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The Burden of Fate: Exploring Marginalization and Indigenous Struggle in Shailender Singh's *Hashiye Par: For a Tree to Grow*

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Abstract

Contemporary literature in Dogri is replete with social realism and is reflective of the beauties of daily lives. Since it greatly embodies the culture and tradition, its emotive and aesthetic quality is highly appreciated. Shailender Singh'sHashiye Par: for a tree to grow is unique in the manner that despite it having all these qualities, the intention of the author lies in revealing the reasons for the condition of the marginalised. The paper tries to read between the lines and present the first ever critical work on the novel by interpreting the author's intention through evidence within the text. It examines the nuanced exploration of resilience and growth within the narrative, highlighting how it reflects the realities of life on the periphery. By engaging with the text, the researcher aims to understand the mechanism through which marginalised voices assert themselves, nurture their dreams, and cultivate spaces for growth despite structural barriers. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the novel, though a work of fiction, objectively understand the problem of destitution and isolation of a certain community in Jammu region. To an extent, it serves as a non -fictional social and economic analysis of the structural faults responsible for the failure of individual and institutional efforts in post-independence India.

Keywords: Caste; Dogri literature; Jammu; Marginalization; Poverty; Social mobility; Social realism.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting its struggles, triumphs, and complexities. In the realm of regional literature, this work

brings light the socio-economic and psychological struggles of marginalized communities. Written against the backdrop of rural India, Hashiye Par: for a tree to growdelves into the aspirations and adversities of Dalit families like Madan's, who strive for dignity and progress despite entrenched caste-based hierarchies and poverty.

The original text is in Dogri and has been translated into English, which is also reflected by a somewhat misaligned trans-creation of the title. While Hashiye Par literally means 'on the margins', the English translation places it as "For a tree to grow". Suman K. Sharma, the translator of the work, admits being unable to convince the author to accept any other suitable English title but decided to lift the expression from the last passage in the novel itself: "Perhaps Kamal had understood that, after all, the pot-grown peepal had managed to connect with the Earth. That was all that was required for a tree to grow" (133). The original title and its translated counterpart do not seem to produce an intelligible meaning if seen in combination or in isolation. It only begins to make sense when viewed in the context of the beginning and the end of a problem, the problem being the unalienable condition of destitution. Even if we consider this problem to be gradually diminishing towards the end of the novel, it happens as a consequence of the realisation of the reasons responsible for it and self-help, rather than as a consequence of any external help in the form of society or the government policy, or mere luck. Hashiye Par, thus this paper argues that it should not be seen merely as emotive, or didactic, but revelatory in trajectory, which becomes vivid at every instance any character is seen referring to their "luck", which is immediately contradicted, or presents an obvious irony.

This paper delves into the poignant narrative of the jheewar community, a marginalized caste residing in a remote village. Through the lens of the jheewar community, this paper aims to explore the complex interplay of caste, class and geography in shaping patterns of marginalization. Singh's work serves as a reminder of the enduring legacy of marginalization, where individuals are denied basic human rights and opportunities due to their social identities. The jheewar community, like many marginalised groups across the globe, has been subjected to many injustices. Shailender Singh writes, "They had no inheritance, no land to farm, no craft or craft of an artisan, and no education that would earn them a government job. Madan had to earn something by manual labour every single day to keep the fire burning in his hearth" (21). Madan's plight underscores the reliance on subsistence-level livelihoods in the absence of land ownership, which traditionally serves as a cornerstone of rural prosperity. His labour-intensive efforts to provide for

his family highlight the precarity of their situation. The exclusion of land ownership, access to education, and decent employment opportunities has perpetuated poverty and dependency.Political philosopher Iris Marion Young presumes that "Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life". (53) It resonates deeply with jheewars experience. Hashiye Par compels us to move beyond simply acknowledging the jheewars plight and to critically examine the historical and structural forces that have shaped their marginalization.

