Telis. We also get insights into the prevalence of “Untouchability” in all its irrational, bizarre and cruel manifestations; the continuing and unreported instances of infliction of various forms of atrocities on the SCs; the phenomenon of landlessness and its victims; caste and “Untouchability” among Muslims and Sikhs, and critique of Governmental policies from the beginning of Independence till now and their limitations.

Bleak Hopelessness of his Childhood – Outcome of Personal Misfortune, complicated by “Untouchability”

Bleak hopelessness is the feature of the childhood of Sauraj, as he was before he became Prof. Sheoraj Singh. At the time of his father’s death, his father, Radheyshyam, was still in his twenties. Thereafter, the author was exposed to the tender mercies of two successive stepfathers. At the individual level, his travails at the hands of his second stepfather, Bhikari, reminds one of the experiences of David Copperfield at the hand of his step-father Murdstone, in the nineteenth century novel of the same name by Charles Dickens. But the sufferings of his childhood were not merely individual. They were complicated by the ubiquitous phenomenon of “Untouchability”, which imparted a uniquely Indian dimension to the sufferings of Dalit Children like him.

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Like a typical SC child, he inherited landlessness. His father left a meager bigha of land, but it was virtually uncultivable. His actual inheritance consisted of flaying and cobbling tools and “the collective misfortune” of his ancestors. The prospect bequeathed to him was child-slave-labour. After his father’s death, his mother told him that from then onwards had had to fend for himself with his own earnings. Hunger was a constant companion and so, as the author says, food was always topmost on his mind. He contrasts his inheritance of child-labour with the children of those living in mansions in cities and of landlords in villages “who have grown rich upon the property inherited from their parents”. Thus, as the author poignantly describes, his “burden of childhood became the load” which his “weak shoulders learned to carry”, from which is born the eloquent title of his autobiography.

Summing up his life in his childhood and early teenage, the author describes himself as one of the “Untouchable proletariat”. He experienced many forms of exploitation of his labour by the time he gained admission in school. That brings us to the saga of how he gained admission to school.

Golden Thread of Hope in Author’s Life – Passion for Reading and Poetic Talent – the Instrument of his Belated Access to School

Every child has some innate talent in him/her, which if nurtured leads to achievement. All too often, and in the case of Dalit children most often, this innate talent is squelched early in life. The author’s talent was his gift for words and song and passion for reading, which was like a golden thread in his life as a child-teenage-labourer. Whenever and whatever job he undertook, he always carried with him a soiled, slim book. One of the earliest books he read was Guru Bakshidas’ “Raidas Ramayan” -- how many of us know of this version of Ramayan among the scores of versions existing in India and outside? --, by borrowing it from a relative, Baburam Swang, a shoe-repairer, who was also fond of reading and singing ballads, legends and songs, and whom the author described as “a man with a noble heart who lived in a state of complete financial ruin”, a description applicable to many Dalits and other deprived. The author would buy many books from the footpaths, which became his source of knowledge. His financial capacity could not keep pace with his voracious appetite for books. The author candidly admits that half of his stock of books was stolen. Years later, he relieved his conscience by paying Rs 10 to the bookseller from whom he had pilfered books.

The author’s introduction to Ambedkar and Gandhi was by his non-Dalit teachers, but in a distorted manner. I may mention that, their distorted version of Ambedkar is part of a tradition of which the most well-known version is of Arun Shourie in his book “Worshipping False Gods”, in which Arun Shourie manages to describe Ambedkar with eloquent distortion, without mention or indication of knowledge of “Untouchability” and its deadening effect.

He was introduced to the *Satyarth Prakash* of Swami Dayanand Saraswati by an ardent Arya Samajist, who was a Yadav by caste, but fraternized with Chamars and “Bhangis” (a name which has since been officially proscribed by Government as it is derogatory, on my initiative when I was in the Ministry of Home Affairs, and now known as “Balmikis”), who was engaged in the work of eradication of “Untouchability” in Arya Samajist style, but with an infusion of intense hatred for Muslims, which infected the author also at that time. It is only later that he understood

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that the source of “Untouchability” and the caste system based on “the principle of birth-based discrimination” was the Hindu social order itself. From the same source, he borrowed two books by Lenin.

