



The sacred thread and the death rope: politics of representation of Dalit lives and Dalit deaths in colonial India with reference to Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Abhagi's Heaven!* and Munshi Premchand's *The Deliverance*.

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Abstract:

Dalits, as a self-enclosed group, have always been vulnerable to casteist oppression and hegemonic tyranny by setting theological binaries disadvantaging them and affiliating them to a sub-human status by perpetrating socio-cultural micro and macro-aggression. But the renaissance of Dalit consciousness culminating into organized Dalit movements with their conspicuous intellectual reflections in writings and literature have made it possible for the Dalits to re-define their cornered existence to a large extent. By discussing two representational texts on Dalit lives and deaths in pre-independent India - *Abhagi's Heaven!* by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Munshi Premchand's *The Deliverance* - this paper chooses to focus on the possibility of theoretical

exploitation of the subaltern lived experience by upper-caste writers during colonial period as well as an early insurgence of Dalit feminism.

Key words: Dalit, death, hegemony, subaltern, bodies, spaces, Brahmanism, Sanskritisation, colonial, pre-independent, feminism.

Dalits and the Fear of Deletion:

Dalitocracy implies a self-referential articulation of empowered untouchables within a discourse of differentiation to undo the effects of indoctrination or mis-education that justified the discrimination and marginalization of Dalits and to confirm the validity of some sort of subaltern resurrection by recalibrating their lives, ostracized within a socio-cultural construct. Dalits - self-designated as social groups and an activist insertion into a “political society” (Chatterjee 1893) by seeking to guarantee upward mobility through a negotiation between community and state - can be interpreted as a counter-culture movement against erasure of their lives in ethnographies and writing of histories, and as an anti-caste phenomenon to calculated exclusivist social policies that subject them to segregation and separation. Such refusals to social inclusions find their ground in ideological state apparatuses:

Inequalities in the form of differential access to basic resources, asymmetrical redistribution of the producer’s surplus, lopsided workloads and consumption standards, present every state-level society with an unrelenting organizational challenge.... The evolutionary viability of the state rests in large measure on the

perfection of institutional structures that protect the ruling class from confrontation with coalitions of alienated commoners. These structures fall into two basic categories: (a) institutions that control the content of ideology; and (b) institutions that physically suppress the subversive, rebellious, and revolutionary actions of alienated individuals and groups. (Harris 405-6).

“The integral state” (qtd. in Greene 71) as opposed to the sovereign state as “the protagonist of history” (qtd. in Greene 91) thrives on the intervention of political and civil society for preservation of power through the hegemony of consent and coercion. Through the Brahmanical mode of composing, signifying and interpreting history, and other forms of cultural narratives as in puranic stories, *vrat kathas*, folklores, rituals and songs, “a Brahminical mindset and a normative frame of reference” (Narayan 40) is created to consign an inferior status to the Dalits. Therefore, the Dalits, as subalterns, are subject to historiographical violence and a peripheral status in history that make it difficult for them to trace their class consciousness or their evolution in phases or levels of political organization.

Further, Dalits have always been subjugated to exploitation and repressive measures embedded in the dehumanizing machinery of *Varnasrama* theory, expatiated in the Brahmanical theologies like *Manusmriti* and the *Vedas*. Hence, Dalits through contestation in “the politics of becoming” (Connolly 204) and through unsettling of what Connolly calls the “inertia of settled vocabularies” (205) in the “cultural construction of power” (Dirks 5), seek to challenge, disrupt and dismantle the basic cultural and ideological foundation of Brahmanical dominance that rests on the oppositional binaries of the Brahmin/Non-Brahmin, high/low, purity/pollution and the sacred/profane.

