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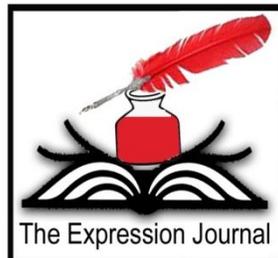
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# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

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## **A VOICE FROM PUNJABI DALIT LITERATURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH BALBIR MADHOPURI**

**(Interview)**

**Dr. Bijender Singh**

**Editor-in-Chief**

**The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal**

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Balbir Madhopuri is an eminent Punjabi writer presently living at Mahavir Vihar Colony located in Palam, New Delhi. He has two daughters Sharanjeet Kaur, Harjit Kaur and one son, Prateek Madhopuri. He has many books to his credit and the theme of Dalit consciousness is quite dominant in some of his books. Many books have been written by him, some are translated works while his other works are in the form of the edited anthologies. He gained reputation as a writer after the publication of his book *Changiya Rukh: Against the Night* by Oxford University Press in 2010. 'Changiya' is a Punjabi word which means 'truncated' or 'lopped'. This book is in the syllabus of the University of Delhi in the Punjabi department. Many people from different states have appreciated this book and that's the reason this book is available in many languages. He has participated in SAARC Writers Conference in Nepal in 2002 and SAARC Writers Conference in Pakistan in 2004 also. Balbir Madhopuri has written the foreword in my edited anthology *Dalit Men's Autobiographies: A Critical Appraisal* published by Kalpaz Publications, New Delhi. He is a very enthusiastic writer and his words have brought a new wave of Dalit revolution in the society. If I write about him here, words fall short to narrate his creative faculties. He is a 'Radio Samrat' and 'TV Star' also. In his obedience, I would like to say that he has clandestine intelligence and indomitable will that makes him a prolific writer. He is a gentle-hearted person and quite close to me. Let me give this opportunity to make you familiar about many aspects of his life elaborately through this interview.

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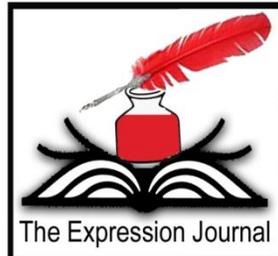
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### **Script of the Interview:**

**BIJENDER SINGH:** Dear sir, I would like to put you my first question about your childhood?

**BALBIR MADHOPURI:** Bijender ji, I was born on 24th July, 1955 in Madhopur, a small village in district Jalandhar, Punjab. My experiments with truth began at the tender age when I was working as a child labourer and an agricultural worker. I had passed my primary school from my village but had not shoes to go to my high school though it was 5 kilometers from my village. During the summer and winter, it was tough time for me, I can say beyond explanation. During the cold and heat waves, I had got only Rupee 1 and one half rupees for half day digging and weeding of crops. Paddy plantation was very hard work when the sun on head and feet in the hot water. Anyhow, I had managed to acquire a post graduate degree in Punjabi.

**BIJENDER SINGH:** Would you shed light on your childhood experience in the society?

**BALBIR MADHOPURI:** Again, it is very interesting question about my childhood, dear Bijender. I want to take some liberty to explain in detail, in a former untouchable caste-*Chamar*. My date of birth does not tally with the birth date as told by my mother. My community had never made a *Janam Patri* or a *Teva*. It had also never believed that giving alms can improve their lives. What I want to say that my caste does not come under any Varna-Dharma/ class or religion in the societal order. It had no social, religious, political or economic rights before independence. For example, every month when *Sangrand* or a *Gurpurab* was celebrated in the Gurudwara, we used to go for getting *Prasad* or having food from the free community kitchen. The organizers used to call us bad names because of our

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caste and uttered such words which should have no place in any religion. We used to be pushed like cats and dogs to a place where the people sitting inside take off their shoes. *Bhai ji* used to throw *Prasad* upward towards us so that his hand does not touch our hands. Many a time *Prasad* would not fall into our tiny hands folded in a bowl shape to get it but used to fall on the ground. The dogs standing nearby in expectation used to eat it losing no time. When the people used to leave, the dogs would get inside and search the *Prasad* which had fallen down by smelling here and there and eat it. If somebody tried to hit them, the other would easily and instantly say that 'a dog is a recluse; it would go out just with a minor threat.' Undergoing such a treatment, I stopped visiting the Gurudwara in my childhood itself. At that time, I was perhaps studying in class 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>. Our ancestors never visited that place as we were never a social part of the Hindus or Sikhs.