Unknown to most in his village, the author became literate and learned to read through a process of self-study, even while carrying out all sorts of farm work and other labour. Wordsworth, the nineteenth century poet of the Romantic Revolution in English poetry says, “I spoke in numbers, for numbers came to me.” This is true of the author also. He composed poems spontaneously, while engaged in work as a labourer and hummed them to himself musically. This is what opened his way to school at last, fulfilling his intense desire to acquire education. One of his poems, composed by him while handing out bricks and mortar for construction of an extension of the junior school in his village, the wording of which was appropriate to the occasion, attracted the attention of one of the teachers, who brought it to the notice of the Head Master, both Yadavs. Another school master, also a Yadav, whom the author calls “Massaab” and who was the first to pronounce his name as “Sheoraj”, instead of “Sauraj”, urged him to study by whatever means and warned that masonry and petty labour would crush his poetic talent. Helped by Massaab’s guidance to get over some formal hurdles, he was admitted to Class VIII when was about 15 years of age.

First Stirrings of Conscientization and Rebellious Thoughts

He was introduced to leftist literature and leftists when in 1976-77, as a student in Class IX, he stayed for a few days with his cousin Dr Nathulal, at his hostel in the Maulana Azad Medical College, Delhi. Dr Nathulal, also from a family without any resources, was then pursuing education for a medical career, and was a role model for the author and also a source of inspiration, who always urged him to study “whatever the circumstances”. During those days, he laid his hands on Gopal Thakur’s book on Bhagat Singh’s monograph “Why I am an Atheist”. He also got to read some Soviet and CPI publications and Kaifi Azmi’s “Awara Sajde” and “Raasta Idhar Hai”. In one of his letters, Dr Nathulal acquainted the author with Maxim Gorky, who started life in acute poverty, similar to Sheoraj’s, and supported himself through all sorts of labour, became a scholar and a talented writer, holding him as an inspiration for Sheoraj. These exposures engendered in him rebellious thoughts “against the caste-centred system of this country, which failed to undertake the responsibility of providing education to hapless children.” He became aware of the exploitation of the labour of Dalits over the generations, continuing even after the country became free. He sums up his understanding in the following words:- “There was a conscious attempt to keep us away from education, literature and the arts, so that we led an animal-like life.”

First Taste of Success at Last – Passing Class X – A Historical First in Many Generations of his Family

His cousin, however, urged him to concentrate only on the study of his school subjects at that stage, so that he could clear Class X as this was his first and only chance in life. After tiding over all difficulties and adverse circumstances through his grit and crucial help from Massaab and his wife, he passed Class X examination in the Second division, to his great happiness and the

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anxious reader's relief. He was the first to do so in a family of many generations of illiterates and a rare achiever in the entire community. The autobiography ends here, though there is a flash forward of his pursuit and completion of higher education to equip himself to serve the country in the field of literature and live among "farmers, communists, Dalits and students". One expects that the author will bring out a further volume of his life and achievements and services after the stage of school education.

III. SOCIAL INSIGHTS AND NARRATIVE IN AUTHOR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In addition to the author's personal story of his journey in his early life, this is also a valuable social document, bringing out the plight and travails of Chamars and the life of other deprived classes and the attitude of the advanced castes, intermediate castes and people of other religions to the Chamars and other deprived classes, as is known to those who are aware of the Indian society. Flaying and tanning of the carcasses of dead animals is a task traditionally imposed on Chamars. I should clarify this by pointing out that, though only a fraction of Chamars ever engaged in this occupation, all those who were engaged in it were Chamars and, therefore, the community's name was derived from this occupational link. For others, flaying and tanning may be just two occupation-related words, but the description of the whole process by the author brings out the hardship and squalor involved in this work. Though Chamars thereby provided an "essential service", "society rewards them with incalculable contempt", as the author wryly points out. His question, "Why should those who cleanse society of its pollutants be repaid with the ignominy of "Untouchability"?", is yet to be answered by the Indian society and its elite. The cruel irony of treating as "Untouchable" those to whom we owe whatever cleanliness exists in our environment continues to remain with us, and the members of Indian social and economic elite, who have profited by their labour, takes this in their stride and carry on without a twinge of conscience. This contradiction was pointed out nearly four decades back in the Report (1980) of the Working Group on the Development of SCs in the VI Plan 1980-85, of which I was the Chairman, in the following words:-

"They are the people who keep the rest of the society clean".

