

Poetry, Politics and Dalit Imagination: Madan Veera and His Poetic Canvas

Narender Kumar

Abstract

The egalitarian principles of Sikhism create an illusion that the Sikhs do not believe in caste hierarchy. But Dalit personal narratives and caste-based gurdwaras in every village of Punjab are examples of how caste functions amongst the Sikhs. Dalits have been deprived of education since time immemorial. It was only after the British intervened that Dalits had access to education. A few Dalits got an opportunity to get educated towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Education made them conscious about their miserable condition and they began to reflect on social reality in the form of poetry or personal narratives. This study makes an effort to understand the rise of Dalit poets such as Gurdas Ram Alam, Sant Ram Udasi, Lal Singh Dil and the contemporary poet Madan Veera. My study investigates how Madan Veera reflects on current Dalit issues such as caste humiliation, socio-economic conditions, and exploitation. Thus, his poetry creates an alternative aesthetics to dominant aesthetics.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, imagination, aesthetics, politics

Introduction: Dalit Poetry from the Early Twentieth Century to the Naxalite Movement

Punjab is a Sikh dominant state. If we look at the origin of Sikhism we notice that Sikhism emerged as a protest against the dominant Hindu religion which did not recognize a large population as human beings. The lower castes largely remained subordinate to the dominant group (Webster, 2007). With the emergence of Sikhism this dehumanized group

found Guru Nanak's principles of human equality more suitable to their humiliated and injured psyche. That was the reason why a larger section of the lower castes became the followers of Guru Nanak (Hans, 2016). This dehumanized group played a significant role in establishing Sikhism as a new sect in Punjab. In the new sect they were made Singh and interdicted to recognize themselves on the caste line (Dhavan, 2011). Of course, the followers happily accepted this new name and promised to follow the Guru's instructions. But do the Sikhs really follow the principle of casteless society?

Such a question needs attention because amongst the Sikhs there are particular groups of people who are addressed as Mazhbi Sikhs, Ramdasia Sikh, Sikligar Sikh and so on (Lum, 2011). Such caste-based divisions and everyday caste practice amongst the Sikhs force the observers to rethink and reconsider the principle of casteless society and human equality in Sikhism. Since the victims were prohibited from reading and writing for centuries, we do not find any written evidence of resistance by them. They were offered education by the British only after the annexation of Punjab in 1849 (Mehta, 2003). Before the British intervention there was hardly anyone educated amongst the Dalit communities (Leitner, 1971). The British Raj opened schools at various places in Punjab and enrolled students irrespective of caste and creed. The British Raj also offered army services to the Dalits, and a sizeable number of them accepted the offer (Webster, 2000). Army service exposed them to the Western world which enlightened them about human equality, liberty and fraternity. Christian missionaries also played significant roles in the field of Dalit education as they opened schools and admitted Dalits without any discrimination. Of course, many Dalits converted to Christianity and towards the end of the nineteenth century Dalit conversion became an issue of concern among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Since Hindus and Sikhs were a minority in Punjab and Dalits conversion to Christianity further reduced the strength of the Hindus and Sikhs in the region, the Hindu intelligentsia, who controlled the region's economy through business, was most concerned about the decreasing strength of the Hindus in the region. The foundation of the Arya Samaj (1877) and Singh Sabha (1873) in Lahore were the result of religious consciousness (Jones, 1973).

The religions belonging to the Dalits became an issue of concern amongst the Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians who made efforts to lure them with material benefits (Jones, 1989). In this volatile political

situation the Ad Dharm Movement emerged in Punjab. Mangu Ram Mugowalia started the movement as he wanted to organize Dalits divided into various sub-castes (Juergensmeyer, 2009). To some extent Mugowalia succeeded in organizing the scattered Dalits under the Ad Dharm movement and they began to recognize themselves as Ad Dharmis. This was the beginning of the rise of Dalit consciousness as they demanded separate electorate rights as given to the Sikhs on the basis of religious identity (Madhopuri, 2010). Ad Dharm's leaders organized conferences, meetings and cultural festivals through which they mobilized Dalits. Mobilization did make an impact on the Dalits and they began to express themselves in the form of poetry. Gurdas Ram Alam, who emerged out of this volatile scenario, is the first Dalit poet who captured the 1920s Dalit political struggle in his poetry (Alam, 2017), he writes:

Ad Dharmiyan be careful brothers
Get up and think of loss and benefit
Hindus and Sikhs have stolen half of our community
And the remaining half of Muslims have stolen
A few of us, Christians have stolen
That's why we do not have any strength (Alam, p. 19)

Gurdas Ram Alam did not have any formal education but somehow he learnt Punjabi from a local Dalit who was involved with the Arya Samaj. Alam's poetry questions the whole establishment and produces an alternative discourse. Alam, being a Dalit and one of the major critics of dominant discourse, was ignored and hardly discussed in the mainstream academia. Since he was deliberately neglected, there is hardly any work available on Alam. Other than Alam, there are two more Dalit poets: Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Singh Dil, who emerged during the Naxalite movement in Punjab. Both of them participated in the Naxalite movement and played a significant role in mobilizing the masses through poetry written in the local dialect. The dialect is popularly used by the local peasants and Punjabi Left world that mostly come from the peasantry, immediately captured the poetic idiom Udasi and Dil used in the poetry. That is why they recognize Udasi and Dil's contribution to literature, especially poetry that emerged in the 1970s.

Since both Udasi and Dil did work with the Naxalites, their poetry is more influenced by the class question than caste. Of course, they addressed the caste question but being a part of the movement they

were taught that the real issue is the division of the means of production and caste is just a superstructure. If they succeed in resolving the issue of class then caste will automatically get over. Both of them of course in their later lives realized the difference between caste and class. With the spread of education their poetry influenced the Dalits and now almost all educated Punjabi Dalits are familiar with them. Their poetry inspired many of them to continue the tradition of resistance through literature. Madan Veera is one of them who keeps questioning the whole socio-economic and political order.

Madan Veera and His Political Imagination

Like his predecessors Madan Veera also comes from a family in which education was not very common. This is what he writes: "When I think about the source of inspiration which forced me to write poetry right from the very beginning, I did not find any in my family or surroundings that inspired me to write poetry" (Veera, 2020). His personal narrative informs us that being part of a working class family reading and writing were not common in the house. Of course, his grandfather remembered Sadhu Daya Singh Arif's *Zindagi Bilas* and one of his uncles used to sing *Heer*. Veera might have got an exposure to the art of poetry through his grandfather and uncle. But the real sources of Veera's inspiration are his personal life and lived experience through which he observes and feels the humiliation and exploitation of a larger group of people stigmatized in the name of caste.

As Veera writes: "Of all the good and bad incidents that took place in my life, the incident that disappointed me the most took place at a gurdwara where the people of my caste were asked to bring their plates to have food in the langar" (Veera, 2020). Since the langar is one of the basic principles of Sikhism under which anyone, irrespective of religion, caste, and colour, can have food in the congregation. But here in this context Madan Veera noticed that the people of his own caste were removed from the langar which forced him to think about the egalitarian philosophy of Sikhism. There are many other incidents which influenced and forced him to reflect on them in the form of poetry. In the beginning, one of his poems was published by Amrita Pritam in her magazine *Nagmani* and another was published in *Nawa Jamana*.

Madan Veera has published four volumes of poetry collections: *Bhakhya* (2001, Reprint 2009), *Nabran Di Ibarart* (2008), *Tand-Tani* (2011) and *Khara*

Pani (2013). Right from his first collection, which is out of print today and was reprinted in 2009, Madan Veera questions the whole philosophy of karma. As he writes:

I contest the worshipped book
Which gives utmost importance to action
But considers sin to be the desire of fruit
Prohibits from rights
Denies the justice
I address that false
And that deceit
Which declares our miseries and sufferings
The result of our last birth deeds (Veera, 2009, p. 25).

