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EDUCATION AT THE COST OF LABOUR: EXPLOITATION AND PASSION FOR LEARNING IN SHEORAJ SINGH BECHAIN'S *MY CHILDHOOD ON MY SHOULDERS*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Sheoraj Singh Bechain's Dalit autobiography *My Childhood on my Shoulders* with a focus on the protagonist's passion for education and his exploitation by dominant caste teachers. While the narrative celebrates education as a tool of emancipation, it also exposes the dark reality of Indian education system where Dalit students are exploited for physical labour under the guise of help and guidance. Bechain's teacher, who promises to educate him, instead uses him for domestic chores, field work, and cattle grazing. The paper argues that such exploitation reveals the feudal and casteist mindset embedded in the guru-shishya tradition for Dalit children. Despite this betrayal, Bechain's unquenchable thirst for learning remains intact, transforming his exploitation into a narrative of resilience and resistance. This paper seeks to analyze how Bechain portrays his educational journey as a quest for dignity and liberation. It examines the obstacles he faced and how his passion transformed his suffering into strength, making his story not just an individual tale but a collective narrative of the Dalit community's struggle for equality through education.

Keywords: *Exploitation of labour, caste and education, school education system, resistance*

Introduction

Dalit autobiographies in Indian literature have emerged as powerful testimonies of pain, protest and assertion. From Omprakash Valmiki *Joothan* to Bama's *Karukku*, these narratives give voice to the voiceless and challenge the dominant caste hegemony. Shuraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on my Shoulders* originally written in Hindi is a significant contribution to this genre. The autobiography is a poignant narrative of a Dalit child who navigates extreme poverty, child labor and caste-based humiliation in rural Uttar Pradesh. Despite these socio-economic barriers, the protagonist's unwavering desire for education emerges as a powerful tool of resistance and self-emancipation. It recounts the life of a young boy from the Chamar community whose childhood is burden not by school bags but by responsibilities of labor, hunger and caste humiliation. At the heart of this autobiography lies as unquenchable passion for education.

Quest for Education

Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders* is a heart-wrenching account of a Dalit child's relentless quest for education. Despite poverty, child labor and caste discrimination, his passion for learning remains unbroken, making education a tool of liberation and identity formation. Sauraj belongs to Chamar caste. The chamars, Aheriyas, and Dhobis are not interested in educating their children. These castes are on the margins of the village. In Pali village, some of the older boys from the neighbourhood attend school. The neighbours and other enlightened people from privileged castes often ask Sauraj's stepfather Bhikari and his brothers as to "why don't you send the children to school" (32). Bechain comments: "It was in such a milieu that I came of age. The savarna looked down upon me as an untouchable and the people of my own caste considered me inferior on account of being a stepchild" (Bechain 32). Sauraj is doubly oppressed: as a Dalit child by the dominant caste and as a stepson within his own marginalized community. This intersectional oppression makes his desire for education even more radical.

Sauraj is not sent to school because there is no impatience or inclination to enroll Dalit children in schools. A few educated and progressive people from Yadav community are interested in sending untouchable children to school. They visit chamar basti to enroll students in school. They drag back those students who has run away from school. This shows that for Dalit children, school is an alien and hostile institution from which they want to escape. This type of hostile school environment is also depicted by Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Jhootan*. Though Sauraj is not admitted in the school but he follows other students to school whenever he gets the chance. He is turned away by teachers because he is not a student. But he keeps playing outside to

join his friends after closing of school. Suraj's character as an unofficial student is a powerful symbol of his passion for education. His presence outside the classroom is a silent protest against an education system that denies entry to Dalits. His persistent waiting outside the school, despite being turned away, transforms his exclusion into a powerful assertion of his unquenchable passion for education.