The novel implicitly critiques the limitations and unintended consequences of post – independence land reform policies. Singh makes a pointed reference to the Jammu and Kashmir Big Landed Estates Abolition Act, 1950 (Samvat), a landmark piece of legislation that aimed to redistribute land from large land owners (zamindars) to the tillers. However, the jheewars, who traditionally worked as water carriers and labourers for the zamindars, were excluded from this ostensibly progressive legislation because they were not classified as "tillers" of the land. As Singh writer,

> Those days the village patwari had enlisted in his revenue record the names of those of Zaildar Dayaram's workmen who were engaged in reaping and sowing on his farms for several years. On the basis of the patwari's records, the government had in the year 1971 declared these peasants' masters of the lands they had been tilling." (76).

Madan laments, "We have been unlucky all along. If only our elders also had been tillers, we too would have got land to farm" (76). It encapsulates the sense of injustice and the arbitrary nature of land redistribution process. Madan's father, Sardari Lal, further emphasizes the jheewars contribution to agricultural labour, asking, "What if we did not hold a sickle in our hands, we too have been working in the fields! Who served water to those who plied sickles and ploughs in the fields?" (80). This highlights the crucial, yet often overlooked, role of marginalized communities in agricultural production and the inherent bias in a system that privileges certain forms of labour while ignoring others. Although Singh has referred to the patwari's record, he also raises a moral argument for including the jheewars as tillers or at least considering their unique case and the possibility of a provision for them too in the landmark legislation. The fact that no such point is raised by the patwari for the benefit and merit of the jheewarhighlights that the government's decisions stem more from chance than justice. It finds its roots in the structure of the caste system

rooted in exclusion. The structure of the caste system with the structure of the policies made by the people who belong to the same system ignores the already ignored and limits the purview of social and economic policies promulgated by a supposedly benevolent, fair, secular and class-agnostic democratic parliamentary system appointed government.

Through the progression of his tale, Singh tries to show that all of these individual exclusions result into greater repercussions that reverberate across generations. These anomalies will result into greater disparities, economically and socially. He writes:

> Those were the days when the New Pratap Canal was being constructed. Every one of us labourers worked with much more enthusiasm there than labourers anywhere else. After that we got none of the benefits that were promised at the time of construction. All of us who toiled there believed that we would be better off once this work was completed. We didn't know then that we would get nothing beyond the measly wages we were being paid. The fields here now yield more than three-four times the quantity of grain that they did earlier. But the whole benefit has gone to the people who owned land. We didn't have any land to grow crops. The government constructed canal made the rich land owners richer. We poor folks got nothing out of it. It's nobody's fault. My own bad luck, that's what it is" (75).

The instance where Madan, the protagonist, recalls of his father's struggles reveals the fabric of society, dominated by a class that perpetuates the economic subservience of marginalized groups. While Sardari Lal is praised for teaching Madan to follow his trade by Zaildar Dayaram: "The boy too had become adept at serving others… Bravo, Sardari Lal! You have trained your son in good time" (24), his compatriot Shailo Ram is rebuked for educating his son, "But if your sons go on to take government jobs, who will do the work that you jheewars do? It was not in the fate of his kin… God had willed it like that" (25). Here Zaildar Dayaram representing the privileged class dismisses the aspirations of the marginalized group to pursue education and government jobs. His statement reflects a deliberate attempt to preserve the status quo by restricting upward mobility for the oppressed. The insistence that children of the marginalized must remain in menial labour underscores the systemic suppression of their potential. The Zaildar's fear that the village will "go without a workman" reveals his reliance on the continued subjugation of these communities for maintaining his own comfort and privilege.