Drawing Lines across the Margin:

Dalit Literature emerges as a cohesive anti-hegemonic tool not only to reconstruct their myths with respect to Brahminical myths such as Eklavya and Shambuk but also to provide an alternative reading as a form of dissent to Sanskritization. However, reflections of Dalit consciousness have undergone different stages of expressions of resistance in popular literature by organic intellectuals to sensitize the masses and protest within India's body politic. This paper, specifically, chooses to focus on the politics of depicting Dalit lives and deaths of disgrace, deprivation and denial in pre-independent India through Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's short story – *Abhagi's Heaven!*¹ (1926) - and Munshi Premchand's short story *The Deliverance* (1924).

The writings of Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) and Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) represent regional Dalit politics in the cultural geography of pre-independent India, coinciding with the nascent Dalit movements in Maharashtra under the prominent leadership of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), Jyotirao Phule (1827-90) and Savitribai Phule (1831-97); and in other parts of India under other notable reformers and thinkers like Iyothee Thass (1845-1914); Poikayil Yohannan (1879-1939), a Christian Dalit and activist; Ayyankali (1863-1941) and Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy (1879-1973).

With the intervention of the early British missionaries and the Orientalists, the colonial period in India witnessed several processes of socio-cultural change like Sanskritisation, Westernisation and Secularisation and of “incorporation of indigenous cultural symbols” (Bandyopadhyay 19) – that further reordered the ritual system. When Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was writing, there were concurrent caste movements in Bengal, led by the Tilis, Jogis, Napits

and the Namasudras, demanding the eradication of caste system and establishing social equality. But the obscurantist metaphysics of Brahmanism and hegemonic discourses like those of purity and defilement, previous births and Karma, and priestly ceremonialism on divine sanctions and supremacy through the social fabric of rites and rituals helped maintain the caste-Hindu village societies.

Abhagi's Heaven! attests to such ritualistic foundation of Sanskritisation through an elaborate description of the pompous funeral rites of a wealthy trader Thakurdas Mukherjee's ageing wife who has been dead after seven days' fever:

...it all felt like a carnival. The whole village came crowding in to watch the funeral procession, now taking place with great pomp and ceremony. The weeping women smeared their mother's feet with a deep coat of alta [red dye] and her head with sindur [vermilion], while the daughters-in-law anointed the forehead of their mother-in-law with sandalwood paste and, wiping the last trace of dust off her feet with the loose ends of their saris, draped her body in rich, costly clothes. Flowers and leaves, fragrance and garlands, and the din made one think that this was not so much an occasion for mourning as one for a new home-coming, after half a century, of the mistress of the big house to her husband's home. (AH 94)

The Deliverance also echoes the same intriguing practices of Brahmanism that thrives on the empty edifice of rites, rituals and personal festivities and that makes religion, a performance, devoid of spirituality:

Pandit Ghasi Ram was a great devotee of God. As soon as he woke up, he would begin his rituals. It would be eight by the time he washed his face, and then the rituals began in the right earnest. First of his acts was to grind *bhang* leaves. Then he would grind some sandalwood into paste; after which he would stand before the mirror and put two long paste marks on his forehead with a thin stick. And then, a round vermilion mark between the lines. Then he would draw, with the paste, roundish shapes on his chest and arms. Then he would take out God's image, give it a bathe, put sandalwood marks on it, offer flowers, and recite the *aarti* while ringing the bell. It would be ten when he completed his daily rituals. Finally, he would strain the *bhang*, and come out. (Premchand)

“Sanskritisation was ... a consequence of a convoluted colonial modernity ... [it] sanctified a Brahmanical view of culture with its interlocking system of symbols signifying status in ritual terms” (Bandyopadhyay 151). In this socio-cultural mould of Sanskritisation, certain exclusive symbols of power were appropriated and divested with their symbolic significance to initiate a deep-seated emulation of the upper castes: “Watching the glorious face in front, [Dukhia's] heart was filled up with great reverence. What a godly image! Small round and plump body, shining head, filled-up cheeks, and eyes radiating godly refulgence! The sandalwood paste and vermilion further heightened this glory” (Premchand).

