

**THE POLITICS OF CASTE AND TEXTUAL CLEANSING: A CASE OF BABU RAJAB
ALI'S POETRY**

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On September 15, 2012, some Punjabi book publishers and editors¹ were arrested under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act for reprinting some works of the 20th century Punjabi poet and *kavishar* Babu Rajab Ali that allegedly contain derogatory caste names for the Dalits. The police had arrested these publishers suspecting the books could cause unrest in the state and could lead to rioting or division among communities. While one of the publishers chose not to circulate the books in the market after the controversy, in the subsequent editions of two other publications, the texts of Rajab Ali were changed, sanitized of the alleged caste names included in them, with terms more acceptable in contemporary times. We examine the deeper reasons behind this zealous and reactionary response to reprinting texts written more than seventy years ago. It becomes imperative to analyse if it is correct to reproduce old poetical texts through the process of “cleansing” and if the textual cleansing subverts the original meaning the poet wanted to convey, in his particular spatial-temporal context. The political, social and cultural dynamics behind the caste-based and censor-filtered purging of text reproduction need to be probed into, along with the role of state agencies and institutional structures that allow it to exist. Should the publishers be held responsible for the content they publish? Should the debate of cleansing/sanitizing, when understood in the context of the prevalent caste relations in Punjab, be reduced only to the notions of ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘freedom of individual’? Further, we analyse the significance of Rajab Ali’s writing on its own merit, while also demonstrating and critiquing his proclivity to perpetuate existing caste norms. These are the questions this paper seeks to address, while also conveying how poetry can be used as an alternative historical source for early-twentieth century Malwa.

Babu Rajab Ali (1894-1979), well-known Punjabi poet, has written poetry to narrate traditional stories, persisting socio-cultural norms, ballads, mythology, Sikh history and rendered themes of partition and freedom struggle in his verses. He entered the world of *kavishari* with his first poem *Heer Babu Rajab Ali*. By using the *Malwai* dialect of Punjabi, he brings into focus various historical, social, religious, political and mythological issues and the prominent form that he adopts to render his verse remains *kavishari*, in which the poet narrates the story interspersed with songs. Caste names appear regularly in his poems like *Qissa²Harnam Kaur*, *Qissa Harnam Singh Phool*, and *Dulla Bhatti* as he brings into the public sphere narratives of the caste-ridden Punjabi society.

However, it is pertinent to note that the representation of Dalits never becomes his primary concern. The *qissas* of the Malwa region that he has written about, are largely the narratives of dominant landholding castes. There are only occasional references to the Dalits. They are not just a footnote, but a constitutive footnote, perceived in a binary opposition to the dominant Jat caste. As Foucault writes, all representations are by their very nature insidious instruments of surveillance, oppression and control – both tools and effects of power – and at least the construction of Dalit images in Rajab Ali’s poetry seem to hold this true (104-105) because he perpetuates the normative idea of privilege by fashioning the dominant caste persons as “hero”, while the Dalits are portrayed either as arrogant figures who are to be disdained, or uncouth and coarse beings who are inferior to the Jats.

In *Qissa Harnam Singh*, their sketchy portrayal is to contrast certain attributes of characters; the word *Choohra*, in the following case, has been used to humiliate a person from dominant caste with an ironical reference to the arrogance of the Dalits:

jo kardarozvavarhan nu

tera giddar varhgiya jharhan nu

nasha pi kekardaakad

vadhkardefakadfakad

sattanchoorheyen jinni akad

He creates havoc everyday

That coward went back into the shrubs

He would show off after getting drunk

Cut him to pieces

He has arrogance of seven *Choohras*(Ali, *Dulla Bhatti* 34-35).

These references, in many ways, prove how caste barriers are maintained, policed and controlled, and rhetoric is constructed that “normalizes” the caste differences, justifies and perpetuates the status quo:

choohra kartara Jandian da bhoochre

farh Harphool de udaunetoochre

sun khushhogekaptan deputy

detiikk rafalkahaninipati

jadonhathyarmilje kujaat nu

ghughianudaunda fire adhiraat nu

*Choohra*Kartara of Jandian fumes

I will catch Harphool and cut him to pieces.