Compelled by social pressure, Sauraj stepfather Bhikari admits him along with his stepbrother Roop Singh in Primary school in Pali. He learns the letters of alphabet very soon. But Roop Singh could not master the letters. Unlike Roop Singh, Sauraj never plays truant to his classes. Their teacher, Harprasad reports Bhikari that Roop Singh takes no interest in studies while Sheoraj is good at studies. He advises Bhikari to encourage Sheoraj to pursue his education as he will make a mark for himself in future. Bhikarilal and his brothers become worried on receiving such report. Sheoraj is promoted to the next grade, not Roop Singh. Bhikarilal felt jealous of the progress of Sheoraj. In a state of despair, he picked up quarrel with his mother and even beat up her. Bhikarlal gives vent to his anger and jealousy:

> The bastard is going to be a collector! The master says that he is sharp. It is I who feeds him and he is going to grow up to support his mother! Such a brat and that too brighter than my son! It was usual for him to discriminate blatantly… Enough! From now on, there is no need for anyone to study. Get me their books and you Dalla, their slates. (Bechain 34-35)

Bhikarilal breaks his slate out of jealousy. He tears up his books, and set them on fire. Though the books are burnt but spark of learning within child Sauraj is not extinguished. His mother is determined to educate him. Now he starts studying the alphabets from the books of his classmate. He saves money to buy books. He takes shelter in the house of his friend Laturia. Bhikarilal makes a living out of scavenging and crafting shoes, stirrups and whips which he makes from processed leather. After the narrator has been taken off the rolls of school, he too is engaged in removing the carcasses of dead animals and gleaning.

Theft for Education as a Marker of Passion for Learning

Bechain reveals how a Dalit child's wish to study compels him to steal in order to buy books. The narrator steals a rupee from the kurta pocket of Bhikari's brother Daalchand to buy textbook, notebook and pencil etc. But his mother is accused of stealing. She is beaten with lathi so brutally that she loses her consciousness. The narrator is tormented by guilt. The crime is committed by him but the punishment is borne by his innocent mother. The narrator was aggrieved and pained to see her condition. As he explains: "As I dubbed turmeric on her back, I felt as if the letters of the alphabet were imprinted on my mother's back and Amma herself became transformed into a text" (Bechain 40). He filled with a sense of repentance. He perceived similarity between the scars on his mother's body and the letters of alphabet in the book which he tried to buy with stolen money.

Though Sauraj is out of school for a month but the school still attracts him. One day he sees a row of small children passing along the road. They are wearing white uniforms and holding small flags in their hands to celebrate Independence Day. Badshah gives him a flag and he too joins the students. When he barely walks a short distance, he stands out amongst the students due to his dirty attire. When Masterji informs Bhikari about it, he kicks and abuses the narrator. His back is whipped with leather strap. His crime is that he is unable to give up his love for education. The Independence Day episode exposes the hollowness of national freedom for Dalit children who remain enslaved by caste and poverty.

Sauraj is very eager to study in school. Though there is a municipality school close to their home in Delhi but it is not possible for orphans like him to study. He tries to read old newspapers and template which he finds lying on the road. He reads magazines sold as scrap. In Delhi, there are provisions for child laborers to study in evening schools and narrator is enrolled in such a school. He is very happy and excited about going to school. He washes his clothes and buys his books at half price. He realizes that one can become successful only through education. But he is apprehensive and fearful that he would not keep pace with other children and lag behind. He remains concerned about arranging money for his daily needs.

Sauraj works hard to earn enough money to be able to get education. One day he gets late in reaching school because he sells lemons in the day. His Mausaji gets very angry with him. He rebukes him, "You got one opportunity to study and you frittered it away" (Bechain 116). He asks narrator to forget about going to school if he can not make it on time and study for a couple of hours at home. It is decided that he would not be sent to school. But his desire to study is still as fresh as before. During free time, he enters the school rooms on the pretext of meeting Naresh, his cousin. He peers through the windows to observe the teaching in classrooms but in vain. One day a student makes his complaint. He is scolded and window is shut from that day. He feels dejected at having lost the opportunity to study. This parallels Dr. Ambedkar's own experience of sitting outside classroom on gunny bag and Eklavya learning outside. The window shutting symbolizes how schools close doors on Dalits.