But within the colonial Victorian and Brahmanic order, the Dalits underwent a daily strategic process of negotiation through selection and elimination of certain Brahmanic values and such procedures of micro-transformations enabled them to reconfigure their spaces. Hence a “complicated, contingent and intentional *everyday negotiation* involving the dialectic of appropriation and subversion operated at every moment in the social, cultural, educational and

political realms... When the lower castes started wearing sacred threads, the most authentic symbol of social authority, the Bengali *bhadralok* [gentleman] began to ridicule it as *siki paysar suto* or a thread worth a quarter of a dime” (Bandyopadhyay 98). But Ambedkar in his liberal enquiry into the social cartography of India - *Who Were the Shudras?* – traces how Dalits were not beyond transcendence but deliberately refused sacrality:

The Shudras were not a *varna* but a community of the Solar race. There was a continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins. As a result of the enmity, the Brahmins refused to perform the *Upanayana* [thread] ceremony for the Shudras. Due to the denial of the *Upanayana*, the Shudras, who were equal to Kshatriyas, became socially degraded. (242)

“The first and foremost ambiguity [of power] derives from the power of domination when it hides its true identity and operates in such a way as to condition the perceptions and choices of the dominated, and make them conform to the existing order of things as the most natural one. The dominating exercise of power takes an insidious form when the present order is internalized by the Dalits...” (Wilfred 4). When Abhagi witnesses the whole funeral ceremony with awe and reverence, she presumes an ecstasy in death and undergoes a masochistic desire to experience the same kind of spectacle in her own last rites after dying:

When the corpse was laid on the wide and ample pyre, her eyes were soothed by the sight of the two red feet, and she felt like rushing up to collect a drop of the *alta* for her head. When at last, amid the many-throated cry of 'Hari,' the sanctified fire was applied by the son's hand, she burst into tears, and went on repeating to

herself: 'You are a lucky mother, you are going to heaven, bless me, so that I, too, may receive the sacrament, in a like manner, at my Kangali's hands....' Surrounded by husband, sons and daughters, relatives and servants and maids—this, indeed, was real heaven-going, brightening up the world around! At the sight of this, her breast heaved with emotion, she scarcely knew how to assess the extent of this good fortune. Casting a blue haze, masses of smoke curled up towards heaven from the newly-lighted pyre. Kangali's mother seemed even to see the faint outline of a chariot among them, with innumerable pictures painted on its sides and what a collection of leaves and creepers wound round its crest! And it looked as though someone was sitting inside it, too, although the face was blurred and could not be recognized. (AH 94)

Similarly Dukhi in *The Deliverance* seems to believe in the Brahmanical justification of punishing the Dalits for slightest transgression:

Panditayan had brought a piece of burning wood held in tongs. She threw it towards Dukhi from a distance. A splinter from this fell on his head, and he began to shake it off. This is the retribution, he thought, for polluting a Brahmin's house. God has sent it so fast. That's why the world is afraid of Brahmins. Everyone can be cheated of his money. But just you try to cheat a Brahmin! You'll be destroyed. Your feet will begin to rot, and then fall off. (Premchand)

Power structures are congealed and coagulated by certain factors that ratify the power-matrix. Discourses of *caste as culture* as anthropologised in the “ethnicization of caste” (Fuller 26) explicate how caste, rather from being a simple insistence upon “arbitrary ascriptions”

(Natrajan 3) is actually derivative from *essential* cultural differences, such as dress, body language, food habits, and work.

The clever manipulation of the Dalit bodies and Dalit spaces through the casteist tools of force and constrain ensure that Dalits remain barred and humiliated but exist as a productive labour force. Dukhi, who had come to Pandit baba, asking for a suitable date to fix his daughter's engagement exerts manual labour as an advance payment for such consultation and finally pays a heavy price by dying. No sooner does he arrive at Pandit Ghasi Ram's house, than he is assigned with a long list of heavy duties – feeding the cow, sweeping, plastering the sitting room with cow-dung, chopping wood, carrying and storing four stacks of straw in the hay-store. Dukhi toils arduously, suppressing his hunger for it is a blasphemy to eat in a Brahmin's house: “Chikuri, what're you saying? Will I be able to eat from a Brahmin's house?” (Premchand). But the Gond rightly points out how the Brahmins “know only to extract work....The landlord at least gives something to eat. The officer makes you work without wages, yet he too gives you something to eat. And these ones have beaten them all, and they call themselves men of God!” (Premchand). Hence the body-self on which society inscribes itself is expropriated and alienated by the upper caste through the taboo of purity-pollution.