In a specific context of one group of SC workers titled by that Report as "Essential Health Service Workers", it says with specific reference to Safai Karmacharis or Manual Scavengers, that:-

"The members of the Scheduled Castes engaged in the so-called unclean occupations have customarily been assigned the 'lowest' position in the caste hierarchy in our country..... No occupation can be really dubbed as 'unclean' so long as it is essential for the existence of a society. The situation can be seen to be all the more anomalous when it is considered that Indian society owes whatever cleanliness it has, to this category of workers."

This also applies to flayers and tanners of carcasses.

Movement to Abandon Stigmatized Occupations

The author refers to the movement, in Agra and Aligarh in the early 1960s, led by the Republican Party, which had been founded by Dr Ambedkar. Under the influence of its reformist appeal, Chamars of several villages began to regard the work related to dead animals as a source of their stigma and abandoned it, but some families like the author's had to continue this

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traditionally imposed work for want of alternative means of livelihood. The space left by Chamars who migrated from this occupation has been taken in the 21st century by the Muslims near his village. In this connection, I would attention to the parallel movement of those on who the system has imposed the occupation of manual-scavenging to abandon their occupation. This movement has made some progress, but its completion depends on the initiative and persistent efforts of Governments to provide access to alternative, non-stigmatized, viable and sustainable means of livelihood through various measures, including skill-development, training, financial support, mentoring, etc.

Prevalence of “Untouchability” in its Many Irrational, Bizarre and Inhuman Forms and Atrocities of Verbal Abuses – Routine and Mostly Unreported

The author reveals to the readers many bizarre forms of “Untouchability” suffered by the Chamars and other Dalits. A grass-root instance of “Untouchability” and its deadening effect on normal human sensibilities is mentioned by the author. In the village where his sister was married, which was also the site of the atrocity of arson referred to below, due to heavy downpour, water from the road flowed into the well in the Dalit Basti and contaminated it as the well was not paved with cement plinth all around it. The elders of the community approached the Brahmins and Jats of the village to ask for water from their securely cemented wells. Their supplication with folded hands was not heeded to, forcing the Chamars and Balmikis to drink contaminated water, leading to sickness and death of a number of children. The author refers to abusive words and epithets which he found to be current in every house of the village like “the donkey among animals, the owl among birds, the Chamar among castes”. I should bring to the notice of the readers that, such verbal abuse by persons of upper castes directed at Chamars is routine and common. Such abuses have been also listed among crimes of atrocities under the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, but they are so routine that in most cases they are not complained against or reported to the police. Another practical reason for the absence of complaints is that the Chamars and other SCs are agricultural and other labourers, forcing them to be dependent on their abusers for daily-wage employment and bare livelihood.

In a number of asides, the author brings out the irrational and bizarre forms “Untouchability” takes. For example, his blind paternal grant uncle, Gangi, called Babba by the author, was engaged to operate the grindstone for the Yadavs and the flour was not considered polluted, but after the grain had been ground, the Yadav women would not let him touch the flour. I must mention that, this is an instance of the many irrationalities of “Untouchability” prevalent all over the country. For example, everywhere Dalit labourers harvest grain and bring them to the houses of upper caste landowners, who accept the grain brought by the Dalit labourers without a qualm, but when food is cooked from the same grain the same Dalit labourers cannot touch it. To rationalize such irrationalities, theories of “pucca food” and “katcha” food were invented.

A bizarre incident which would be hilarious but for its inhumanity is recorded by the author, as related to him by his Bua Kalawati, the eldest of his father’s sisters. One day the author’s father was carrying some processed leather on his head and was crossing the bridge across the Ganga river at Rajghat. The policeman on duty on the bridge stopped him and told him that he

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could not cross the bridge with leather on his head as “the bridge is on the Ganga which will be polluted by the leather, our Hindu religion prohibits that”. His father expostulated, and buttressed his arguments by quoting a verse from Kabir. At last the policeman found a way out by suggesting that Basheer Mian could carry the leather across the bridge because “he is a Muslim. The rules and regulations of Hindus won’t apply to him.”