In contrast, a generation apart, the same systemic inequalities persist, albeit in new from. The Mantri ji openly praises the corrupt contractor,- Mukhtyar Singh, and the village headman, Gulchain Singh, who is later revealed to be responsible for Madan's unjust exclusion from the Below Poverty Line (BPL) list. This exclusion, in turn, denies Madan access to government support for building a pukka(permanent) house, a symbol of stability and progress. While a clear nexus of corruption and self – serving interests between government employees and the village headman actively works to Madan's detriment, he internalizes the blame, attributing his misfortune to fate: "But when my luck is bad, how can I blame anyone? I wonder what bad deeds I might have committed in my previous birth that God is annoyed with me. One gets only what He bestows. My family will build a pukka house when He builds us one" (52). This internalization of blame, rather than recognition of systemic injustice, highlights the insidious nature of marginalization. It demonstrates how oppressed individuals can internalize and perpetuate the very narratives that reinforce their subjugation, effectively masking the true sources of their hardship. This is not simply a passive acceptance of fate; it's a reflection of the limited access to information and the pervasive sense of powerlessness that characterizes life on the margins.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), a flagship government program designed to provide employment opportunities to the rural poor, also fails to deliver for Madan.Despite harbouring hopes of securing the minimum guaranteed 100 days of work per year, he manages to find only a single day's labour and, compounding his hardship, is unable to receive the corresponding wages, even with the necessary documentation. This situation exposes the stark discrepancies between the intended beneficiaries of the scheme and the realities on the ground, revealing the structural anomalies that hinder its effectiveness for the most vulnerable. Madan's initial encounter with the NREGA system reveals a critical flaw: Payment is contingent upon completing a minimum of fifteen days of work. This stipulation presents an insurmountable obstacle for Madan, a daily wage earner who relies on immediate income to provide for his family's basic needs. As Singh writes, "Rashpal had bluntly refused to give him anything. To top it, he had said that nothing will be paid before fifteen days. And a direct cut of thirty rupees in a day's wage. Madan had nothing to take home to his hungry wife and children. That was his immediate concern" (62). Forced to prioritize his immediate survival, Madan must abandon the NREGA work and return to his precarious routine of selling fish in the morning and purchasing meagre rations for the day. Even when, after fifteen days, he finally receives a cheque for the single

day's work, a new set of obstacles arises. The cheque, being crossed, requires him to open a bank account, a seemingly simple process that becomes yet another insurmountable barrier. The bank requires a minimum deposit of five hundred rupees, an amount far beyond Madan's reach. As Singh poignantly describes, "Madan would have to present two passport size photographs of his own and deposit at least five hundred rupees to open an account. The photos alone would cost him forty rupees. Madan came to despise the government scheme of NREGA. He kept the cheque in safe custody in the hope that someday he might receive the amount that it promised him" (64). Thus, the NREGA scheme, intended to provide a safety net for the poorest of the poor, becomes yet another source of frustration and disillusionment for Madan, highlighting the gap between policy intent and implementation, and the systemic barrier that prevent marginalized communities from accessing much – needed support.

The irony of the NREGA situation is further amplified by the fact that while Madan, a genuinely needy individual, is systematically excluded, the village headman is seen compiling lists of individuals for whom NREGA work would be considered beneath their social standing. As Singh observes, "workers of some other political parties had also arrived to have their men registered" (59). This highlights not simply overt corruption, but a deeper societal bias that privileges certain groups while marginalizing others. The issue transcends individual acts of corruption; it points to a systemic problem rooted in the social fabric itself. The system, designed to alleviate poverty, is manipulated to serve the interests of the already privileged, reinforcing existing inequalities. This skewed distribution of resources perpetuates the cycle of marginalization, benefiting higher castes and further disadvantaging communities like the jheewars of Jammu.