The fellow students, boys and girls used to behave in the same manner and kept a distance from us when we used to take water from the school water well. They used to wash away with water our pollution and then only take water. When piped water came and a tap was fixed for drinking water, they used to wash the tap first and then only take water. While at school, I and my classmates belonging to my caste used to walk more than three kilometers to village Sohalpur to wash and feed the animals of our *Khatri* teacher. We were not allowed to drink water from the water tap in his house even if it was extreme hot and we were dam thirsty.

There was a post office in the village. I and my class mates used to go to three nearby villages to deliver letters. These villages were situated at a distance of one kilometer to five kilometers. Walking bare footed in extreme hot or cold weather was no wonder to us. During these days, many a time I had to take off from my school to work for driving the animals of the neighbouring Jat family yoked to drain water from the well so that their son could go to school for study. This was a sort of a forced labour. After feeding her husband Taro aunty would ask me 'Good, get off the drive as your uncle has to drink water.'

In winter, I and other boys of my caste would stand near the jaggery machines with buckets in our hand for collecting juice dirt. The dogs used to hover around us in the expectation of eating the juice dirt being thrown there. We used to drink the juice dirt as there was an acute shortage of food during these days. I used to be daily busy in collecting the juice dirt. If I was unable to go, my elder brother would collect the juice dirt. Many a time, the hot juice dirt would fall on the feet and burn these. During these days, small cattle and old oxen and cows would die and my father, sons of my uncle and other male members in the neighbourhood would carry and remove them. Heavy animals were carried in hand carts. I also used to help them in pushing the cart. I always used to feel ashamed of in doing the above mentioned two menial jobs and was often compelled to think why only we

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people are compelled to do such jobs? Our funeral places are also separate from the Jats – what sort of links we have with them?

Despite all this, I used to go for child labour in the fields of the Jat farmers. The Jat women would throw loaves of bread at my hands from a distance. They would give me tea or water in the glass or the small bowl which I would carry from my home. I used to visit the houses of the Jat farmers at noon or in the evening with my aunts or brothers' wives to collect food which used to be part of the meager wages which my uncle earned as daily wages. We used to sit on the ground and many a time the hot curry or vegetable would splash over my naked feet. This would cause small burns. Amidst all this, my mind would be continuously bogged down like the blood running in the veins. A thought would bother why we do not have lands? We labour hard in the fields but still we are helpless in getting enough food. Why there is always tension in our community cluster due to poverty? Can we also have pucca houses like the Jats one day?

**BIJENDER SINGH: Would you share the caste discrimination among the Punjabis?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: The caste discrimination and untouchability is a base of Indian Hindu society which follows the codes of Manu Samriti. The Punjabi Community is also a part and parcel of Hinduism. In my childhood, we were not allowed to obeisance Sri Guru Granth Sahib inside the Gurudwaras in the villages. The present Sikhs talk in Punjab, India and abroad that there is no casteism among the them, but you can see the advertisement of matrimonial in the newspapers. It is true that Sikhism and Bani (poetry of Guru Granth Sahib) condemn the practice of untouchability and casteism and spread the message of humanity. The untouchables in the villages and towns of Punjab have been faced and facing the boycott and honour killings of their people. Often, the incidents of boycotting the lower castes happen in the rural areas of this progressive and prosperous state. It is also true that dalit women are for from untouchability. It is also a naked truth that youth dalits and non-dalits youth drink and abuse the drugs jointly.

**BIJENDER SINGH: As you belong to a scheduled caste/untouchable community Is this is a religious community?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: As you know that I belong to untouchable (Ad-Dharmi- Chamar) community. We are out caste people. According to our constitution, my community belongs to Scheduled caste. We people have no identity like other religions in India. In the Census 1931, we Ad-Dharamis (36 untouchable's castes at that time) population was 4.5 lakhs in the Greater Punjab but after Poona Pact 1932, we the aborigines of this land had lost our identity. Our native's movements all over India claimed loudly that we are a separate element; we are not Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians. So, we, in spite of, New Bodhist, Ramdasis, Majabhis and schedule castes, we are under Hindu fold according to the Article 25 of Indian Constitution.