Sauraj is not destined to go to school. Since a single meal is difficult to get, the education seems a distant dream to him. As he has passion for education, he reads books of school children and the books that are sold on the footpaths. Suraj has intense desire to study but no opportunity is available to him. The narrator thinks, "The various formats of independent India had hardly ever bothered to open schools for orphans like me, where we could study, work and not be anxious about feeding ourselves" (Bechain 112). Sauraj's experience demonstrates that Dalit passion for education does not fail for lack of will but is systematically rendered destitute by a state that separates learning from livelihood, forcing the orphan child to choose between a single meal and a single classroom window.

Exploitation in the Name Education: The Teacher as an Oppressor

One of the most powerful episodes in Bechain's autobiography is Sauraj's exploitation by his own teacher. In the hope of getting education and shelter, Sauraj becomes dependent on a teacher who initially appears as a savior. However, this relationship soon

turns into a form of bonded labor. The teacher makes him do all kinds of physical work- cutting fodder, cleaning cattle shades, working in fields, fetching water, and doing household chores. The irony is that this labor is justified in the name of service and help in education. The teacher propagates the traditional idea that serving the guru is the price for knowledge. For an upper caste teacher, Dalit student's body is more useful for labor than his mind for learning. Thus, education, which should be a right, becomes a favor for which the Dalit child must pay with his sweat.

Master Prempal Yadav is very impressed with poetic talent of child Sauraj and motivates him to study. He suggests his mother that he will provide him opportunity to study by enrolling him in the school. But he has to work on his fields during vacations without any wages. His mother turns down this proposal because she thinks that his son is being cheated by Prempal Singh under the pretext of education. Sauraj is wounded by his mother's words and suspects her intentions:

> She dreamt of emancipation from the travails of beggary on the strength of my child labor. However, I could opt for only one of two roads. Either I had to settle for an education and renounce my mother, family and community or give up my aspiration of learning for their sake. (Bechain 180)

For an upper-caste child, education is supported by family. For Bechain, education means exile from his own community. Bechain is determined to embark upon his education and decides to accept the proposal of Prempal. Massaab convinces him that he is not employing him as a servant rather he likes him as a trustworthy boy. He is asked to work for them, earn his meals and study in free time. After completing his studies, the narrator will be free to find his own means. Sauraj never receives any support in his education from his own community. So, he resolves to study and prove his worth:

> I will study. I shall definitely give it one try. Whether anybody supports me or not, I am willing to give every drop of my blood for each letter in the alphabet, but I shall not give up my quest for an education. Since all of you are against me, I shall stop entering the Chamar Basti from now on and sleep the nights on Massaab's premises. To hell with the ties of community and of family! I shall procure an education for myself on my own strength. (Bechain 180)

Prempal motivates him that when he gets success, his own people would claim for him as kin. He would be honoured by his community. He will be a role model for the children of his community. The narrator starts working with Massaab on his field all day long. Prempal gives him some books for Class Six. He begins to grasp arithmetic and algebra quickly. He procures for himself as English book for Class Six. During the day, he toils on the fields and at night he studies each of his subjects. He is admitted in the school. But he feels a sense of inferiority complex when he compares his dirty attire with their uniform and his tattered slippers with their shining shoes. He could not muster courage to enter the school.

Sauraj feels disappointed and sad because though he is admitted to school, he can not attend it regularly. He has to miss school for the whole week many times since Massaab gives him a long list of farming tasks to do well in advance. He gets his attendance marked in the class. He is just given meals for his labour. He had to do extra work for his clothes and books. When the boys of his community see him doing various tasks day and night on Prempal's fields, they jeer at him by saying, "Look! How well Sauraj is studying! Is disposing dung studying or a form of slavery?" (Bechain 187).