The Deputy and Captain were happy to hear this

They gave him the rifle to end the tale

When *kujaat* gets a weapon

He shoots to drive dove away, in the middle of night (Ali, *DurlabhQisse*163).

The last two lines reinforce the way caste prejudices and stereotypes are conceived in Punjabi dominant caste narratives of the time. The representations of the Dalits are mostly stereotypical and support dominant modes of ideology, characterized by condemnation, derision and victimhood. The politics of stereotyping not only justifies the social and material exclusion of the Dalits but also constructs them as expendable negative ‘Other’. Markers of social status such as lifestyle, behavior and language have been constantly invoked to project the Dalit men and women as different, to permeate a hierarchical social construction of caste. The caste-specific terminology, understood in this sense, signifies “embodied allegories of inequality”(Rancière 12) between the dominant Jat castes and the oppressed castes. It also extrapolates to the common practice in rural Punjab of using caste names to address the oppressed castes; ironically normalized in the public sphere that is why these utterances are considered beyond the ambit of oppression, exploitation and discrimination. It becomes evident in Dulla Bhatti’s conversation with his mother where the poet uses the caste names for Nandi rather nonchalantly:

nandimarasanjehdi, ohne gall pichlicherhi

doomni ne taanemaarke, tetikhikaradkaaljevaahi

bandian de vich, merichhotmarasanlaahi, bandian de vich

Nandi *Marasan* unraveled the old story

The bumble-bee slit my heart with her taunts

In the presence of men, the *Marasan* humiliated me, in the presence of men

(Ali, *Dulla Bhatti* 18)

In another poem, he writes “the *Choohra* of Jandian was killed masquerading as a clown.” (Ali, *Anootha* 135). Such an understanding “not only pushes the Dalit into the framework of a negative language but it also does not pay any attention to the congruence between self-perception and self-expression of the Dalit” (Guru 41), rather it endorses the feudal discursive practices and *Savarnachauvinism* by celebrating the hyper-masculinity of the men of dominant castes.

The juxtaposition of caste binaries in his poetry also need to be understood in the context of how naming as a process interjects to define the linkage between those who name and those who are named and how they are placed socially, economically, culturally and politically. The social relations among different castes and communities in Punjab, like rest of Indian society, are organized hierarchically where the large number of the Jats and their “hold over the landownership structure”(Sharma 29) and politics of the state places them at the hegemonic position within the society. Traditionally considered as low-caste groups, the Jats increasingly consolidated their hold after their entry into the fold of Sikhism at the time of Guru Arjun Dev, then to a position of land-owning aristocracy during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) and later at the time of the British Raj. The inevitable result was the development along lines dictated by the influence of Jat cultural patterns as argues Neeru Sharma:

The Punjab Land Alienation Act 1901³ further privileged the position of the Jats, the agricultural caste, by denying access to landholdings to non-agricultural castes such as *Tarkhans* and the scheduled castes. The launch of the Singh Sabha movement, with Sikhs forming the majority population, consolidated the social and political domination of the Jats (29).

The extraordinary privilege, as Harish K. Puri elaborates, of the “Jat agriculturalist (eighty percent of whom turned to Sikhism in central Punjab districts by 1921) contributed further to their caste domination and arrogance of privilege” in their relations with the oppressed castes in their local village situations (2695). And in these cultural patterns, the other Dalit castes like the *Chamars*, *Valmikis* and *Ramdasi* have been reduced to a subordinated position to the Jats and trading castes, thus also diminishing their political role. Their political marginalization in the past and the present is significant to understand the politics of cleansing and role of state apparatuses. Moreover, the use of caste-denominated words for them in the rural Punjab was quite common, denying them any subjectivity. The poetry of Rajab Ali constitutes, and is reflective of, the same cultural patterns.