Even though certain horrific practices of “Untouchability” have declined under the particular influence of Arya Samaj teachings, which were in vogue at that time in North-Western India including Western UP, discrimination by middle castes like Telis against Chamars/Jatavs and against Balmikis continues, for example, in the shape of codes pertaining to the caste order at dining. In wedding and funeral feasts, first the guests of the caste of the host would eat and then would come the turn of the middle castes like Telis and at the end Chamars and Balmikis. The author candidly notices that the discriminatory attitude and behaviour of Chamars towards fellow-Dalit Balmikis and repudiates it. His attitude in this regard was shaped by the Arya Samaj.

Even in public gatherings, there is “Untouchability”-based segregation, according to which, at a concert organized by the Arya Samaj, the author sat at the back of the crowd in one corner.

The author notes as a “miracle of Indian politics” that Mayawati became the Chief Minister of the State – an observation which recalls former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao’s holding out to an international audience the rise of Mayawati as a miracle of Indian democracy.

The author’s autobiography has a lesson for those who talk about misuse of the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. He brings out the continuing atrocities on Dalits, which are not reported, and the collaboration of the Savarna landed gentry and the police in this game. The author points out that the Savarnas were habituated to making deals with the police, to rescue or harass Dalits as and when it suited them and thereby to exact from the Dalits the performance of tasks imposed on them. The author refers to an event in the village of the person to whom his sister was married. The houses of Chamars were set on fire because they had refused to work for Jats and Brahmins, who dominated the village, for low wages and had stopped working in their fields, a few days before his sister’s marriage – another instance of a not-infrequent type of atrocities which go unreported on account of the atmosphere of fear. This and the routine showering of abuses on them referred to earlier, mostly unreported on account of reasons like Dalits’ dependence on land-owning upper castes for daily-wage labour and livelihood, and awareness of the dubious role of a number of police personnel, is a matter to be pondered over by those who, in their ignorance, think and allege that the SC and ST (POA) Act is often misused, while the real problem is the non-use or inadequate use of the Act.

Grassroot Insights into Traditional Economy based on Caste System-with-“Untouchability”

This autobiography contains a number of insights at the grassroots into the working of the traditional economy built upon and bolstered by the caste system-with-“Untouchability”. For example, he brings out that till the generation before him, the entire mohalla was engaged in the work of flaying and tanning of cattle carcasses, but by the time he was born, most of the Chamar households there had given up this work. This is part of the phenomenon in some parts of India of deliberate abandonment of traditional stigmatized occupations by Dalit communities. This has

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been particularly notable in Maharashtra among the Mahars and Western UP among the Chamars/Jatavs. In both instances, growing awareness of stigma and Dr Ambedkar's inspiration were at the root. The author, however, brings out the little change and substantive stagnancy by his observation that, "the modes of exploitation have certainly changed a little over time, but the basic structure is still intact." As a result, "the burden of debts on the Dalits is on the increase, while the Savarnas continue to grow more prosperous."

The landlessness of SCs, both Chamars and Balmikis, then and now, is brought out. The pattas given to some of them by Governments remain on paper. The ownership of land and cattle is with Jats, Brahmins and Lodhs, while the Dalits have been relegated to social slavery for centuries, providing hard work for disproportionately low wages. The author wryly observes that "hard work cannot dispel poverty".

In a flash forward pertaining to the period in 2007, when the author was at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Shimla, he gives an account of a Survey of Pali which he conducted and in which he compiled a list of workers in kilns and brought out that all the workers were "landless proletariat Jatavs". He brings out a significant contrast in caste society by observing that there is not a single Brahmin or Bania working in brick kilns or in sanitation work and not a single Balmiki or Chamar is found to be the priest of a temple or a monastery. Slow, delayed and limited change is taking place with regard to the selection and appointment of Dalits as temple priests in States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but the contrast portrayed by the author almost wholly remains true till today.