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## **BIJENDER SINGH: Shed some light on the origin and development of Punjabi Dalit literature and effects of Dalit literature?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: Dr. Bijender, it also very important question, I want to tell to you in detail, that the rebellious voices among the natives against the treacherous administrative moves of the Aryan Brahamans, their inhuman treatment and the slavery started growing louder extensively. Charvaka Philosophy and Buddhism specially supported such voices. This proved to be a big challenge to Brahamanism. During those days, Aajivaka Darshan was prevalent among the natives. It is also true that in order to suppress and silence these rebellious movements, some of the neo ideologies and notions propagated and instigated to lead a life of lesser demands, follow the path of non-violence (Ahinsa) and be contented by considering everything as God's wish. With the passage of time, some holy men across India, pleading social equality made mind shaking poetic attacks against caste-based religion in the guise of Satsang. Prominent among these saints were: Namdev, Ravidas, Kabir, Trilochan, Sadhna, Sain, Pipa among others. While their compositions preached uniformity and equality of bones, skin, veins and skeleton and the red coloured blood running in the veins of all human beings, these aroused social awakening also. For this reason, they were successful in their times in mobilizing the landless, hard working classes and the artisan fraternity. The poetic compositions of these saints and holy men have autobiographical references and contemporary situations as well as historical events. It is pertinent to mention that these saints and holy men presented a resolution for Shudras and untouchables i.e. natives to shake off Brahamanical traditions and bad customs and to usher in a new society. For example, Begumpura – a city sans all pains and troubles, sans casteism, a society sans caste/class, a modern society, sans any reference to temples, an urban society, the area where no tax is to be paid or no trouble to bear with, where there is no discrimination of high or low, rather all are equals. In the concluding part of this Shabad, poet Ravidas said that he belonged to Chamar caste but was a free bird and loitered in freedom with his friends and had the right to go anywhere, to a city or a village. (*Adi Granth Page No. 345*)

## **BIJENDER SINGH: Please tell us something about Dalit consciousness.**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of twentieth century several Dalit movements came into being with the main aim of bringing a revolutionary change in the Indian society, especially the socio-economic, religious and political situation of the untouchables. What I mean to say is that Jyoti Rao Phule (1827-1890) initiated the bonds of unity in 1868 among the untouchables by allowing the Shudras and extreme Shudras to take water from his home pond and established the 'Satiyasodhak Society' on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1873. Later he founded the Hindu Sreyobhi Vardhini Sabha Madras in 1870 and Namashudra Bengal in 1872 to bring an awakening among the untouchables about their rights. Similarly, Adi Dravida Mahajan Sabha in South

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India in 1927, the first Dalit Revolutionary and land reformist Ayyan Kali in Kerala (1863-1941), M.C. Raja in Tamil Nadu, Bhagya Reddy Verma in Andhra Pradesh (1888-1939), Adi Hindu Mahasabha 1926 and in North India Adi Hindu (founder Swami Achhutanand, 1839-1932), Ad-Dharam Mandal Punjab (founder Babu Mangu Ram, 1886-1980), Baba Saheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) who all hailed from different areas but with one uniform ideology and thinking presented their ideas before the people and the British government. They published innumerable booklets. For example, Ad-Dharam Mandal published eight poetic books – (1) Adi Dukhre, published twice, (2) Sacha Pataka, published twice, (3) Achhutonki Pukar, (4) Adi Paigam, (5) Vihar Sudhar, published twice, (6) Bharam Tod, (7) Azadi di Daundi and (8) Kaumi Aallan, etc. A total number of 50,000 copies were published of all these editions. A lot of revolutionary literature was published and distributed among the untouchables and before 1931 Census, a large number of posters on creating awakening for equal rights were pasted on walls and trees.

It would be pertinent to say that Dalit litterateurs became interested in creating literature which was something new, rational, inspirational and pointed to a definite aim. The result was that Dalit movements were used as a logically sound tool. The autobiographies of Dalit litterateurs portrayed a true picture of the contemporary Indian society before intelligentsia, the world over and were successful in projecting the ugly face of the country.