Veera produces a counter discourse which questions the whole philosophy of karma under which a larger group of people has been categorized as untouchables. Of course, under the constitutional provisions the practice of untouchability was prohibited but caste remains an essential part of everyday life in India. Even after seventy years of constitutional provisions, caste is the first thing which most of Indians want to know when they meet any unknown person. The dominant group, who enjoys the privilege of caste, and never realizes the humiliation inflicted on another group in the name of caste. Caste travels faster than anything else amongst Indians. Caste reaches the workplace before an employee gets there. And this is what Veera further writes:

From one house to another house
From one city to another city
From one office to another office
When I get transferred
Then before I reach
That house, that city, that office
My caste reaches first
And then people start talking about me. (Veera, 2009, p. 7).

Veera feels the pain of the whole Dalit community which faces caste discrimination everywhere in India. As and when any Dalit employee gets transferred from one city to another city, one office to another office, and one house to another house his caste reaches first then the employee and then people begin to talk about him. The talent, capability, and qualifications of the employee do not matter; the only thing that matters is caste (Yengde, 2019). He is looked at with the caste lens/caste gaze that rejects all his qualities and makes him an object of hatred. This is

the hatred that Veera reads on the faces of the dominant caste people wherever he meets them:

Then that moment from a human being I become the feet
 I realize my condition
 I am alone in the sea
 And not only the crocodile
 But the whole sea
 Considers me as an enemy (Veera, 2009, p. 8).

Veera delves deep into the issue of caste and makes efforts to understand how and why a Dalit becomes an enemy of the dominant castes. He knows that caste is a human construction and propagated and promoted through religion. Caste was designed to protect the notion of superiority and separate a group of people from the other. Of course, it was done in the name of religion which guaranteed its immovability. And this is what Veera writes:

We have understood
 Your politics of religion
 Your politics of karma
 That declares us
 Outcaste,
 The fifth category of people (Veera, 2008, p. 35).

Such poetry is not acceptable to a group of experts who come from the dominant castes and control Indian academia. Such poetry questions social, political, cultural and religious establishment and so it does not suit their aesthetic sense developed over the years. Dominant aesthetics has trained them to enjoy the pleasure generated out of the image of a beautiful woman in the full bloom of her youth. The dominant aesthetics can be easily noticed in literature, for example, how a Dalit woman Chandri is depicted by U.R. Ananthamurthy in his novel *Samskara* (1965), or Sohini a character in Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935). The upper caste male gaze enjoys the portrayal of the various parts of a young Dalit woman's body. Pleasure is one of the aesthetic elements which dominant academicians do not notice in the Dalit poetry or Dalit literature. There are other elements such as language or the selection of the words on the basis of which they reject Dalit poetry/Dalit literature. In the context of aesthetics Madan Veera writes:

You feel
 Words hit you like a slap
 Verses you feel as abuse

Burning with anger
And art experts say
This is not a work of literature
And not the religion of poetry (Veera, 2008, p. 21).

And this rejection has enlightened Dalit writers and intellectuals who have decided to develop their own aesthetics. Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) and Om Prakash Valmiki's *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundryashastra* (2001) create a counter aesthetics to dominant aesthetics. Though Dalit poetry itself creates an aesthetics as it enlightens the exploited about exploitation, sometime done in the name of religion and sometime in the name of karma and culture or sanskriti. The aesthetics, which Dalit poetry generates, is very pervasive amongst the readers who understand the politics of "taste." And of course, to mobilize this aesthetics amongst the masses is a challenge for Dalit writers and intellectuals. In this context I am reminded of the statement of one of my Brahmin colleagues, "I will teach the complete Indian Literature paper except *Untouchable Spring*, a novel by a Dalit writer G. Kalyan Rao who questions the victimization of Dalits in the name of caste."

Madan Veera understands the politics of religion under which people have been divided in the name of castes. He also observes caste practice in the religion such as Sikhism which itself emerged against the caste system and theologically does not believe in any notion of caste. A Sikh is known by his first name and the last name "Singh" given to him by the tenth Guru Govind Singh. Singh is a common last name for all who believe in Sikhism. But people do not practise this principle, especially when they address anyone from the Dalit communities, for example, Balraj Ramdasiya or Raju Mazhbi. So caste still remains with Dalits even after they become Sikhs. This is what Veera observes:

A bone and flesh human being
From Budh Singh to Budhu Mazhbi
From Mazhbi to Harijan
And in the name of life
Struggle to manage salt and oil (Veera, 2011, p. 41).