Grassroot Picture of Dalit Residential Segregation

The way the residential segregation of Dalits was ensured under any circumstance comes out as an aside. When the newly emergent middle castes, or Socially and Educationally Backward Castes, of Yadavs and Telis bought lands and constructed their homes on the outskirts of the village, the Chamars and Balmikis in the proximity had to sell off their homes and move towards new outskirts. This village level account of the residential segregation of Dalits, I must point out, is a reality even now in all over the country. This is a matter to be kept in view by those who theorize that residential integration of Dalits and non-Dalits has taken place to a considerable extent and, therefore, question the need to give separate attention to the provision of housing with all facilities and connectivities for Dalit bastis. While we may hope to see the arrival of good days when there is real residential integration of Dalits and non-Dalits, at present and in the foreseeable future, it is indispensable to give focused attention to the upgradation of every Dalit basti in the country to humanly acceptable levels.

Attitude of Different Communities towards Dalits

The author's keen observation over the years of his childhood and teenage brings out a number of facts of the attitude of different communities from the point of view of Dalits. He finds that "most Yadavs are.... greater exponents of Savarna culture than Brahmins." They and other persons of the middle castes, referred to as "Shudras" by him, "could not bear to see a Chamar walk with his head held high or a Chamarin or Bhangin wearing good clothes." He arrives at these conclusions on the basis of certain specific instances of events which he has cited. However, he

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also notes some redeeming features. Yadavs associated with the Arya Samaj were relatively more liberal towards Dalits. It also comes out from the recital of his story that the teachers and Headmaster who discovered his talent and provided a break for him through lateral entry into school, which became the game-hanger of his life, were also Yadavs. The Arya Samaj had a role in those days in moderating the upper and middle caste attitudes towards Dalits, though it was accompanied by the distortion of hostility towards Muslims. Now the influence of Arya Samaj has dissipated and no other humanizing ideology has replaced it. This underlines the importance of building into our education system, in graduated modules appropriate to each stage of education, human rights education about the harm done by the caste-system-with-“Untouchability” over the centuries till now and the importance of eliminating this evil system and the inequalities produced by it, not only as a matter of justice for the victims, but also in the interest of social integration and harmony and optimal national progress.

Regarding the attitude of Lodhs, the author refers to an incident of personal fracas between a Lodh individual and the author’s Tau, a near-blind totally destitute road-side cobbler, because his Tau asked the Lodh for payment of the money owed for his shoe-polishing work a number of times. In this incident, the former was the offender and the latter’s retaliation was in self-defence. The Lodh regarded the defensive retaliation of the Chamar cobbler as “an insult to his caste.... He was accustomed to abusing the Untouchables in his village almost every day”. He brought other Lodhs and mounted an attack on the author and his Tau. They were saved by Atiqurrahman and his men. But the author and his Tau had to change residence, beyond the reach of the Lodhs, leaving the village Kaser Kalan, where they lived at that time. In a sociological aside, the author also brings out that “those were the days when the Lodhs were aspiring to be recognized as Kshatriyas. They had started to attach the appellation ‘Rajput’ to their names”. This can be recognized by sociologists as part of a pan-Indian phenomenon among middle and lower-middle castes of claiming higher social status and assuming new caste names or adding new suffixes to their original caste names. These new names/suffixes now figure as synonyms of those castes in the lists of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEdBCs) prepared in different States and in the Central list of SEdBCs.

The role of some Brahmins in maintaining relations between castes on an “even” keel, in accordance with tradition, is brought out by Mahendra Sharma’s counseling to the author’s Tau against young Sauraj’s attitude and advice that a “low caste boy” should not think that “he can answer back a ‘high caste’ man and a landlord at that, on equal terms”.

