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Life of the Dalit Labourers/Seeris in Gurdial Singh's Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse/ਅੰਨ੍ਹੇ ਘੋੜੇ ਦਾ ਦਾਨ

Dr. Rakesh Kumar

Associate Professor Department of English University of Jammu
rakeshbcju@gmail.com

ABSTRACT :

Gurdial Singh in his famous novel *Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse/ਅੰਨ੍ਹੇ ਘੋੜੇ ਦਾ ਦਾਨ* meticulously brings out the oppression, helplessness and destitution faced by the Dalit/Seeri community during newly independent and divided Punjab which was experiencing new capitalist economy along with technological advancements and the Green Revolution. The new developments divide the Punjabis into the haves represented by Jats and the have-nots represented by the Dalit/Seeri community. The Dalit community represented by Melu, the protagonist, frustrated and being fed up of humiliation by Jats, leave their native land in villages and migrate to the towns in search of better living opportunities, but the towns also exploit the downtrodden and have-nots like Melu. The novelist uses silence more than the dialogues to unravel the pain, oppression and humiliation faced by all in the Dalit community, be it a child, a man, a woman or even a cattle, in village or in town.

Keywords: Dalit/seeri, haves, have-nots, Green Revolution, Capitalism, Oppression

Life of the Dalit Labourers/Seeris in Gurdial Singh's Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse/ਅੰਨ੍ਹੇ ਘੋੜੇ ਦਾ ਦਾਨ

Gurdial Singh (born 10 January 1933 and died 16 August 2016), the critically acclaimed Punjabi author, is a Jnanpith Awardee (after Amrita Pritam) and also the Sahitya Akademi Award winner of 1999. He has realistically presented the social, cultural and economic life of rural Punjab, specifically of the Malwa region in his novels. His narratives are “indicators of tragic experiences based on real experiences which bring about a fundamental change in the traditional way of presentation of personal grief” (Rahi 40). Jasbir Jain supports Rahi and writes, “Singh’s novels, even as they engage with the peasant life of rural Punjab, move outside the surface narrative through narrative techniques” (360). Like Singh’s other novels, his seventh novel titled, *Alms in the name of a Blind Horse*, published in 1976, also represents the conflict among values prevalent in society, tangible as well as intangible struggles of the characters that ultimately lead to tragedy is the pivot of his novels. In his tales, “oppression is not foregrounded but the struggles are” (Jain 360). Singh is established as a novelist of Punjabi literature who not only understands the multiple layers of rural society but showcases these layers with utmost rigour, seriousness and flawlessness. As a novelist who is a keen observer Singh knows the rural society of Punjab which inclusively comprises various types of classes, castes and religions. In such a society, there has always been a sense of solidarity, but at the same time, there have also been clashes of interests among the people. Punjab, as a community always comprised of people who took insights and archetypes from the Sufi saints, faqirs and Sikh Gurus and have been in favour of a common composite culture based on solidarity. On the other hand, there have also been such selfish materialist forces which are viciously bent on destroying this composite texture of society. This wicked section of Punjabi society has infected the lives of marginalised people with misery and is responsible for their tragic conditions. Gurdial Singh is familiar with the binaries in both the groups of the haves and the have nots and also understands the contours of conflict between these two conflicting forces. The present research paper is an attempt to analyse the condition of Dalit Sikhs as a marginalised entity of Punjabi society with special reference to Gurdial Singh’s novel *Alms in the name of a Blind Horse/ਅੰਨ੍ਹੇ ਘੋੜੇ ਦਾ ਦਾਨ*