These lines express a social reality that Dalits face in everyday social life and they find it difficult to resist the undignified address. Since economically they are almost completely dependent on the landholders and economic vulnerability silences their resistance. This is the same issue which Balbir Madhopuri has raised in his autobiography *Chhangya*

Rukh. Madhopuri was surprised to note that the young boys of the dominant community addressed his parents and other old people of the Dalit community with their names while Madhopuri and others from his community address the elders of the dominant community with respected words such as uncle, grandfather and grandmother (Madhopuri, 2004).

The notion of disrespect comes from the means of production such as land which dominant castes control. The idea of respect is also embedded in identity constructed through scriptures. Since the caste system deprives Dalits from the ownership of the means of production, economic dependency enslaves them to the dominant caste. Of course, people believe that there is no slavery in independent India but lived experience of Dalits exposes how the Indian social system enslaves them. And this is what Madan Veera writes:

You have heard the word 'slavery'
 Know the literal meaning
 You know what it means
 We bear this pain,
 This sorrow
 And have lived experience of slavery
 Bear it on our body
 Imposed upon us since time immemorial (Veera, 2009, p. 82).

After independence Dalits have been given equal rights under constitutional provisions. These rights bring them at par with the dominant caste. But that equality exists only on paper; in everyday social life Dalits have been treated with the same caste normative with which they had been treated earlier in the ancient or pre-colonial and colonial time. The hope, which constitutional provisions generate amongst the Dalits, does not work as equality is not only about the equal voting right; rather equality is about the equal distribution of economic resources or equal representation of the marginalized in every sphere of life. The equal distribution of economic resources and equal representation did not take place in India after independence. Under Nehru's leadership the Indian state introduced the land distribution policy but it could not get implemented as the politicians and bureaucrats, who mostly come from the dominant landholding caste, did not want to give their land to Dalits (Walisky, 1977). Reservation or representation, another policy introduced to ensure representation, has also not been implemented properly. So the whole idea of equal rights, ensured under constitutional provisions,

remained unfulfilled in India. And this is what Veera observes:

This is the place from where
I have been issued the yellow card
This nation
Is mine because
Here in the laboratory of Manu
Again identified
My caste, my race
Step by step done
My verification
My identification
And in the name of rights
I have been given the voting right (Veera, 2009, p. 93).

Even after seventy years of independence and implementation of constitutional provisions and equal rights the economic division is very visible between the Dalits and the dominant caste. Constitutional provisions did not succeed to reduce the gap amongst the various sections of society (Breman, 2019). The gap between the rich and the poor has increased in the last few years. Of course, the Indian state introduced various policies in the last seven decades and claimed development and growth in various fields of Indian economy. But socio-economic reality in villages narrates a different story and exposes how the government policies have affected the villagers in the name of development:

The carriage of policies
From the capital
When start moving
Then my village
Feels a deep sense of remorse
Then the inspection team comes
They play their pungli/bin
Divide the village in various divisions
When they count the rate of development
People of the village become homeless (Veera, 2009, p. 71).

Development projects in India that attracted the attention of the whole world and promised to bring the changes amongst the most marginalized section of the society, failed to meet the expectations. Whether it was the Green Revolution, special economic zones or mega projects, which the Indian state introduced from time to time, did bring some changes in the socio-economic status of the people. But who were the real beneficiaries of these policies and projects? While the poor got the minimum, Veera

writes that the rich people got the maximum.

The question of development and growth in the country depends on the political policies undertaken by various political parties. There are various political groups such as socialist, Marxist, democratic and so on in India. But these political groups could not succeed in bringing any structural change in the socio-economic system of the country so far. Rather the traditions and rituals have been transformed with such an expertise that creates an illusion of modernity (Rudolph, 1967). Democracy, an elected government of people-- as ideally accepted, has lost its credibility and perhaps this is what Veera suggests:

Help to win the enemy of masses
Or to defeat the crocodile of the opposition party
Since half a century
I have been watching the drama of democracy
Now I have understood
Whichever party wins
Whoever gets the crown
Here only the ordinary people get defeated (Veera, 2009, p. 24).