Another precious sociological insight becomes available from the author’s description of Karamtullaji or Mullaji, a relatively well-to-do dealer in scraps. Mullaji ignored “Untouchability” and dealt with the author and his Tau on an equal basis. The author observes that there was a world of difference in the treatment they received from Mullaji and Atiqurrahman, on the one hand, and from the Yadavs, Lodhs and Sharma ji, on the other. According to the author, his Tau’s explanation for this difference was that “Mullaji’s forefathers had been ‘Untouchables’ like us. They have converted to Islam, disgusted with Hindu norms regarding ‘touchability’ and ‘Untouchability’”. In this little observation, the illiterate Tau has summarized the knowledge of a

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large number of sociologists, anthropologists, historiographers, demographers and social administrators of different parts of the country, whom I had drawn upon, apart from my personal knowledge and observations, to show conclusively in a report of mine, which in book form is with the publisher awaiting publication, that the overwhelming majority of the Muslims in India are converts from castes, which are now classified as Scheduled Castes and Socially and Educationally Backward Classes.

Apart from the behaviour of these two individuals, the author also refers to the behaviour of Muslims in general. For his work of cleaning and polishing shoes of Namazis when they trooped into the Masjid – boot-polishing was one of the many forms of labour in which the author was engaged in his childhood and teenage –, he would be paid money by them automatically without his having to ask for it, and they thought it was sinful to hold back wages. He contrasts this with his experience with some Hindus, who “skimped on giving just wages for labour” and who would extract services and not provide remuneration. On the very sensitive issue of “Untouchability”, the author’s observation is that, “Over and above that, unlike the Hindus, they would not use pollution norms to distance themselves from us”.

Another experience that the author relates is that, “Hindu barbers would not cut our hair”. It is interesting that the same situation exists to this day in many parts of the country. On 18 January 2019, I was in Ranibennur in Haveri district of North Karnataka, along with my wife Prof (Mrs) Shantha Krishnan, for a Conference of thousands of Dalits of the Madiga community, the most populous SC community in South India and one of the largest in India. One of the issues that emerged in the Conference, which are now being addressed by the District Administration, was denial of hair-cutting service for them by the barbers on account of caste norms enforced by dominant upper castes in the area. Next observation by the author, while referring to the liberal behaviour of Massaab and his wife, Bau, who belonged to the Yadav community and who let him eat his food from the family’s plate, is that, “Prior to that day, I had never been served anything in the utensils of a Bania or a Yadav family. No Yadav family, save a few from the Arya Samaj fold, ever allowed a Chamar-Bhangi the use of its utensils. Yet, Muslims could partake of meals from their utensils or smoke from their hookahs even though some of them were poor and landless like us, but they were not Untouchables.” The phenomenon of treating members of Dalit community as “Untouchables” when they are Hindus, but not when they became Christians or Muslims, as it existed in Kerala at that time, was brought to the notice of Swami Vivekananda by Dr Palpu, one of the two earliest matriculates from the then “Untouchable” Ezhava community, and Swami Vivekananda has severely castigated the upper castes of Kerala for this and referred to Malabar (meaning Kerala) as a “lunatic asylum”. Such lunatic asylums had existed and still exist not only in Kerala, but in many parts of the country. Dr Palpu himself, after his matriculation, faced the problem when he applied for admission to the medical college in his native Travancore State, creating a great problem for the upper castes. The Maharaja of Travancore pleaded with him whether he could not convert himself to Christianity, in which case he could be admitted. The Ezhava community’s riposte for this was whether they while being Hindu, could not get what they could get if they become Christians. Palpu had to go to Mysore State for his medical education.

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Devout Hindus, who are concerned about conversion, have to ponder over the continuing practice of “Untouchability” against Dalits, widely prevalent all over the country in various forms, including bizarre, irrational and comical forms. The solution for their concern is in their own hands. They have only to follow the teachings of reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Shraddhananda, Sri Basaveswara, Srimanta Shankara Deva, all of the upper castes who condemned “Untouchability” and caste-based discriminations. If Hindus, especially of the upper and middle castes, can get over the mental constraint of caste and look also to scholars and saints and reformers of Dalit and Backward class origin, there are many more examples of indigenous wisdom and humanity, which can be followed in order to be able to come out of the trap of the caste system and “Untouchability”. In the Raidas Ramayana by Guru Bakhshidas, the debates that Raidas, a cobbler, had with the ritualistic Brahmins of Kashi are outlined. There have been such persons all over the country. Based on his reading of Raidas and Kabir, and referring to Mahendra Sharma’s pretensions to scholarship of the Vedas, the author remarks: “I wonder at what ultimately was the measure of the so-called wisdom of the Brahmin. What kind of tree of Brahminical knowledge was this that produced only the fruit of inequality.”

