

The Ballad of Bant Singh: The Singing Torso of Punjab

Abstract

The present paper dwells on the idea of being a Dalit in reference to a real life incident that took place in Punjab's remote village of Burj Jhabbar of Mansa District in 2006 that created ripples across India. The incident focuses on the rape of a Dalit girl, her subsequent fight for justice, and the cost which her family had to pay for seeking justice. Her father, Bant Singh defied the limits of casteism and crossed boundaries to seek justice for her daughter. He was brutally attacked for this transgression of caste boundaries and had to lose his both legs and arms which left him to a dwarfed torso. Despite all odds, Bant Singh emerged as an unsung hero of rural Punjab's Dalit population.

Keywords: Dalit, Marginalization, Resistance, Retaliation.

Introduction

The Ballad of Bant Singh: A Qissa of Courage is a biographical account penned down by NirupamaDutt, of Bant Singh, A Dalit labourer and a revolutionary activist of Punjab's Mansa District's remote village Burj Jhabbar. As a punishment for seeking justice for his young teenaged daughter who was gang raped, he was brutally attacked with iron rods which left him amputated for life long. As a result, he lost his both legs and one arm. Thus, he lost his human figure and became a mere torso. Although, he was physically beaten and broken, yet this attack could not destroy his revolutionary and fiery spirit. Till today, he is fighting for the dignity of his fellowbrethren, inspiring them and singing songs of courage and motivation.

The author takes us into the history of Punjab's Dalit revolutionary literature and leaves the reader to contemplate on the discourse of casteism that has always left the Dalits at the periphery. Man doesn't choose his caste; it is his birth that assigns him a particular caste. Bant Singh was born in the year 1965 into a *Mazhabi* Sikh family (Dalit); an outcaste. His name was carefully selected from the holy Sikh scriptures, thereby highlighting the Sikh ideals of valour, courage, self-esteem and standing for the righteousness.

The word *Mazhab* refers to as having no mazhab, no caste or no religion. But in the areas where Dalit marginalization is rampant, it is used as a derogatory term referring to the lowest of the low caste in the hierarchy of caste system. There are two subcategories among the *Mazhabis*-the *choorhaas* and the *Bhangis* (The Punjabi speaking and the Hindi speaking counterparts). The two communities are in no way better than each other as both are bounded by hierarchy and caste system to remain at the bottom forever and work as scavengers and sweepers. In the case of Punjab, the upper caste majority is represented in the form of *Jatts* who are the land owners. Caste is an inherited identity that passes on from one generation to another. The Dalits of Punjab come from the lineage of Balmikis who later became the followers of Sikhism. According to Manusmriti the society is divided into four *varnas*: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the most unfortunate ones- the Shudras. The Shudras known by various names (the untouchables, the *Chamaars*, the *Bhangis*, the *Choorhaas*, the *Mazhabis*, and the *Pariahs*). The Shudras, means the defiled ones often lead a life not more worth than a dog or an animal. They were into the menial jobs and could never move out of their family occupation. They could be openly flogged, abused or assaulted anytime and anywhere. They were forbidden from seeking knowledge. They were not allowed to marry outside their caste.

In Punjab, although the Sikh Gurus have done a lot at eliminating the caste system, but it is firmly deep rooted in the socio cultural milieu of the land. Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, (1469-1539), the first Guru of the Sikhs dwelled upon the idea of a casteless society. The Sikh preacher had a



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huge following from all the castes and religions. He advocated the notion of *sangat* (congregation) where all would sit together in a *Pangatand* have *langar* together. Everyone, high and low would share the same food prepared under one roof, thereby trying to build a casteless society. Similarly, there were other Gurus who worked for the upliftment of the Dalits in Punjab like: BhaiJaitaji, Guru Ram Das and the exponent of Bhakti movement, Kabir, Namdev and Saint Ravi Das. But still their lot need be improved.

Now the question arise as to who is a Dalit? It means 'ground down' or 'broken to pieces'. The word Dalit has its origins in the Marathi culture when it was first used by Dr. B.R Ambedkar in his newspaper *BahishkritBharat*. The term later gained momentum around the 1970' when there was a surge in Dalit life writings or with the birth of Dalit literature. The Dalit writers started sharing their experiences, thus claiming their place in the history (of humiliation and pain). Dalit life histories began around 1970s when the problem of Dalit selfhood was highlighted as a problem of literary representation that questioned the traditional notions of content and style.(AnupamaRao)

NirupamaDutt, in her seminal work on the life and struggle of Bant Singh takes us through narrow and congested by lanes of Bant Singh's *Vehra*. *Vehrais* actually a segregated neighbourhood on the outskirts of every village to house the outcastes of that particular village. It is usually located on the outskirts, in the Western side of the village, where the drainage is from East to West. It is deliberately located on the western fringe in order to protect the sunlight coming from the East from being defiled. The *Vehras* are full of squalor and sludge and it often becomes a breeding ground for diseases. People do not have basic necessities of toilet as a result they use open grounds for defecation. The *Vehrais* a poignant image of 'living on the edge'. The Dalits have accepted this life and their senses are also not hostile to this squalor and odour.