The defeat of the ordinary people suggests the failure of the democratic system in the country which was introduced to bridge the gap between the privileged and deprived.

Conclusion

Initially Madan Veera's poetry, like other Dalit poets, was not appreciated and recognized by the Indian academia. The contexts of pain and sufferings of people bring Veera's poetry closer to the masses. And therefore, ordinary people recognized him as their poet. As mentioned earlier, Veera's poetry does not reflect the dominant aesthetics. In fact, it creates an alternative aesthetics that questions the dominant aesthetics. With the expansion of the "taste" his poetry has travelled all over including a part of the university syllabi. The inclusion proposes that in coming years his poetry may succeed in changing the "taste" of the masses.

Note: All translations from Punjabi into English in this paper are mine.

References

- Alam, G.R. (2017). *Mera jeevan anth.* Ed. Sohan Sehijal. Lokgeet Parkashan.
Breman, J. (2019). A mirage of welfare: How the social question in India got

- aborted. In Jan Breman (Ed.), *The social question in the twenty-first century: A global view* (pp. 98-114). University of California.
- Dhavan, P. (2011). *When sparrows became hawks: The making of Sikh warrior tradition, 1699-1799*. Oxford University Press.
- Hans, R.K. (2016). Making sense of Dalit Sikh history. In S.R. Rawat & K. Satyanarayana (Eds.), *Dalit studies* (pp. 131-154). Orient BlackSwan.
- Jones, K.W. (1973). Ham Hindu Rain: Arya-Sikh relations, 1877-1905. *The Journal of South Asian Studies*, 32 (3), 457-475.
- Jones, K.W. (1989). *Arya dharma: Hindu consciousness in 19th century Punjab*. Manohar Publications.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (2009). *Religious rebels in the Punjab*. Navayana.
- Leitner, W.G. (1971). *History of indigenous education in the Punjab: Since annexation and in 1882*. Language Department Punjab.
- Lum, K. (2011). Caste, religion and community assertion: A case study of the Ramdasias in Spain. In K. Jacobson & K. Myrvold (Eds.), *Sikhs in Europe: Migration, identities and representations* (pp. 179-200). Routledge.
- Madhopuri, B. (2004). *Chhangyarukh* (Autobiography). Lokgeet Parkashan.
- Madhopuri, B. (2010). *Ad dharm de bani: Gadri Baba Manu Ram* (Biography). Chetan Prakashan.
- Mehta, H.R. (2003). *A history of the growth and development of Western education in Punjab 1846-1884*. Punjab Language Department.
- Rudolph, L.I. & Rudolph, S.H. (1967). *The modernity of tradition: Political development in India*. Chicago University Press.
- Veera, M. (2008). *Nabraandiibarat* (A poetry collection) Sapatrishi Publications.
- Veera, M. (2009, 1st edition 2001). *Bhakhya* (A poetry collection). Raab Parkashan.
- Veera, M. (2011). *Tand-Tani*. Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd.
- Veera, M. (2013). *Khara Pani*. Saptrishi Publications.
- Veera, M. (2020). My writing process. *Sirjana*, 196, 12-18.
- Walisky, L.J. (Ed.). (1977). *Agrarian reform as unfinished business: The selected papers of Wolf Ladejinsky*. Oxford University Press.
- Webster, J.C. (2007). The Dalit Sikhs: A history? In T. Ballantyne (Ed.), *Textures of the Sikh past: New perspectives* (pp. 138-162). Oxford University Press.
- Webster, J.C. (2000). The Christian movement in Punjab. In H.K. Puri. (Ed.). *Social and political movement: Readings on Punjab* (pp. 118-136). Rawat Publications.
- Yengde, S. (2019). *Caste matters*. Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd.

Narender Kumar teaches English at Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi. His articles have appeared in EPW, Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, Dialogue, and Sanghrash.

rishikumarnarender@gmail.com