The controversy erupted when the publishers were arrested for publishing the books of Rajab Ali that contain caste names. As a result, later editions of his works have been cleansed of all the caste names. It is pertinent to note that it was not the authorship but the publication⁴(2) that was targeted by the law, and that too almost seven decades after the books were first published. In

that case, the intervention of state apparatuses and subsequent cleansing of the old literary texts needs to be situated together with the role and responsibility of the publishers. That the publishers were arrested and later sued in court is revealing of the state's interest in establishing its hegemony over both the discursive and cultural spaces through the regulation of autonomy and freedom of the publishers because it coerces them to be "complicitous with the power structure and form a perfect mirror of its ideology" (Burt 112). Such an intervention can also enforce the publishers to be self-censorial and discriminative towards dissenting voices. If they edit and sanitize the texts to perpetuate the state ideology, their move undermines the authorial expression and intent. The direct/indirect intervention on the part of state institutions is also part of the larger strategy to control as to how the old historical and literary texts should be interpreted, thus negating the earlier interpretations of literary texts and history. It is also an act of erasure of cultural imagination of the people of the texts that have been in publication and part of the oral performances for more than seven decades.

Does the reproduction of old literature need to be put in the process of 'cleansing'? Should we delete all such references from the old literature, which are not in tune with the contemporary sensibilities? While the analysis of Rajab Ali's poetry proves that he perpetuates caste hierarchies, yet the sanitizing and cleansing of it puts into question the objectivity and integrity of the texts. It denies us an awareness, of the extent of cultural ramifications resulting from historical injustices and oppressions committed against Dalits. It also neglects the complex nature of historical events, impedes critical analysis, negates the cultural significance and engenders stereotyping. This is a different sort of politics performed at the levels of texts and their interpretations as it hides the role of power structures. Whether it is the government agencies or the publishers, cleansing is the easiest method that they can choose, rather than investing in rigorous critical analysis.

Moreover, the caste names in Rajab Ali's poetry, that became basis for the arrest of the publishers, figure in the works of other writers as well. In that case, such a cleansing will need doing away with much of the classical Punjabi literature from Bhai Gurdas to Waris Shah and Dhani Ram Chatrik⁵ to Pash and even religious text of Guru Granth Sahib. Or rather, to put a finer point on this statement, the politics of direct/indirect censorship in the form of cleansing,

privileges the notion of replacement or elimination, and the analysis of a writer's work in the larger context is not taken care of.

Seeing Rajab Ali's work only through the caste prism neglects the other dimensions of his poetry, because, though using the caste names, it is also an important source to understand the linguistic and demographic variances of the Malwa (Southern Punjab) region and beyond:

singhvale juan hunde bharati pulis
naukari karan tanakhahan lainde changian
feemi, bhangi, posti gagarh de ziada lok
karde kamai ghatt, ghare rehan tangian
mitharhi de lok oon taan shayari de shukeen bahale
paise den vele jeban ghuttan laiyan dhangian
kotli de lok ziada heer da sunan gaun
'Babu' ji dosehere vele goonjan sarangian

The youth of Singhwala join the police mostly
They do their job well and get paid hefty
People of gagarh are opium, marjiuna or poppy addicts
They don't earn much, there is always shortage
the people of Mitharhi are connoisseurs of poetry although
but when it comes to pay, the hypocrites do not open their pockets
people of kotli listen to rendition of heer more
"Babu" the *sarangis* reverbate when its *dosehra* (Ali, "sthan" n. pag.)

The social and linguistic range of Babu Rajab Ali's poetry is expansive as he prefers to use the words common in *Malwai* dialect and local expressions rather than the standard Punjabi vocabulary:

Standard Punjabi	Malwai	English translation
<i>Parkarma</i>	<i>Parkammia</i>	Circumambulation
<i>Janam</i>	<i>Jaram</i>	Birth
<i>Bharvan</i>	<i>Bharma</i>	Filled
<i>Yaad</i>	<i>Jaad</i>	Memory
<i>Banwaas</i>	<i>Banbaas</i>	Exile
<i>Vairee</i>	<i>Bairee</i>	Enemy
<i>Retire</i>	<i>Ratair</i>	Retire
<i>Sunehari</i>	<i>Snehri</i>	Golden
<i>Shayari</i>	<i>Shairi</i>	Poetry

(Ali, *Josheela* 10)