The reason Madan has to go through all of this as a first-hand experience and couldn't safeguard himself against any of it is because of the structure of the government scheme itself and gets compounded by the absence of reliable and comprehensive information ever reaching to him: "Madan had owned neither a radio, nor a television set. His knowledge was limited to what he heard from the village folk" (52). This lack of access to reliable information further marginalizes him, making him vulnerable to misinformation and exploitation. In this context, Tarsem, the educated jheewar, emerges as a crucial figure. His access to information and his ability to interpret it become a lifeline for Madan and his family, as well as for the wider jheewar community. Madan's reliance on Tarsem is evident when he says, "On my way back from the river I went to Tarsem's home. I have spoken to him about today's affair. Tomorrow, he will ac-

company me to the BDO's office" (71). It is through Tarsem's assistance that Madan finally uncovers the reasons for his exclusion from the government's housing scheme, highlighting the crucial role of education and access to information in navigating complex bureaucratic systems and challenging systemic inequalities. In the absence of such a resource within his own community, Madan is left vulnerable to neglect, isolation, and the perpetuation of his marginalized status. Madan's struggles extend to accessing even basic necessities. "He had heard somewhere that one could get low-cost rations against a BPL card. Beyond that he knew nothing" (87). When he leans that government has conducted a census for BPL card distribution, he is perplexed: "I never saw anyone coming to the village to register our names. If someone did come, how could he have missed me for being anything other than a poor man?" (88). This highlights not only Madan's lack of information but also the flawed implementation of government programs. His poverty creates further barriers: "he could not afford to buy a week's ration for his family in a single purchase. The BPL rations might be dirt cheap, but how would he manage enough money to buy rations for a full month?" (86).

Again, Tarsem, the educated jheewar,steps in to illuminate the systemic bias at play. He explains, "When the census officials came to our village, they all went straight to the house of Sarpanch Gulchain Singh, the village headman, and under his supervision filled up those forms for the villagers below poverty line" (89).This reveals how access to government assistance is often mediated through established power structures, requiring a form of deference and subservience that Madan, in his marginalized position, is unable to provide. This echoes the earlier dynamic with the zamindar, highlighting the persistence of hierarchical social relations. Madan's frustration is palpable: "It is the government people who make the list of families living below the poverty line. They do not belong to any political party. Then why should they not treat everyone equally? Treat all of us without bias?" (93). A generation prior to his, Madan and Tarsem's father had faced similarly at the hands of the Zamindar Zaildar Dayaram they had been working for. The author's vision echoes through Tarsem's thoughts in the novel when he ponders: "To this day our society hasn't turned democratic. We take decisions on the basis of caste and religion and these national and social flaws in our public conduct influence the government decisions as well. This sort of administrative discrimination becomes the undoing of the grandest, finest, and biggest schemes" (89).

Towards the novel's conclusion, Madan's hopes for government assistance are completely dashed. He appears to accept his fate, attributing his hard-

ships to "his luck as a payback for the bad deeds of a previous birth" (95). While the text has meticulously laid bare the systemic reasons for Madan's struggles – "Madan had himself witnessed the goings-on, but it was the first time he was grasping its consequence" (91) – his seeming acceptance of "luck" symbolizes not genuine belief, but a profound sense of disillusionment and perhaps a strategic adaptation to an unjust reality. This is not a simple case of fatalism; it is a poignant expression of the psychological toll of persistent marginalization. However, in this moment of despair, Madan's focus shift to his children's future. He recognizes education as the only viable path to social mobility, inspired by Tarsem's example: "Reconciled though he was to his fate, he nursed a desire that his children should receive a good education, get government jobs, and become officers" (95). This marks the turning point, albeit one born out of necessity rather than optimism. Help, when it finally arrives, comes not from the government or the wider community, but from within Madan's own family and through the continued support of Tarsem. His wife Kanta suggests sharecropping, a move that gradually improves their self – sufficiency.

This point in Madan's life, marked by a steep decline and a sense of utter hopelessness, paradoxically becomes a turning point. True to novel's emphasis on resilience, help emerges not from external forces like the government, but from within Madan's own family and through the unwavering support of his community, particularly Tarsem.His wife Kanta's suggestion to cultivate paddy on sharecropping basis proves to be a crucial step towards self – sufficiency. This initiative allows family to produce their own food, alleviate their constant struggle for sustenance and freeing up meagre resources for other essential needs.