The novel like the other novels by Singh, captures rural Punjab in its true colours offering a repository of the social, economic and cultural life of rustic Punjab in its most realistic form. The novel is translated into English by Rana Nayar, is widely read and offers a heart wrenching narrative of Punjabi Dalit Sikhs shuttling back and forth to rural and urban society in the failed attempt to escape the poverty, marginalisation, and subjugation. Like Thomas Hardy and R. K. Narayan Gurdial Singh was also celebrated for having imaginatively recreated Malwa region in his fictional world, realistically. The value of this novel lies in the fact that it comprises both the elements of tradition and modernity. The hegemonic popular culture that was being portrayed in the earlier Punjabi fiction did not find any space in his novel and he depicted a realistic image of his contemporary rural as well as urban Punjab where his Dalit characters suffer their fate. This novel like his other major works is also set in early post-independence India when the nightmare of partition was still haunting in the minds of people and Punjab was struggling to cope up with the modernisation and capitalism. The socioeconomic and cultural shift was evident in society where the traditional agrarian economy was collapsing and modernity, capitalism and materialism crept into the life of people. This shift is strikingly evident in this novel in which the novelist embodied the very essence of this transitional phase through the settings, characters, symbols and images etc. The president of the Punjabi Sahit Akademi, who believed that Singh ‘brought alive the struggle of the working classes of rural Punjab’ saw Gurdial Singh as ‘one of the last ones in the Munshi Prem Chand tradition of writing about the downtrodden.’ Gurdial Singh utilised his

creativity to write about social inequality, casteism, injustices incorporating the lives of the poor, illiterate farm helpers, *seeri*, peasants, marginalised carpenters and rickshaw pullers in his writings. Gurdial Singh's translator, Rana Nayar stated that for Singh "writing was a form of activism, a way of transforming our decadent, putrefying social order". A writer and a Dalit scholar, Dr. Suraj Milind Yengde, states that the term 'Dalit' is itself equivalent to antioppression as the word itself sprouted up as a protest against the derogatory and oppressive words that were used to refer to the lower castes. To Gangadhar Pantawane, a reputed Dalit Marathi writer, the term Dalit was not just associated with a caste but was a symbol of change and revolution.

The plot of the novel encapsulates the time period when the agrarian economy of Punjab was facing a downfall in the wake of industrialisation and Green Revolution. In evolving economic world feudalism was being transformed into capitalism. Resultantly, the market value of the lands in villages increased manifold and the farmers provided the capitalists considerable chunks of land for setting up industries and factories, threatening the age old agrarian economy and social, cultural life of contemporary Punjab. Due to this, Dharma, the Dalit Sikh and his family are forcefully uprooted from the land they have been living on for over seven years by demolishing their *kothri*. An oral agreement in front of the Panchayat between Dharma and Wadhawa, the owner of the land, confirmed Dharma's status as the owner of a piece of land measuring 'a kanal-and-a-half'. Dharma's *kothri* was built on this land which legally belonged to Wadhawa and his ancestors after he was uprooted from the village and made to settle here to look after the orchards of Wadhawa. In the greed of the overnight economic elevation that the disposal of the sixteen acres of land would bring him, Wadhawa sold the land to factory owners, dismissing Dharma and his family forcibly after failing to persuade them. This ruthless and forced displacement leaves them in a state of 'homelessness', creating a consciousness in the other characters of the Dalit community, a fear of same fate and exodus. This feeling of powerlessness and helplessness causes anguish and agitation in them. Considered 'lowly' and 'polluted' they are forced to live as outcasts on their own land. On the other hand, Melu, a migrant rickshaw puller struggles to find means of survival in the city after the auto rickshaws gulp commuters who were the customers of rickshaw pullers like Melu. The novel does not only offer a single Dalit protagonist's struggles but also a story of Dalit community with several characters showcased together to form several micro-narratives exposing the inner dynamics of the Dalit community in a single macro-narratives. Through the prism of Melu's family acting as the focus of the macro-narrative, the novel focusses on the difficult situations that the people of *vehra/ghetto* find themselves in as Singh's focus is laid on the lives of Dalits during the onset of capitalism when they are hopelessly shuttling here and there between the rural and the urban places expecting a better life. Oppressed and exploited in the villages, many of these marginalised Dalit people migrate to the nearby towns with the false dream of finding more earning opportunities with no oppression in the urban world. In that Punjab, evolving with new socioeconomic and cultural circumstances, the experiences of the Dalit community is very different from that of the dominant upper castes. With the advent of Capitalism followed by the Green Revolution, the interdependence between the landlord farmers and the Dalit farm labourers/*series* was reduced due to the expanding technological interventions in farming like tractors, threshers, hybrid seeds etc. which largely helped the landowning agriculturalists in economic and speedy farming. As a result, a large number of the unprivileged people had no other option other than to take up inadequate jobs or migrate to the town to with the dream to find better survival in urban spaces. The oppression, marginalisation and exclusion of Dalits has also been multilayered, in the world of agriculture they were called upon and offered the leftover of the traditional agricultural sections, that no other group accepted and laboured for. And, in the modern capitalist world, the Dalits as a community suffer an 'unfavourable inclusion' which is nothing but a disguise designed by the dominant community of Haves to safeguard itself in the capitalist world strategically terminating any potential risk in the form of revolt by Dalit Have-nots against them, by keeping the oppression continuing by nurturing the idea of caste terrorism. "*Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse is not only about the moral fabric of a corrupted society and the inequitable working class. It delves much deeper into institutions, such as the family, and explores a range of sentiments*" writes Ananya Borgohain.