The narrator relates an incident when he had to face an embarrassing situation on Teachers' Day celebration in school. His civic teacher, Dheeraj Singh Tomar composes a poem for the narrator which he is to recite on the occasion. But he is not given time for rehearsal. Prempal puts him to work on the fields. When he is invited on the stage, he loses his confidence on seeing the children:

> I became convinced that the children facing me were endowed with an intellectual prowess superior to mine and that I could never be like them. A sense of my inferiority besieged me from within. Although I had managed to stand up, my legs were trembling and my tongue refused to utter a word. (Bechain 188)

This is not a natural fear but caste-induced inferiority. The stage becomes a site of caste judgement. He feels ashamed and scared as if he is guilty of a serious offense. In those days "his mind was a site of tempest" (Bechain 189). He is keen to study but is unable to devote all his time to his studies because first he has to make arrangement for his meals. He had read all Hindi texts in advance but he lacks practice in writing because he can not afford to purchase stationery. He realizes that his Massaab is not really interested in educating him, rather he just wants to exploit his education. As he remarks "I sold my physical labour and satisfied my hunger. By the time I gained admission to school, I had experienced many forms of exploitation of my labour" (Bechain 198). He follows Massaab's views till eight standard. But he realizes that Prempal he extracts back-breaking labour from him. And for his pains, he gets just food and nothing else. He senses duality of his character and pretention. As he remarks:

> Eventually, my exploitation began to be disagreeable to me. Why was it not a sin to exploit labor? How could oppression coexist with devotion to God? Why could I not find a solution to my problem in Dayanand Sarswati's *Satyartha Prakash*? I had harvested the wheat crop for Masssaab in the first year and I got just meals for it. I begin to think that if I planned to study, I would require rations for at least a month or two for my meals. (Bechain 202)

Initially Sauraj thinks that Massaab would make arrangements for his meals but later it becomes clear that he is not going to reward him for his physical labour. He usually had no sufficient provisions for meals. When he told him about it, he advised him to have determination, courage and dedication. He told him that he was a promising boy who would surmount all difficulties. He tried to divert his attention with these words but hunger could not be satisfied by words. The narrator remarked, "Education was the birdfeed, in reaching out for which, I, like a pigeon, would always be ensnared in one or the other mesh of exploitation" (Bechain 203). Thus, education is used as a trap to capture Dalit labour. His passion makes him vulnerable to exploitation because exploiters know that Sauraj will do anthing for education.

Prempal buys ten bighas of land and the responsibility of ploughing it is given to narrator. Sauraj meets with a brutal accident while handling and operating harrow for ploughing the land. Two and a half inches of flesh of his toe scrapped off and flipped over. The bones of his legs lay exposed. He somehow manages to wrench his leg free from the horrow. He thinks that he was willing to give every drop of his "blood for each letter that I learn. However, in this case, it was not for learning but for tilling that my blood had been shed" (Bechain 210). He is bleeding badly when he reaches Massaab's house. Bua, sister of Massaab harshly rebukes him:

> Looks like you've deliberately got your foot injured so that you can sit back and eat some freshly made food by me for about fifteen days or so. Well, you'd better give up daydreaming because I'm not giving you a sip of water without your working for it. (Bechain 210)

The accusation is the worst form of dehumanization. He is suggested to apply some mustard oil mixed with water in a brass or copper vessel to his wound. But he refuses to give him even a drop of oil though there is plenty of oil stored at her home. His hopes are dashed when he realises that instead of providing him medical treatment, Prempal is more concerned about his fields. He appears to Sauraj very miserly, greedy and exploitative. He feels that Prempal is completely in contrast to the image of a saint like teacher.

Bechain shows how the educated teachers practice untouchability in the schools. Many teachers stay in the school during mansoon. The school peon, Chandrapal helps in preparation of their meals. Massaab asks Bechain to help peon in preparing meal. He starts peeling the bottle gourd. His Sanskrit teacher Siyaram Arya rebukes him for it because he is untouchable. He addresses another teacher:

> Is it right to eat a vegetable peeled by a Chamar? Will you be able to bring yourself to do it, Tomar Sahab? At least I cannot gulp down any food prepared by an untouchable. Prempal ji may have turned into a saint but I am an ordinary teacher. (Bechain 226)

Siyaram further asks Massaab that he might help the boy in some other way but should not expect them to eat food cooked by him. The narrator finds himself caught in a vortex of thought that he can wash their clothes, clean their rooms and gather firewood. But he is not allowed to touch food items. This shows how school teachers preserve caste hierarchy even while living together in school.