The poetic range of Babu Rajab Ali's work takes into its fold *kabitson* popular historical and mythological figures of all three major religions Sikhism (Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind, Banda Bahadur, Bidhi Chand), Islam (Prophet Mohammed, Hassan Hussain Ali, Daaood Badhshah) and Hinduism (Ramayana, Mahabharat, Prahalad) and the popular love legends (Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, Mirza Sahiba N, Puraan Bhagat, Kaullan, and Raja Rattan Sain). At the same time, he maps the hitherto unexplored local legends like Harnam Singh Phool and Gurnam Singh Rauke; strong female figures like Harnam Kaur and Aasi Thathiaari in the broader cultural and historical discourse of Punjab, thus providing an alternative ethnographic perspective through his poetry. As product of its time, Rajab Ali's poetry preserves the specificities of oral narratives and local cultural patterns but cleansing of certain words from these texts disassociates them from the historical and social context, thus diminishing the role of the original. Understood in this sense, the politics of cleansing also includes a degree of manipulation and when imposed and sanctioned by an institutional authority also governs what Bourdieu calls "access to expression and form of expression." (138).

The politics of cleansing also need to be understood in the context of the prevailing caste relations, as the notion of freedom of expression and freedom of individual is closely linked to it. The power structures advocate, on the one hand, the cleansing of the old literary texts to assuage the 'hurt' sentiments of the Dalits but strengthen, on the other hand, the caste hierarchies in the society. Cleansing the texts of derogatory words and replacing them with politically correct alternatives can be an appropriate resort but it does not guarantee political efficacy. While the state apparatuses support the cultural assertion of Dalits, and in the publishers' case, it seems to do so, but their social and political assertion in the same hierarchical set up is not acceptable, rather it is dealt with in an extremely oppressive manner (in the form of social boycott and police action against struggles for land for the Dalits, which has been happening in Punjab these days⁶). In fact, their struggle for political and economic emancipation has sharpened the contradictions between the landless and socially secluded Dalits, and the landowning and dominant caste of Jats.

In their statement in the court, the complainants claimed that the books "use derogatory language for scheduled castes which can instigate the people from targeted community and situation can deteriorate into communal riots". The arrest of publishers in the name of publishing derogatory words, is symptomatic of the insidious and hypocritical character of state power apparatuses that perpetuate the caste discrimination on the one hand, and also seek constituent support, on the other hand, by appropriating the cultural assertion of Dalits but punishing their political assertion as Gopal Guru states,

In Brahmanical social order, Dalit community is denied the privilege of being equal partners in *deliberative* process. Through the *pathological naturalism* Dalits are accommodated (in the cultural assertion) and yet systematically denied their due space (in the political and social field) in a democracy." (Guru, "Foregrounding Insult" n. pag.)

In the case of arrest of the publishers and ensuing debates in Punjabi public sphere, the question has been reduced only to the realm of freedom of expression, however as Gopal Guru argues, in the context of the position of Dalits, it can "become problematic once it is converted into the matter of self-possession or a semiotic property that has to be defended at any cost" because the

concerns raised by Dalits never become central to the same public sphere. (*Freedom* 41). Moreover, there is another dimension of the case. The persecution of one of Dalit publishers, Jagjit Singh Sahoke, under SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) act, 1989⁷ exposes the true intentions of power structures. The whole debate over cleansing the old historical texts, thus, becomes more complex and comprehensive when understood in the sense of its relation to the question of freedom of expression, position of Dalits in Punjabi society and the hypocritical and opportunistic role of the power structures.

Coming to the conclusion, cleansing of old literary texts is problematic as it tends to exclude the complexities and subtleties of both the texts and their socio-political contexts. It becomes even more complex when the question of caste is added to the debate. One needs to be more cautious in understanding the subtleties of the texts so that their objectivity and integrity is not compromised and the publication and dissemination of such literature can also be protected. The freedom of the author and publisher in a discursive public sphere is also closely related to it. The deliberation over the need to engage with caste must go on, but the banning/cleansing/ censoring of old literary texts is not acceptable. Before cleansing/sanitizing the literary texts and history, let's just understand it.