Abhagi's Heaven! exposes a similar intricate process of victimization of the Dalit bodies. When Kangali's father Rasik strikes the Bael tree for gathering wood to perform last rites for his wife Abhagi's death, he is slapped by the darwan: “The up-country darwan [the door-or gate-keeper], pouring filthy abuse on [Kangali], was on the point of striking him, too, but desisted from laying hands on him for fear of contamination—the boy had, perhaps, been sitting close to his dead mother” (AH 100). The village zamindar Adhar Ray is equally perturbed with the nasty

presence of Kangali: “The boy had been in contact with the dead, one never knew what he might have touched here!’If your mother is dead, go downstairs, and stand outside,’ he said sharply. ‘I say, is anybody there? Come quickly, and sprinkle a little “cow-dung” water!’” (AH 100)

Caste and body are inextricably intertwined and share histories comprehending the ways in which “membership to a specific caste determines notions of stigma, bodily defiling, special segregation, etc. that are enacted within notions of purity and pollution so that caste becomes a significant reference point through which to comprehend the physicality of the body that undergoes processes of abstractions” (Kurian 28). The introducing conversation between husband and wife in *The Deliverance* expresses an anxiety and concern in showing the right hospitality to Pandit baba while maintaining the boundaries of caste hierarchy. Their first concern is to arrange a proper seat for their upper-caste guest. Jhuria’s suggestion to borrow a cot from the Thakurs is no good to Dukhi:

‘Sometimes you say things that make my blood boil. How can we? They don’t lend us even fire for lighting, and you expect them to lend us a cot! If I ask for water at the house of *Kaisthas*, I won’t get it. No question of getting a cot. It’s not like our cow-dung cakes, straw and wood; which anyone one can come and pinch. You better wash your own cot. Being summer, it’ll dry up before he comes.’
(Premchand)

Dukhi’s solution is also not acceptable to Jhuria either: ““why’d he sit on our cot? Don’t you know how strict he is in his observances?”” (Premchand). The list of offerings to appease the Pandit is also long: “They should be plentiful. One seer flour, half a seer rice, a quarter of lintels, ghee, salt, turmeric. And put a four-anna coin in one corner of the leaf-plate” (Premchand). But Dukhi reminds Jhuria not to make the offerings on a thali or everything will be lost: ““Baba will

throw away the *thali*. He gets wild in no time. When angry, he doesn't spare even Panditayan. He thrashed his son so badly that he still has a broken hand. Put the offerings on a leaf-plate. And, don't you touch anything'" (Premchand). Dukhi also repeatedly reminds his wife not to touch anything while buying the offerings from Bhujin, the grocer.

Concomitant to the condescended physical postures of the Dalits, it is the menial space prescribed for the Dalits that further accelerate their secondary status: "Today when [Pandit Ghasi Ram] came out of his prayer room, he saw Dukhi Chamar sitting at the door with a bundle of grass. Dukhi got up as soon as he saw him, made his obeisance by lying down flat on his chest in front of him, and then stood up folding his hands" (Premchand) . Kangali also falls on the knees of the gate-keeper to be excused for having struck the bael tree.