Another interesting sociological aside regarding the illogical persistence of caste comes from the author’s observation about the recent new developments in the leather-related occupation. Processed leather is now being exported by Brahmins and Banias. The owners of the Bata company who manufacture and trade in leather products are not treated as “Chamars”, nor are they treated as “Untouchables”. On the other hand, the author himself, who has become a highly educated university teacher, his son and daughter who are well-educated, his grandchildren who study in public schools, and others who have become officers, are still called “Chamar”, which means “leatherworkers”, though none of them got anything to do with leatherwork.

Caste and “Untouchability” among Sikhs – The Behaviour of Upper Caste Sikhs towards Sikh and Hindu Dalits and Scheduled Tribes

The author also provides insights into caste among Sikhs, who he came across at Baajpur, where he worked for sometime as a bonded labourer. He notices the existence of two sections among the Sikhs, namely, the upper caste Sikhs who are land-owners and Sikhs who belong to the Ravidasi and Mazhabi castes, who are landless Sikhs or had small plots of land. But he found discrimination against Dalit Sikhs by the upper caste Sikhs less rigorous than seen among Hindus in his native Western UP.

Scheduled Tribes population is very sparse in UP. One of the few tribes in Western UP is the Bhuksas. The author gives us a field-level insight into how the Sikhs who had come from Punjab bought lands from the native Bhuksa tribe at throw-away prices. Those who know India will recognize this as part of an all-India phenomenon, in operation over the centuries, which acquired intensity after Independence, of large-scale deprivation of the lands of the tribal people in every part of India, through various forms of deceit by individuals and by the colonial and post-Independence Governments in the name of reserved forests, irrigation projects, industrial projects etc., of which the beneficiaries are others and the losers are the land-deprived tribals. Bhuksas

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were extremely backward, but would not allow themselves to be enslaved by the Sikhs.

Guru Nanak's teachings and historical events since a few decades prior to Independence and during Partition may have mitigated the forms and rigours of "Untouchability" practised by upper caste Sikhs, but it made no difference to their ruthless exploitation of Dalit landless labourers and bonded labourers. The author compares the way "these Sardars bled us Dalits" with the way "the British exploited our labour". Any protest by the Dalit landless labourers was suppressed by importing labour from Bihar. This practice of import of alternative labour to suppress local labour demand for better wages brings to the mind of those who know other parts of the country the events leading to the Kizhavanmani massacre of Tamil Nadu in 1968, which was preceded by demand of the local Dalit agricultural labourers for a rise in their wage rate to a level between the existing wage rate and the statutory minimum wages rate, and import of agricultural labourers from other villages by land-owners.

III. AUTHOR'S CRITIQUE OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES, ABSENCE OF POLICIES AND APPROACH OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AND PARTIES

Critique of policies of Governments and the absence of policies and critique of approach of political movements emerge from various observations of the author, pointing to lacunae which need to be bridged. He observes that the only prospect available for Dalits in the village was to subsist by selling their labour cheaply for various menial jobs. Yet, he laments, nobody has contemplated land-reforms as a means of affording a basis for self-reliance to them. Here he touches a raw nerve of the serious negligence of all post-Independence Governments in the Centre and States and all the political parties who have formed these Governments or participated in them as coalition partners to take up seriously the most important measure required for the crores of Dalits, viz., a massive national programme of distribution of Government lands to rural Dalits and, along with them, to non-Dalit rural landless agricultural labourers. This has been commended to Governments by reports of bodies like the Governors' Committee set up by the then President of India, Shri K. R. Narayanan, under the Chairmanship of the then Governor of Maharashtra, Dr. P.C. Alexander, the Group of Ministers on Dalit Affairs set up in 2005 under the Chairmanship of Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the Working Group on Empowerment of Scheduled Castes in the XII Five-Year Plan (2011), of which I was the Chairman, and many other Committees and Reports, but it is yet to get the serious attention of Governments and political parties.