Punjabi Dalit writer Attarjit sums up his childhood memories of being a Dalit and living in a *Vehra* in his autobiographical work *Akk da Dudh (Poison milk)*:

The soil of my village was no more special than any other yet it had the power to pull me like nothing else and fill my senses with elation. However, I never experienced here what poets call 'fragrance of earth'. Perhaps such phrases are just poetic euphemisms. Ever since I can recall I just saw filth and more filth all around: small and dirty mud tenements. Outside, there was slush and water in unpaved drains that were the abode of creepy-crawly insects. A little beyond were mounds of dirt and garbage as well as the prevailing stench of human urine and excreta. (Attarjit:2008)

The position of a Dalit woman is of being doubly marginalized. One is that they are a Dalit and the other is that they are a female. They often fall prey to the lustful men of upper caste. A Dalit was not

allowed to marry an upper caste whereas the upper caste men having a mistress from the Dalits were a common sight. They were exploited in the upper caste houses and their fields. The women were often waylaid and raped. When an upper caste boy comes out of age (grows into his man hood), it was considered as his right to exercise his manhood on a Dalit girl. It was a prerogative of upper caste men. Eminent writer Rahiwrites "The tragedy of Dalit existence is that exploitation of women and girls is expected as a part of fate and the reasons for the same are economic." (Rahi 2004)

The present paper focuses on one such real life incident that took place in a remote village of Burj Jhabbar of Punjab's Mansa district wherein the eldest daughter of Punjabi Dalit revolutionary Bant Singh was gang raped by upper caste boys of the same village. Bant Singh, unlike the other Dalits of the village, was full of self-esteem and hard work and never bowed down against the wrong. Unlike the other families of his *Vehra*, he never worked as a farm help or domestic help in the upper caste households. The rape of a Dalit was considered as something very casual. Normally the village elders would dispense the matter amicably by just compensating the victim with some monetary help. But things were not normal with the family of Bant Singh. Bant Singh and his daughter Baljit made sure that the guilty were tried in the court and would get behind the bars. So Bant Singh moved ahead, he lodged the FIR much against the chagrin of the entire village. After a long trial, he succeeded in getting the guilty behind the bars. The upper caste *Jatt* boys now wanted to teach Bant a lesson so that no Dalit could ever raise his head again. In the words of NirupamaDutt:

THE NIGHT OF 5 January in 2006 saw the peddlers of gloom prowling about in the green fields near Burj Jhabbar to ensure that darkness should be the lot of a people who, silenced and enslaved for centuries, were now daring to raise their voice. Not just raise voice but challenge and seek justice from the law of the land. This must change, the oppressors told themselves, pouring country liquor down their throats. Those who dared to change the established order of their lives had to be taught a lesson. (Dutt:19)

Bant was returning back from the neighbouring village after buying *khoya* in order to prepare sweets for lohri. He was waylaid and attacked brutally with the iron rod of a hand pump.

Four of the boys dragged him to the edge of the irrigation canal. There they put his legs on the embankment wall. A rough cloth was thrown on him as four of the men pinned him down. Two raised the metal handles and brought them down with all their strength on his shins.(Dutt 38-39)

Bant's body was mutilated and coiled in pain. The pain was too much for him to be felt. The attack on

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Bant Singh as well as his daughter's rape had a clear and loud message. The rape was a lesson to the Dalits for sending their girls out for learning and educating themselves. "Knowledge is empowerment" for a Dalit. So it has to be put an end. Similarly Bant's bold act of seeking justice and getting the guilty punished was blow to the upper caste ego. They wanted to break the spirit of Bant Singh, but they were failed in this task as the attack broke him and his family physically but not the revolutionary spirit. Bant was rescued by one of his fellow villagers who put his bundled body in a car and took him to the Mansa Civil hospital where the doctors refused to perform their duty. They left him unattended and on being pleaded they demanded bribe to start his treatment. By the time his treatment started, gangrene has set in due to the rusty iron rod. His condition deteriorated and he had to be shifted to PGI Chandigarh, where the doctors, in order to save his life had to amputate his both legs and one arm.

Bant Singh's ordeal, by that time spread like a wildfire where all the media channels (both the print and the digital) started making money at the plight of Bant Singh. But there were some genuine NGO's and organizations that came to the help of Bant Singh, and demanded justice for him.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to trace the situation of the Dalits of Punjab, the atrocities they face and how despite all odds the revolutionary spirit emerges victorious. The paper articulates a real life incident of a Mansa village of Punjab. The Primary text under study is Nirupama Dutt's biography of Punjabi Dalit icon Bant Singh- *The Ballad of Bant Singh, A Qissa of Courage*

Conclusion

Although, the incident may have faded in the present times but the songs which Bant Singh sings today have made him a Dalit icon for the poor. It has left a message for others to fight against their oppression. The songs he sings today are the songs of famous Punjabi poet Sant Ram Udasi who sings of liberation, empowerment and self-esteem. Bant Singh is rightly called as the singing Torso of Punjab. Therefore in order to conclude it can be said that despite all odds, the fight for justice and righteousness is an arduous one. But the fruit in the form of self-esteem and respect is much sweeter than the efforts put in. Bant Singh's struggle is an eye opener for the society of the times. One is forced to reflect upon the plight of people 'living on the edge'.

In the words of Sant Ram Udasi through the mouth of Bant Singh:

Abode of the Labourers
 Mother Earth! Many more moons to your lap
 Keep shining, O bright sun, on the abode of
 the labourers
 Where denial is a way of life
 Where throats are throttled
 Where hair yearns for comb
 Noses run, eyes crinkle, teeth grind
 Keep Shining, O bright Sun, on the abode of
 the labourers.
 Where the soul is but a ghost

Where life is nothing but a regret
 Where the lava of pride is damned
 Where the mind is forever abused
 Keep shining, O bright Sun, on the abode of
 labourers. (Dutt :205)

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