Social history records that untouchable Dalit quarters have been tangentially posited on the outskirts of a village out of fear of contamination. "Space is", therefore, "not simply a passive reality but is invested with power. Occupation of a space and exclusion from a space are matters of power-relationships. Upper castes use spatial strategies such as appropriation, deployment and control in order to maintain hierarchical relations of caste." (Wilfred 4) Abhagi's emotional overwhelm at the Brahmanical religious splendor exists vis-à-vis her practical consciousness of not violating the upper-caste space:

Shaking the morning sky with loud cries of 'Hari', the whole village was simultaneously on the move. And the one other person, who joined in the procession at a distance, was Kangali's mother. ... being of a low caste—a daughter of the *dulés* — Kangali's mother, not daring to come any closer, stood

apart on a mound, and went on watching with curious, eager eyes the funeral rites from beginning to end. (AH 94)

In *The Deliverance*, Dukhi's impulsive entry into the Pandit's house enrages the Panditayan but Dukhi was already:

... regretting that he ever came in. She's right. How can a Chamar enter a Brahmin's house! They are so pure, these people. That's why the world worships them. That's why they're revered so much. They aren't Chamars. I have grown old in this village, and yet I did not have this much sense.

When Panditayan came out, he felt he was in heaven. He folded both his hands and bent down and put his head to the ground and said, 'O Mother Panditayan, I made a terrible transgression by entering the house. It's because of my follies that I'm punished again and again.' (Premchand)

The She-Dalits vs. Upper-Caste Feminism:

In the nineteenth century, as part of the Imperial reformist measures, the Indian Caste system had been denigrated in the writings of British Colonials and Missionaries as "a system of priestcraft, built upon the most enormous, irrational, and tormenting superstition, that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind" (Mill 452) or as a system "opposed to intellectual freedom ... [with] its face sternly against progress." (qtd. in Dirks 47). However, to ensure an effectual governance of the subject society, colonial discourse, by a process of "dialogic production" (Irschick 1994) approved the caste system as the quintessence of the Indian cultural antiquity.

Caste hierarchy was established as the most effective marker of social status and ethical conduct in the colonial official discourse that fixed Brahmanic or upper-caste model as point of reference not only in private matters such as marriage, adoption and inheritance but also in the court of law. The *Raja-Pundit nexus* was thus legitimized in Brahmanical patriarchy where everyone was subject to the sanction or the verdict of Brahmanism. The basic context in *The Deliverance* is the occasion of inviting Pandit Ghasiram to seek his guidance and opinion to fix a propitious date and time for Dukhi's daughter's engagement: "He's a Brahmin, and if he fixes an inauspicious day, all will be ruined. That's why people respect them. Everything depends on them" (Premchand).

Social mobility could only be guaranteed by reproducing Brahmanical gender codes and family structure within Dalit communities and Brahminical forms of socio-sexual control. Thus the Woman Question was inextricably linked to caste. Even the reformist movements under Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Radhakanta Deb, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and William Bentick that purported to suggest remedies to the constricted autonomy of women, ended up generalizing the woman situation and overlooking the significant differences that remained in the status of women across the caste hierarchy. In this symbolic world of Hindu society irrespective of caste strata, women were invariably disadvantaged with the burden of maintaining the *honour* of the community and family. In *Abhagi's Heaven!* Kangali predicts that his mother Abhagi will attain heaven after death for her lifetime chastity: "The other day,' he went on, 'Bindi's mother was telling Rakhal's aunt that in the dulé quarter of the village, there was none to equal Kangali's mother for virtue and gentleness.'" (AH 96) of a Hindu wife is assumed to be an upper-caste quality and is in its sole custody. Abhagi's virtue makes her an exception in the Dalit community. As witness to Abhagi's virtue, Rakhal's mother rhetorically questions: "Why had

such a virtuous, gentle woman to be born in our dulé family and not in a brahmin or kayastha family?” (AH 96)

However, when writing about Dalit women of pre-independent India, portrayals of Abhagi or Jhuria in the hands of upper-caste writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee or Munshi Premchand, fall prey to a “dominant, Brahmanical forms of Indian feminism” because “At the heart of the Dalit argument is its profound anxiety over the inauthenticity of dominant feminist theorizing on Dalit gender relations ‘a la distance’” (Kurian 27). Progressive feminism is often accused of disallowing the specificity of “an active gendered and caste-marked identity” (Kurian 27) to the substantial constituency of Dalit women, and keeping their caste-based differences unrecognized.