The author acknowledges the Gandhian stance of compassion towards Dalits, but laments that the discourse of the rights of Dalits did not feature within its ambit. He gives the example of a Gandhian freedom fighter, Raghunath Shastri, native of the same village as the author, who, being a reform-minded Gandhian was more broad-minded than most of the Yadavs of the author's village, but in whose poems issues such as the curse of "Untouchability", the pitiable existence of the subaltern groups in the village such as Dalits and women, the crimes against the rights of Dalits for which the privileged castes owe a duty of repentance, did not find place. Even in the discourse of different political parties in the current run-up to the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections of 2019, this issue, so vital for the largest number of Dalits and also for other rural landless agricultural labourers, does not figure at all or figures in a very incomplete or casual

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manner. He notes that at that time the preachers of Gandhism would come to the bastis of Chamars and Bhangis and assure them that the benefits of the impending Independence would soon reach the Dalits. The author wryly notes that, "However, after Independence the condition of Dalits has worsened in proportion to the increase in the affluence of the Savarnas. He observes that, post-Independence it seems as if Gandhi has been proved wrong and many of Dr Ambedkar's fears have come true.

Referring to his own inability to go to school despite his eager quest to study, he laments that, the "various Governments of Independent India had hardly ever bothered to open schools for orphans like me, where we could study, work, and not be anxious about feeding ourselves." Successive Governments had failed to adopt a comprehensive policy to make education possible for Dalits, Adivasis and other deprived classes. While there is a Post-Matric Scholarship scheme, secured for SCs by Dr Ambedkar's far-sighted initiative in 1943 as Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council, and later extended to STs after Independence, the crying need for pre-Matric Scholarship to cover the entire period of schooling has not been introduced, except to a limited extent to children of families engaged in scavenging, flaying and tanning.

Another solution for the problem, mentioned by the author, is the establishment of high-quality residential schools for SCs, STs and SEBCs, introduced in Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) through sincere bureaucratic efforts, and later adopted by Karnataka and, to a limited extent, by Kerala. An attempt made to extend this to all-India scale in 1996, on the basis of my recommendations in the Dalit Manifesto, 1996, adopted in toto by the United Front Government, and for which the then Minister of Welfare Shri R.S Ramoowalia made sincere efforts and secured from the then Prime Minister Shri Deve Gowda a grant of Rs 250 Crores, was torpedoed.

There is a nugget from the author's mother. She often enquired of her son, i.e., the author, because he had read many books, whether he could tell why men refer to Indira Gandhi's rule as women's rule, and "what a poor Chamar woman like me has gained from Indira's rule?"-- a question which India's political, administrative, social and institutional leadership has even now to ponder over.

Another serious lacuna in policy comes from the author's account of the staff and teachers of the school which he joined and matriculated from. At that time a meager scholarship was available for SC students, but the clerk who dispersed scholarships was behaving as though he was performing an act of charity from his own resources. Not a single teacher thought of the money as a form of compensation or a partial payment of a historical debt. Even the teachers of history were ignorant of the history of Dalit oppression.

He gives instances of practices of "Untouchability" by certain teachers. It points to the lacunae in our system of education and training of teachers and other professionals including All-India and Central Service officers, their State counterparts etc. Our education training system does not contain materials explaining the caste system and "Untouchability" prevalent over the centuries and persisting to this day, the oppression committed through it on the vast masses of our country, the harm it has done to the cause of social integration, national unity and optimal

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progress of the country, the Constitutional discussions about it and the Constitutional provisions introduced to remedy it, the social justice measures – legislative as well as programmatic, one of which is reservation – undertaken in fulfillment of these Constitutional provisions and the need for all to cooperate in this enterprise, as a matter of human values, true patriotism and Constitutional morality. There is no attempt in our educational and training syllabi to debunk prejudices and biases based on birth, gender etc., so as to bring into existence new generations of human and fair minded individuals who can help in creating a humane and just society.

A careful reading of Prof. Sheoraj Singh Bechain's autobiography of his early life will benefit all those who are concerned about India's progress as a humane, just and happy country.