**BIJENDER SINGH: Everybody in this world gets inspired by someone. There are some moments when you get inspired by a chunk of writers. Would you please shed some light on the writers by whom you got inspired in your life?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: There are many reasons which have compelled and inspired to me to write my autobiography Changiya Rukh (*Against the Night*). First, I born in an untouchable, landless and a poor family in Doaba region of Punjab. My community is an outcaste like other thousands in caste system and Varna-Dharma. In other words- centuries old quarrel and tension between two races; original people of India and Aryans who conquered the natives. The slavery for natives is the outcome of war between these two races. Manu Smriti- a creation of Varna -Dharma had given more strength to Varna -Vivastha by its codes. One thing more I would like to share you that I was very much fond of books during my school and college time. I can say my trend had been set to read more and write also. My poems had started been publish in the Punjabi Dailies and magazines. Those days, I think was my experience. During this period left movement was on peak and I had joined it. Along with my syllabus I had read communist literature- Revolutionary Literature. The writers of USSR like Maxim Gorky, Chingez Aitmatov, Nicolai Ostrovsky, Dostoevsky, Pushkin etc. were my favourite. Now, I had direct links with the CPI local, district level leaders and literary personalities of Left ideology.

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In 1987, I had transferred been to the capital of Indian where I had got books on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Guru Ravi Dass and Dalit literature. My first book of poetry- Bhakhda Patal (The Smoldering Netherworld) was published in 1992. I have authored 14 books and translated 30 books from Hindi and English till date.

**BIJENDER SINGH: You are doing a very noble deed through your works. When a book is published by a writer, it is really a matter of great joy to him/her. You have also contributed significantly to Dalit literature through your works. How do you feel that your famous autobiography *Chhangiya Rukh* has served the purpose of awareness among the dalits/untouchables?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: Yes, definitely it had become a source of inspiration for dalits and non-dalits to fight for the social justice. Its social vision is based on human rights for all not only for few people of a particular religion and caste. I have just laid a stone in the foundation of our literary movement. But, majority of many readers are from non-dalit communities, have given the reactions in writing as well as on telephone. But as a proof you can see a book *namely Balbir Madhopuri Di Swaijeevni Chhangia Rukh da Sahitak-Samajik Mulankan* edited by Dr. Sutinder Singh Noor, formerly Head, Department of Punjabi, University of Delhi. The book contains 208 pages. Only 20 pages are contributed by the Dalit writers. Almost all the readers have the tuning with my views and ideology. The eminent and known writers of Punjabi and have well placed been in the international literature have always appreciated my viewpoint, my way of expression including my language. I mean to say, I have a large size of my readers. For example; 11 editions of *Chhangiya Rukh* have been published in hard and paper back by two publishers in Punjabi, Oxford University Press has sold thousands of copies. In Pakistan, the first edition in Shamukhi (a Punjabi alphabet) has been sold. In Hindi, the first edition is also out of stock. My autobiography has been serialized in many Punjabi and English magazines in and abroad.

**BIJENDER SINGH: Keeping in view of your works, we can say that you are a unique writer and deserve all the honour of an established writer. In this direction, I would like to ask my last question to you. As you have done a lot of work, you must have bagged some awards, honours etc. Could you please tell about awards you have received on your works?**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: Yes, please see the list of Awards and Honours:

1. Sahitya Akademy Translation Award-2013
2. Translation Award- Punjabi Academy Delhi-2000
3. Gold Pen by All India Adi-Dharam Mission-2011
4. Punjabi Sahit Sabhyachar Sangathan, Delhi-2009
5. Lal Singh Dil Purskar -2008,  
Punjabi, Sahit Kala Prishad, Malerkotla (Punjab)

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6. Sri Begampura Mission Punjab (Regd.) – 2006, Patiala
7. Dharat Suhavi – 2006, Punjabi Sath Lambra (Jalandhar)
8. Punjabi Deptt., Kurukshetra University-2005
9. Prerna Award – 2004, Prerna (A Punjabi Magazine), Delhi
10. Sarvotam Pustak Purskar-2003 by Bhasha Vibhag, Govt. of Punjab
11. S.M.S. Sahitya Award, Maharashtra-2003
12. Academy of Fine Arts and Literature-2003
13. Jagroop Singh Datewas Pursakar-1999 by Shabad (A Punjabi, Magazine) Jalandhar
14. Kaav-Pursakar, Punjabi Academy, Delhi -1994.
15. Sant Ram Udasi Memorial Award- 1993 (Barnala), Punjab
16. Dr. Ambedkar Fellowship – 1993
17. Gurdas Ram Alam Award- 1992 by Manvvadi Rachna Manch, Punjab

**BIJENDER SINGH: Thank you very much for sharing your valuable thoughts with us. I am indebted for your love, cooperation and cohort.**

BALBIR MADHOPURI: No mention, Bijender ji. You are my true friend and I hope we will go miles together on this literary journey. A man of literary worth like you is always welcome to approach me at any moment.