Dalit radicals are in fact suspicious as to whether somebody belonging to the bourgeoisie, upper-caste community can genuinely relate to the authenticity of Dalit lived experience and voice their rights. Sarat Chandra’s Chatterjee’s portrayal of Abhagi fail to escape the accusations of “elitist fetishization” (Kurian 27) through an aesthetically simulated melodrama. The acute mushiness of Abhagi’s character is overbearing and her pre-destined, unfortunate life, is something that prepares the readers for over-sentimentalism: “When her mother died after giving birth to her, her father named her Abhagi, the luckless one, in anger” (AH 95). After living with her father, who had been disoriented since his wife’s death, Abhagi is subject to a hapless marriage, to be soon deserted by her husband who falls for another woman. Left alone with Kangali, she rears him single-handedly and makes him her sole support.

Dragging and Dumping the Dead Bodies of Dalits, Scavengers and other Sub-humans of their kind:

The *deva/daitya* binary in the socially engraved hegemonic knowledge systems have relegated Dalit bodies as: “inherently irredeemable ... Dalit body carries the scars of ontological discrimination, traces of epistemological violation, and stigmas of theological amnesia.... Dalit body is a ‘spectral body’ which is not just a thing, rather; it embodies haunting histories/ memories, philosophies of relationality, politics of agonies, and theologies of ‘revivifying practices.’” (Vinayaraj 30)

Abhagi's Heaven! not only projects the anxiety of the gendered subaltern, and her historical struggle against caste patriarchy but also vocalize her final response to hierarchical distinction and hegemonic superiority, by seeking survival through death. In the words of Rakhal's mother: “[Abhagi] has literally given her life, pining for the last sacrament of fire at Kangali's hands!” (AH 99). Society, with its masculinist grinding mechanism, accelerates her death but denies her last wish. When Abhagi falls ill, the physician in the neighbouring village refuses to attend her: “Kangali went off to expostulate with him, to fall at his feet, and finally offer him a rupee for his fee by pawning the utensils. He did not bother to come, only gave him a few pills” (AH 98). Abhagi deliberately skips taking medicine and when her condition deteriorates and she dies, Rasik is beaten for trying to get some wood from the Bael tree that Abhagi had planted. The ensuing pandemonium annoys the village zamindar who asks Kangali: “‘What caste are you, boy?’ ‘We are of the dulé caste,’ replied Kangali, and hastened downstairs in fright” (AH 100).

Dule Bagdis have been described as a “cultivating, fishing, and menial caste of Central and West Bengal, who appear from their features and complexion to be of Dravidian descent, and closely akin to the tribes whom, for convenience of description, we may call *aboriginal*”

(Risley 37). However as Satadal Dasgupta finds out the evolution of this sub-caste has mythical associations. The Bagdi Dules voluntarily took up the profession of palanquin bearers after they made a palanquin and carried Lord Krishna who was proceeding on foot to attend a gathering where the Gods would stratify caste groups. Sri Krishna, pleased with them, bestowed them with a boon of wealth and four beautiful women for procreation and their descendants got traditionally connected to this profession.

Unfortunately Dalits have been subject to continuous subordination because of a strategic “ghettoization of their communities into so-called “traditional” and “ritually impure” occupations” (Rawat 3), which is why they have been socially penalized. The last act of Abhagi’s life-in-death cannot escape the ignominy of her Dalit birth. She faces mockery before her body, like a piece of garbage, is finally stacked and dumped in Nature’s vat. Kangali’s genuine effort to respect Abhagi’s last wishes faces tremendous ridicule and insult. ““Whoever has heard of anybody of your caste ever cremating,’ [Priest Bhattacharya] said ... ‘Just fancy, sir, all these fellows now wanting to become Brahmins or Kayasthas!’” (AH 101): adds Mukhopadhyaya’s eldest son. In the meanwhile, Kangali has given up begging. Exhausted and disgraced, he stoically gives in to the only option suggested to him by the zamindar earlier and echoed by the priest later:

They dug a hole in the sands of the stream, and Abhagi was laid out. Rakhal’s mother gave Kangali a lighted bunch of straw, and guiding him by the hand, touched his mother’s mouth, and threw it aside. Then, everybody together, throwing earth over Kangali’s mother, effaced forever the last trace of her. (AH 102)

The Deliverance shows how the Dalits are not even spared in death: “the cause of untouchability is a riddle to grave disability and denial of human rights and dignity” (162). Since pre-independence, Chamars have also been equally stigmatized as untouchables through a persuasive colonial discourse that have stereotyped them occupationally as labourers dealing in hides and skins of dead animals and tannery. Even in official records by George W. Briggs as early as in 1920, Chamars have been branded as leatherworkers and as early as in 1850s, they have even been correspondingly blamed as killers of cattle by poisoning animals to possess their dead bodies and skins. Such associative links to “an organized and professional crime” also demonstrates the worst effects of a “constitutive relationship between imagined occupation and the representation of Dalit identities” (Rawat 6). Presuppositions of an impure occupation and presumptuous occupational labelling have framed Dalits as untouchables.

The Deliverance vividly sketches the pitiless plight of the Chamars in the discredited lives they lead and the ignominious death they face. The back-breaking toil that extracts Dukhi’s life ironically places his body in a no-man’s land where it lies unclaimed. The chill nonchalance in Panditayan’s calm suggestion, ““Nothing. Send a message to the Chamars. They will carry away the body”” (Premchand) signals the brutal insensibility of the upper-caste towards the Dalits. The Dalit bodies are subject to the violence of neglect and abandonment even after death. Since the body lies on the way to the well, people face difficulty to draw water and this prompts an old woman to tell Panditji, ‘Why don’t you have the corpse thrown away? How shall we drink water?’” While the Chamars are discouraged by the Gonds to touch it since the death has occurred under mysterious circumstances and is subject to police investigation, Pandit Ghasiram is equally demotivated: “...how could a Brahmin touch a Chamar’s corpse! The Shastras and Purans forbade this.” The body begins to stink. Faced with such a dilemma:

Panditji took out a rope. He made a loop at one end and slung it round the corpse's feet and pulled it to tighten it. ... Panditji caught the rope from the other end and began to pull the corpse. He dragged it out of the village. Then he came home and bathed, recited the prayer to Goddess Durga and sprinkled the Ganges water all over in the house.

Out there in the fields, jackals and vultures, dogs and crows were feeding on Dukhi's corpse. This was the reward for a life-time of devotion, service and steadfastness. (Premchand)

The "subaltern's lived experience" (Zene 91) is so central to the theory and praxis of the social lived reality of the Dalits that the validity of the outsiders producing insightful accounts on Dalits, is often questioned. In *Abhagi's Heaven!* and *The Deliverance*, the notion of *authority and authenticity* in lived experience as opposed to the legitimacy of *participant observation* in the field of social sciences is problematised. However, even though the representational politics inherent in the short stories, discussed, cannot evade the delineation of Dalits as lop-sided and oversimplified lives of persecution, agony and anguish, without a slightest trace of protest, it is undeniable that such initial literary endeavours, primarily foregrounded by depictions of tortured Dalit lives and livelihood, laid stepping stones for the Dalit cultural critique to interrogate the inherent myths and symbolic systems of "the value-loaded, Brahmanical religious and cultural text" (Narayan 66), to define another world-view, to formulate an alternative value-system and to "homogenize all the lower castes through the creation of a common meta-narrative highlighting the injustice of the upper castes." (Narayan 66).

Endnotes:

¹ *Abhagi's Heaven!* is cited as *AH* in the course of the course of the article.

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