As Singh writes,

> They sowed paddy the following year as well. Again, Kamal and Kamlesh helped in the field with their delicate hands. After the harvest they got two sacks of paddy which was slightly more than their share of the previous year. Besides, Madan brought home some additional money as a daily wager and supplemented his income by selling fish that he caught in the river (97).

This modest improvement in their economic condition, however, is directly linked to Kanta's initiative and the family's collective effort. Throughout this period, Tarsem's financial support proves invaluable, enabling Kamal to continue his education. "It was Madan's desire to send all his children to school and it fell on to Tarsem to fulfil his desire. He paid their fees and

continued to support the children when they went on to the next higher classes" (97). Kamal's academic success not only brings recognition to the family but also subtly shifts Madan's social standing within the village. While there are instances of individual generosity, like the schoolteacher who rewards Kamal with new books, the wider community's support remains largely symbolic. When Kamal is accepted to study engineering in Srinagar, a moment of immense potential for the family, the community's response is characterised more by discussion than by tangible action. Despite the awareness of the financial burden, no organized effort emerges to support his ground breaking achievement for a child from the jheewar community. Even Desu Shah, while congratulating Madan, attributes Kamal's success to fate rather than acknowledging Madan's and Kamal's hard work and Tarsem's crucial support: "Come, Madan, how do you do? Congratulations! Your son has brought glory to all of us… Madan, it takes money to become an engineer, but don't worry. Everything will turn out well" (111). This highlights the complex interplay of admiration and continued reliance on the idea of "luck" to explain social mobility, rather than recognition of systemic barriers that Kamal has overcome.

The novel suggests that community progress is not solely dependent on external assistance, but also on internal support and the inspiring examples set by its members. A cyclical pattern of learning and aspiration emerges, with Madan inspired by Tarsem's achievements to prioritize Kamal's education. Tarsem, in turn, provide not only financial assistance but also imparts knowledge and skills to other children in the community. Kamal's subsequent success in gaining admission to an engineering program inspires Tarsem's own children, and Kamal begins tutoring other children from his community, many of them from under privileged backgrounds. Crucially, Kamal's academic excellence leads to a government scholarship, which covers his entire educational expenses. The scholarship represents a significant turning point, not only easing the financial strain on Madan's family but also potentially transforming their future prospects. It also benefits Tarsem, who has invested heavily in Kamal's education. This narrative arc emphasizes the transformative power of education and the importance of community solidarity in breaking the cycle of marginalization. The government's assistance, when it finally materializes, is a direct result of Kamal's educational opportunities. The novel seems to suggest that while systemic barrier exist, education, coupled with internal community support, can create pathways for social mobility. However, even with Kamal's clear success stemming from hard work and determination, the narrative subtly reminds us of the persistence of old narratives. Kanta, while overjoyed, attributes Kamal's scholarship to "luck": "Sitting in the

tuala, Kanta listened to her children. She was beside herself with joy. Her son had stood first. Her real surprise was that he would be receiving a scholarship. Our Kamba is lucky. God is very kind to him. He has listened to the prayers of us poor folks too" (132). This seemingly innocuous comment, however, carries a weight of irony. While expressing joy and gratitude, it also subtly acknowledges the systemic biases that make such success and exception rather than the norm, highlighting the precariousness of upward mobility for marginalized communities.

Spanning three generations, Hashiye Par reveals a complex picture of social change. While incremental improvements do occur, they are often fragile and susceptible to setbacks. The characters tendency to attribute their circumstances to "luck," while perhaps a reflection of their lived experiences, also serves as a subtle critique of a system that perpetuates inequality. The novel's structure, with its cyclical patterns of hope and disappointment, underscores the enduring nature of marginalization and the persistent challenges faced by the jheewar community. While individual success stories like Kamal's offer a glimmer of hope, the narrative does not shy away from depicting the systemic injustices that continue to impede the complete emancipation of marginalized groups.

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