The title of the novel is intriguing and illustrates the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed subtly by stressing on the power dynamics between the upper castes/the haves and the Dalits/ haven-nots who are hegemonized and imposed with inferiority by the former. The title is associated with the ancient Hindu myth of the churning of the ocean or *Samudra Manthan* as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata Purana* and *Vishnu Purana*. As per the myth, the *Asuras* were cheated upon by the *Devas* during the dispensation of the nectar by Vishnu. The *Devas* collaborated with the *Asuras* in order to obtain the nectar, the gift of immortality or *Amrit* from the ocean with the promising equal share. But when the nectar was churned out both the parties claimed it entirely for themselves. To settle the conflict, Vishnu in the disguise of Mohini enchanted and distracted the *Asuras* while the *Devas* gulped down the *Amrit*, however, Rahuketu, one of the *Asuras*, managed to consume the *amrit* in the disguise of a *Deva*. Infuriated Vishnu cut off and separated his head from body which later came to be known as Rahu and Ketu. In Gurdial Singh's *Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse*, just like the *Asuras* had to depend on Vishnu for nectar, the Dalits, who are considered to be the descendants of the *Asuras*, have to depend on the mercy and charity of the rich landlords associated with Vishnu. The myth is still celebrated and remains a significant part in the lives of Dalit as they are depicted going around begging for alms on the days of the solar and lunar eclipse in the name of the blind horse that drew the chariot of Rahuketu. Gurdial Singh does not glorify this myth but seems to criticise it and ends the novel with a positive episode of resistance when one such Dalit seeker of alms is criticised by a *Panch* who tells the Dalit seeker "It's because you aren't willing to give up such ritualistic practices that you have been dragging on like this since the times of your forefathers." The *Panch* believed that nothing will change until the Dalits stop celebrating their own oppression. Gurdial Singh challenges such mindset and through the minor character named Dheesiya suggests that only education can be saviours for the Dalit oppressed.

The term 'Dalit' was coined by Jyotiba Phule which translates to "broken, crushed or scattered", used in the context of the unrelieved agonies and suffering faced by the Dalits. The novel is full of many Dalit characters showcasing the indomitable efforts to survive against all odds, oppressions and challenges. Melu, the Dalit protagonist, has migrated to the nearby town with his wife and two sons in search of a better livelihood. After experimenting with different kinds of backbreaking jobs, he finally purchases a manual rickshaw and exploits himself day and night to earn his living. Melu and his fellow Dalit rickshaw puller friends struggle each day to sustain but ever since the arrival of the auto rickshaws their life has become worse. They find themselves in an uncertain ambivalent situation, where they have been displaced from their native land of rural Punjab, carrying with themselves a sense of abandonment and dis/placed in the urban space that never accepts them and leaves them with an devastating feeling of alienation. The things get to worst from bad as Melu and his Dalit friends resort to drugs in order to escape the hard reality, are unable to earn to sustain their families and manage even meals. When asked about why do Melu and his wife not want to return to the village by his wife's brother, Melu's wife replies her brother:

There in the village, it's not as though we are sitting atop a large heap of freshly threshed grain. Labour is what we do here, and that's what we are condemned to do there... Now, we are nowhere, neither here nor there. He is so weak and fragile that he can no longer work as a *seeri*. So you tell me, where should we go. (60)

Ignorant of the fact of unemployment and oppressing life lived by Melu in the town, Melu's *babu* lives in the village with the false notion that relocating to the urban space has brought prosperity to his son and yearns to shift there himself in the future to get away from the tyranny, oppression and exploitation from the landowning agriculturists Jats. He always brags about the city life parading the village after Melu's visit saying, "Now what should I tell you about city life! All I can say is that people really have a good time there". Also, Melu's wife's brother dreams of settling in the town in the illusion that: ...our jats are more miserly than the Banias. They don't let you take anything for free... In the town, at least, you get money in your pocket on a daily basis. Here they skin you alive for more than six months, and then say, "Wait for another month. Let me marry off my son, and then I'll settle your account. (30)

Melu has been living in the town for quite some time now, but, is facing the same fate of destitution as his family back home in the village. He is repeatedly advised to return to the village. His friend and fellow rickshaw puller, Dheera tells him, "Bhai Melu Singha, you are not fit to live here. It'd have been much better for you to have gone back to the village" as he has a family to support. Another friend and fellow rickshaw puller named Dulla also reminds him that even after staying in the town for seven long years, Melu has not gained much, he is just consuming himself out by peddling his rickshaw day and night without proper regular meals. Melu and his friends, frustrated indulge in drugs and curse their inhuman existence, complaining of being treated like dogs, they feel that only death can relieve them from such oppression and tyranny. Being frustrated, Dulla and Dheeru pick a fight with some auto-rickshaw drivers and get arrested. Singh divides, places and showcases Dalit Melu's family in both of the worlds of urban and rural living in extreme economic distress. Melu consumes himself away futilely peddling his rickshaw day, night and drinking repulsively with most of the meagre money he makes in order to relieve himself of his exhaustion, agony and shaking legs. He even steals the money saved by his wife to drink and relieve himself. Back home, in village, his sister Dyalo rummages the empty boxes of flour and molasses to feed her *babu* and her younger brother, Shinda. They even find it difficult to feed their cattle as there is no land to graze them. They do not have enough firewood to light up the *chulha*. Gurdial Singh is nostalgic about the times before the advent of capitalism when people lived like humans, sympathising and sharing with each other. Melu's *bebe*, regretting her misfortunes, reminisces about the pre-capitalist times when people used to give away many things like firewood freely to the poor, whereas, now all they get is abuses and ill-treatment. Singh highlights humanity in the Dalit family of Malu who despite the fact that they do not have enough to feed themselves worry about feeding Dharma's children who are crying from hunger and trauma of being thrown out of their land and home.

Gurdial successfully criticises the ruthless capitalists who with their notion of development, blind yearning for profit and modernity grab the land of the indigenous people, displacing them from their native land to make money by setting up industries and factories feeding their "civilized notion of modernity". The capitalists tempt people by offering a large amount of money which is actually nothing compared to the values attached to the fertile land. However, people like Wadhawa fall prey to these capitalists' bait and give up their land in exchange for some meagre amount of money that may sustain them for a while, but displaces the beneficiaries of the land forever. In that period of time, capitalists would often resort to forceful measures by using repressive state apparatuses like police to acquire land of the indigenous people when they refuse to give their land otherwise. The Dalit characters suffer helplessly the destitution, extreme hardship and exploitation from the Jats and capitalists and their hate towards the oppressors strengthens their compassion for themselves as a community and brings them closer with a feeling of companionship and belongingness. They stand together during good and bad times, as Dharma says to Police Officer, "They belong to my community. And they must share my joys and sorrows". The Dalits unite and decide to fight back their oppressors when Dharam's house is demolished and he is arrested, the men of his community come together with the hope of overpowering the dominant group of Haves but fail. The Dalit community assembles in Dharma's demolished *kothri* to decide their plan of action to help Dharma. After Dharma's arrest, they walk as a delegation to Sarpanch's house for the release of Dharma and to resolve the conflict. This collective effort to support Dharma in his distress also springs up from their own fear of possible displacement, the fear of meeting the same fate as Dharma. Dheeru, a fellow Dalit villager says, "We'll have to rise to the challenge... Today, they have been ruined tomorrow it could be "us"." The Dalits feel vulnerability like "a band of aliens" in their own village as their future seems insecure and they start accepting their fate.