Sauraj learns his traditional job from Gangawasi. He is now adept at the art of skinning dead animals. He begins to keep scraper in his school bag besides books and copies. The narrator remarks, "Books, food, and a place to stay these were my basic minimum needs. I desired little else. Had I found some good job that gave me time to study I would never have done this for shaken work" (Bechain 228). The very first day of the school, he manages to hide scrapper wrapped up in a cloth in his school bag. But he is fearful of being caught with it. His drawing teacher doubts his queer behaviour and asks what he is carrying in his bag. But he runs away from school. He is very perturbed: "That day I set a slightly apart from the rest of my classmates my teacher thought that I was not being able to adjust to the environment in school because I belong to the lower caste and had remained deprived of school education" (Bechain 229). Suraj is unable to concentrate on his lessons that day. Jaipal thrusts his hand inside his bag and got hold of the scraper. He feels humiliated before teachers and students.

Usurpation of Scholarship

Bechain highlights how the scholarships meant for Dalit students are usurped by dominant caste teachers. Scholarships are given to scheduled caste students in schools so that they can afford education. The teacher and the clerk who disburse the scholarship behave as if the scholarship amount is being given from their own pockets. Suraj never receives the amount of stipend all through eight, nineth and tenth standard. It is usurped by his Massaab. As the narrator comments:

> I would fill the form every year and it would be made out as a favor that I was studying at such subsidized rates. I did not receive a single paisa of the scholarship but I would hear the clerk say, 'These SC fellows study only to avail the scholarship' (Bechain 214)

This is double violence. First, his scholarship is stolen and then he is insulted for the same scholarship. This is how reservation is turned into stigma. The child who is ready to give blood for letters is called a scholarship-hunter.

Suraj realises that Prempal has no wish to provide him financial help even as a form of wages for the work he has done on his fields. On insisting, Masssaab offers him an old, spare saddlecloth which had been used for buffalos back for many winter seasons. If he has paid him his wages, he could have brought a new blanket and mattress. He is anxious about his board exam and is not able to sleep due anxiety and cold. No one is there to guide him either in his studies or the daily affairs of his life. His destiny is bound with helplessness and despair. Bechain realises, "In many cases, these Shudras (Yadavs) are more feudal in their dealings with the untouchables than the Thakurs, Jats, the Jatavs. They could not bear to see a Chamar walk with his head held high or a Chamarin-Bhangin wearing good clothes" (Bechain 241). Similarly, in *Changiya Rukh*, Balbir Madhopuri remarks that upper caste people can not see low caste students getting education. As the dominant caste Bhujjar commented, "All the Chambers have started studying and are growing swollen headed? If they all get jobs, who will work in our fields? *Bhaiyas*? They are all rushing to this area!" (Madhopuri 163).

Labour in Lieu of Boarding and Food

Bechain exposes the trafficking of Dalit labour between teachers. Prempal sends Sauraj to Pitampur to work at the home of his geography teacher Chaudhary Raghunath Singh. His job is to get up at four in the morning and feed the cattle. He has to dispose the dung and run the tube-well. Ha has to operate the fodder machine and flour mill. His Massaab tells the Chaudhary that the

narrator knows all the works related to farming and he can extract as much labour from him as possible in lieu of his boarding and food. Choudhary's son who studies with the narrator remains busy in doing his homework but Sauraj gets no time for studies as he has to continue to labour for his meals. This contrast exposes how caste determines childhood itself. His guru's wife has set aside bowl and glass for his meals as he is an untouchable. She gives him food from a distance as if he were a beggar. He is given a cot in the cattle shed and a tattered quilt and saddle cloth for a mattress. In the beginning, Guruji's son treats him well but later he too starts discriminating against him. He needs time to prepare for his upcoming exams but Guruji hands him a list of tasks to be done. The narrator is fuming against this uninterrupted form of exploitation. His Guru Mata further aggravates his resentment with her remarks when he is preparing for going to school:

Before you go for a bath, dispose of the night soil. The bloody Bhangi hasn't turned up and the place is stinking. Don't mind it, but I'm told that Chamars also do the work of Bhangis. If you get late for school, your Guruji will mark your attendance. (Bechain 205)

Sauraj sees their son wearing a clean uniform, having breakfast of vegetables and then going to school. But the kind of works he is assigned shakes him to the core. Though he feels insulted but he does not lose heart. He continues to study as well as work as a mason. He has no regret about the kind of jobs he does as a child. The narrator remarks:

> However, I wish to register my complaint against the caste-centered system of this country, which failed to undertake the responsibility of providing education to helpless children like me. This free country did not compensate even a fraction for the exploitation of our labour which has been carried on for several generations. (Bechain 208)

The personal autobiography becomes a national indictment. It is not one teacher's cruelty but country's system. Sauraj keeps his attitude positive: "I don't know how but from somewhere within, a sense of hope was gaining strength that these problems, difficulties and this sense of operation were merely aspects of my present lot and would soon be a thing of the past" (Bechain 204). For Sauraj, hope serves as survival strategy.

Sauraj has literary bent of mind. He starts composing verses or poetry. When he goes out doing work in construction of buildings, he carries a piece of paper and a pencil in his pocket. In village, a junior school is being upgraded from class Eight to Class Ten and a few additional rooms are constructed. Dalit communities are motivated by school teachers that their children would get opportunity to study in school. So, they start helping in construction of school rooms. A teacher named Kanwar Bahadur Singh Yadav is very much impressed by a poem composed by Sauraj. When he learns that the narrator has leant to read and write through self-study, he takes him to headmaster Khushiram Yadav to get him admitted in the school. He also gives him a chance to present his poem in a concert. He wins the heart of everyone by his beautiful compositions. The audience rewards him with a prize amount of three rupees. Similarly, in the autobiography *The Scar*, Gunasekaran also wins the heart of audience by his literary skills in competitions.

Sauraj is determined to excel in education fighting against all odds. he passes his Eight grade and is promoted to class Nine. A cultural programme is being organized in the school. He gets a chance to recite his compositions. His performance is highly appreciated by all teachers and students. Principal gives him a two-rupee note. He is elated and from an ordinary student, he becomes a winner of prize. He gains encouragement and confidence. He begins to pay attention to the neatness of his clothes. He is also unanimously elected as the Vice President of executive committee of the village unit of Arya Samaj. He realises that his forefathers could not change their plight because:

They were mute members of an indigenous community who were oppressed for centuries in this country. Ignorance and lack of education and resources were the factors that prevented them from filling fully human. There was a conscious attempt to keep us away from education, literature and the arts so that we led an animal-like existence. (Bechain 208)

Dalits as indigenous, original inhabitants are muted. Muteness is not natural, it is imposed. Sheoraj breaks muteness by composing verses. Thus, Sauraj's journey from cattle shed to poetry recitation is a journey from animal-like existence to human existence through literature. He explains his passion as a political act of becoming fully human through self-learnt literacy.

Conclusion

The analysis of Bechain's autobiography *My Childhood on my Shoulders* demonstrates that Dalit passion for education is not a natural inclination but a relentless political struggle against a caste-centred system that converts schools into sites of labour extraction, humiliation and exclusion. The study shows how education is portrayed not merely as academic learning but as a means of dignity, identity and liberation from the oppressive caste system. The study exposes two important realities. First, the Indian school system for Dalit was not a place for learning but an extension of the feudal jajmani system, where the child had to serve the dominant caste to get minimal education. Second, it shows the double exploitation of a Dalit child-- exploited by society for being Dalit and exploited by the teacher for being poor and helpless. Bechain endures this exploitation not out of ignorance, but out of his desperate passion for education. He tolerates the humiliation because he knows that only education can free him from this cycle of labour. His endurance is not submission but a strategic resistance. He learns from this betrayal that for a Dalit, nothing comes free, the knowledge must be snatched and not begged for. This makes his quest for education even more heroic. It is not just a struggle against poverty but against those who used his thirst for education to exploit him.

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