End Notes

1. The publishers who were booked for reprinting the works were Ashok Garg, the owner of Sangam Publications from Samana in Patiala district and Sukhwinder Singh Swatantar, editor of *Anutha Rajab Ali*, Amit Mittar of Vishav Bharti Parkashan, Barnala and Jagjeet Singh Sahoke (belongs to scheduled caste community), editor of *GathaSurmian Di*.
2. Expanding the scope and meaning of Qissa, Farina Mir writes, "As a genre, Punjabi-language qisse are rooted in Arabic and Persian storytelling traditions of the same name. They have particular affinity with the Persian romance qissa, a subgenre marked by its use of the masnavi poetic form, which dates from c. 1000 C.E. This latter tradition, both its literary norms and its repertoire of stories, was transmitted to South Asia from Central Asia and Persia during the medieval period, likely crossing regional boundaries with court poets, merchants, traders, Sufis, and mendicants... Qisse are meant to be performed, usually (but not necessarily) to musical accompaniment. During the colonial period, the qissa was therefore simultaneously a textual and an oral literature" (7-16).

3. The Land Alienation Act of 1901, promulgated by the British administrators of Punjab, created a new category “agricultural tribe” to include the buyers and sellers of the land. The act, thus, prohibited the “non-agriculturalist” castes the transfer of agricultural land as Cassan elaborates, “a member of an agricultural caste could transfer the property of his land (be it by sale or by mortgage) only to any other member of an agricultural caste. The “agricultural tribes” owned the large majority of the land sold, which resulted in an almost complete exclusion of non-agricultural tribe members from the land market (3).
4. Contrary to the decision taken by the police, the Additional Session court while granting bails to Jagjit Singh and Amit Mittar, noted, “It is not denied that the contents of controversial book "Gatha Soormea Di", is a mere reproduction of poems recited and composed by ancient poet Rajab Ali. So reproduction of recitals of earlier poems composed by Rajab Ali and published in earlier books does not point out any mens rea on the part of the accused contents of such book is not composed by them and rather it is a reproduction of composition of ancient poet Rajab Ali and such publications were already published in previous poems” (2).
5. The selective editing process has extended into literature via the sanitizing/cleansing of various books. In another context, the works of Dhani Ram Chatrik, poet lyricist and contemporary of Rajab Ali, have also been cleansed. In one of his poems, “MeleVich Jatt”, first published in the collection *Chandanwaarhi*, he uses the word “*Choorha*”,

After the sale of Rabi crop, and storing the straw and hay

After clearing the dues of moneylenders and landlords

After ploughing the land in wait for rains

Asking the *Choorha* to take care of the livestock

After getting the turban, long-shirt and *chaadrastitched*

Oiling the wooden stick

With flute in his hand, he is brimming with joy

The Jat has arrived in the fair, with romp and pomp (n. pag.)

The poem was prescribed in the Punjabi textbooks of class IX. However, the Punjab School Education Board decided to cleanse the poem by replacing the word “*Choorha*” with more acceptable name “*kaama*” in the book *Sahit Mala* published by them.

6. A report by *Janhastakshep* team unfolds gruesome details of repression by police and landlords on the Dalits in Sangroor district of Punjab who have been protesting to get share in the Panchayati land. The Jat landlords, affiliated either with the Akali Dal or Congress, have established their hegemony in the villages and Dalits who have voiced their protest against the status-quoist structure have been slapped with false charges. The hegemonic state structure, being casteist by nature, has always backed such moves, thus repressing the political mobilization of the Dalits.
7. The SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 was introduced to prevent the offences of atrocities against the members of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Under this act, there is a provision of Special courts for trial of the cases related to atrocities. However, one of the publishers, despite being a Dalit was charged under the act which is actually meant for their protection and safety.

Glossary

kavishri: art of composing folk-poetry usually recited rather than sung whose performers can be recognized by their lack of any instruments;

kujaat: belonging to a low or other caste

choohra: scavenger, sweeper, member of a caste usually working as scavengers

marasi: Muslim bard-cum-genealogist, humorist; slang. humorous, witty person especially one possessing bawdy humour

kabit: a verse form; stanza composed in meter

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