For Dalits oppression happens at various levels, the men are oppressed but the women are doubly oppressed. Dyalo Melu's sister and parents' submissive daughter remains within the four walls of her house, busy in feeding and looking after her *babu*, *bebe*, Shinda, her younger brother and the cattle. She represents all Dalit women who are the silent sufferers of oppression and have never experienced the freedom. She sensitively observes everything around her but hardly speaks just like us the readers. Most of Gurdial Singh's characters hardly speak, making the readers sympathising and empathetic, they can just observe the situations unfolding before them, helplessly and devastated. It appears as if Dyalo is condemning the readers for being inert and silent on what they had been suffering. Their reticence is stronger than shallow rhetoric and condemns us to reflect on their plight.

Gurdial Singh has been realistic in his portrayal of the tyrannical rural and urban lives. He aptly brings up the urban industrial advancement that had been taking place around that very time. He reveals the ugly side of these so called developments, the pollution it causes to the environment, the effect of these advancements on have nots, people like Melu who, as a result, are deprived of their livelihood. The community of the rickshaw pullers unite to register their protest against the system favouring the capitalists selling auto rickshaws, with their union strike but they are violently thrashed by the repressive state apparatus i.e. police. Far away from Dharma's demolished house in a village, in the city, where Melu suffers "sky-high, demon-sized chimneys of the thermal plant" are visible and constantly polluting the environment. In opposition to the chimneys' size, have nots like Melu are forced to live in small tenements made out of whatever is left over, old bricks, tin sheets etc. He lives in a marginalized and destitute neighbourhood, in a segregated filthy ghetto that remains neglected, just like *wehra* in the village.

Singh, through his characters criticises the abuse of power by the dominant people. The powerful capitalists with the support of repressive state apparatus i.e. Police, design a plot to arrest Dharma's sons before demolishing his house to avoid brawl, protest and resistance. The *Panch* states, "If you are powerful, then the law is on your side; and if someone else becomes more powerful than you, the law becomes their chattel". The nexus between the capitalists and the state power is made explicit with the statement, "With the powerful, even 'seven scores' equal a hundred". Through the helplessness of the Dalit community in this novel the reader is witness to the use of Police against the poor. Looking at two sparrows wrangling, Melu imagines them

to be fighting for a piece of land. Who after the intervention of another sparrow abandon their squabbling. Melu finds it difficult to understand the power structure at play and wonders, “why another sparrow had to intervene to settle their dispute or why she couldn’t let those idiots just kill each other”. Melu and his rickshaw puller friends, like a band of gypsies, try to escape from the harsh realities to a world they have created for themselves. They consume themselves drinking unsafe and cheap liquor to get rid of tensions and responsibilities related to their families who depend solely on their income. Melu like an existentialist is constantly running away from his family, avoiding them and his responsibilities, peddling his rickshaw in and around the city. He goes towards the power plant after his sons call out to him feeling “as though he had come towards this side, only to escape the tyranny of that sound”. His loses all of his confidence because of his thoughts and the worries about his inability to work due to his weak and giving up physical strength. To deal with his malnutrition and the painful shivering of his weak legs, he also begins taking drugs. Dulla his friend and another Dalit character curses the power plants symbolising the pollution and mightiness that have left no happiness imaginable for the poor like them and abuses the cruelty of the modern world. However, there are also some exceptions with the Dalit character like Dheesiya who is able to climb up the social ladder after leaving the past behind and does not wish to deal with the oppression faced back in the village, he says, “Why would we go to the village now? Do we have to lick the leftovers of the Jats there? Here, everyone comes and touches my feet. There, no one ever spoke to me without hurling an abuse first.” The oppression, helplessness and exploitation depicted by Gurdial Singh appears to be a hellish and ugly world to live in. The industrialisation and the economic progress in towns has been represented by filthy and dark imagery. Through Melu we constantly view his urban surroundings with fear and repulsion. The novel begins with Melu laying on his *manji* hearing the knock on his door, then witnessing the “frightening spectre flickering on the opposite wall”, the things around him in the darkness begin to take ugly shapes representing the state of his disturbed mind. He is even haunted in his nightmares, having visions of huge buildings crashing down, lying in ruins, showing his hatred towards the ongoing development. While paddling rickshaw aimlessly around the city on the “serpentine course” of a road circling the “monstrous chimneys of the thermal plant” he sympathetically reflects on the life of the poor factory workers. He sees the poor workers strapped to the iron ropes, standing on swinging logs around the chimney cleaning its exterior surface, he wonders, “What if someone were to fall from that height...?” realising the value of the worker that was just reduced to as a soulless working hand whose life has no value for the capitalists and no one cares about except his family. They were not even considered human, their identity was reduced to their poverty, helpless dependence and occupation, and their enslavement brought them nothing but vulnerable bondage just like in villages.

The poverty, helplessness, exploitation and oppression of the Dalits is brought out throughout the novel. Melu’s bebe is ill-treated by her employer Jats for taking some mustard stalks for her cattle. Singh tries to portray a new chaotic world loaded with oppression, inhumanity and degradation where Shinda is ruthlessly beaten because his cattle enter the fields of a powerful Jats who also hurt the ankle of his innocent calf with a spade. Singh seems to compare and prove that the life of the poor is like an animal in the new capitalist economy of the rural as well as urban world. This degradation reaches its lowest with a boy’s murder for allegedly stealing cotton from the field of a landlord. Singh as a novelist has been successful in bringing out not only the physical life of the Dalit labourers/*seeris*, but also their inner psychological strife that they have to suffer day and night, universally, in rural and urban setting. The novel offers a heart wrenching slice of life of the male as well as female, the child as well as the adult Dalit characters. No doubt, Melu is the main male protagonist of this novel, but the oppression faced by Dyalo her bebe and Melu’s wife is more agonising. The female Dalit characters are doubly marginalised, oppressed by the powerful Jats and the patriarchy in this new world of capitalism where even the calf or the child like Shinda is also not spared. Gurdial has seen such a life closely and has skilfully presented this life, where most of his Dalit characters suffer silently. Singh is critically acclaimed for using silence over words, Dyalo, Melu, Shinda and their bapu, bebe are best example of this.

The novel also brings up the universal oppression of Dalits where both of the urban and rural worlds have abandoned them. Melu and his bapu, oscillate between the rural and urban worlds chasing a dream for a comforting life. In the end Melu’s bapu is shown going to the town during the night hoping that he would stay with his son Melu, who he thinks is living a happy and prosperous life. Melu is disillusioned and pained with his urban life and wishes to return back to the village and restart. Ironically, in the hope of a better future in the village, he returns to village while his father is coming to the town with the same hope, chasing a mirage. Melu finally declares, “It’s much better to be home and be hungry than live in this hellhole.” Melu and his bapu, like doomed Dalit characters appear to be running in circles hopelessly going back and forth unable to find a dignified living. The pastoral world of Melu’s bapu is the opposite of the polluted city life led by his son but the materialism, oppression and humiliation is same for the Dalits in both of these new worlds of new economies.

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