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A Road Not Taken: An Account of Dalit Experiences in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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“Caste has emerged as the key discursive category in contemporary Indian Social thinking, dislodging the earlier emphasis on class and nation to a considerable extent producing scholarly explorations and polemical controversies in equal measure”. (Sarkar, Sumit, and Tanika Sarkar, 2014) Caste in India is a system of social categorization which historically differentiated communities into thousands of hereditary groups called Jatis, translated into English as “caste”. The Jatis are again grouped in to four classes or varnas (chaturvarna) viz. Bramins, Kshatriyas, Vaishaas and Shudras. Yet another group now known as the Dalits were completely excluded from the Varna system and were crucified and discriminated against as “untouchables”.

A social system and stratification is usually created to help everyone in a society to behave according on their natural disposition. Ancient Indian religious texts justified class system as a way of creating balance between various societal groups without leading to any disagreement between them. In this system of classes, rather than the rights and privileges of the different classes the emphasis was laid on the performance of duties. As the Forum of Hindu Awakening explains,

In a family, children generally resemble their parents with regard to the complexion, temperament, intelligence etc. due to genetics. Based on this, authors of Smrutis (ancient religious texts) such as Sage Manu laid down the rules for constituting the societal pattern. Sage Manu came across different pupil with qualities required for various tasks in a particular social set up and believed the qualities to be inherited. He then allotted the responsibility of various tasks beneficial to society to each group based on those qualities.

Accordingly a Shudra, the lowest of varna system (labourer) was supposed to offer his body as he is devoid of anything else to offer. A Vaishya (businessman) should offer his body and wealth, a Kshatriya (Warrior) his body wealth and life and a Brahmin (priest) the highest in the hierarchy is supposed to offer his body wealth life as well intellect in the service to please the Almighty. But the Dalits or the untouchables who were excluded from the category were neither given work nor food for livelihood. They were ostracised and ill treated and were made to live like animals striving on the bits and pieces from the upper classes.

As time passed thought processes of the people changed and social systems changed in turn.

Thus it was understood that every person, to whichever class he may belong, becomes a Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras for some time of the day, each day. Thus an individual is Brahmin when meditates and studies, a Kshatriya when he fights according to the situation, a Vaishya when he earns a livelihood and a Shudra when he does some physical work. (Understanding Dharma, 2015)

But these theoretical changes in the Varna system hardly touched the hard core realities of Dalit livelihood. They remained where they were groping in the dark for a ray of hope.

The story of such 'Untouchables' finds a vivid voice in the 1995 novel, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry. The chapter "A Village by a River" of the novel portrays the life of three generation of a chamaar family. Chamaars as per the Indian Caste system are the untouchable sects who are excluded from the Varna system. They are traditionally considered to be leather workers who skinned the carcass of animals, ate the meat and tanned the hide which was turned into sandals, whips, harnesses and waterskins.

The novel details the life of three generations of Dukhi Mochi's family striving to live through the most turbulent years of India mainly before independence, during independence and after independence. During these years lots of things changed – India became independent and there were political, social and economic changes. But nothing seemed to change the pathetic condition of Dukhi Mochi and other untouchables. In fact, it only transformed their lives from better to worse.

A journey through the lives of Dukhi Mochi family proves how terribly the society has been treating the Dalits.

Dukhi Mochi was five years old when he had begun to learn the chamaar vocation at his father's side..... Besides tanning and leather working, Dukhi learned what it was to be chamaar, an untouchable in Village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. (Pg. 95 – 96).

In the village by the river, the chamaar were permitted to live downstream secluded from the other section of the society - the Brahmins and the landowners. These untouchables were forbidden to go to temple, walk through the way the upper class walk and drink from the village well. The Dalit children did not need special instruction or education to understand the ways of the society. They somehow imbibed it.

Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. And if that was not enough, the talk of adults, the conversation between his mother and father filled the gaps in his knowledge of the world. (Pg. 96)

Punishments for breaking any of the untold rules were brutal. Nobody went to the Police or pleaded for the guilty. It was a Dalit who always did the wrong or broke the rules as the

Thakurs and Pandits could never go wrong and it was their duty to “ whip the world into shape”. The crimes were varied and imaginative but the punishment were always the same and brutal.

For walking on the upper-caste side of the road Sita was stoned, though not to death- the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears, because he ventured within the hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat his excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with pandit Ghanshyam the wages of chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he would expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows and had him hanged.(pg 108)

A bhungi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes, a chamaar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it, a Bhungi child had not erased her foot prints clearly from the dust in a Thakkur’s courtyard after finishing her duties... her plea that her broom was worn thin was unacceptable(Pg.101).

At 18 Dukhi was married and had two sons. Birth of sons were a matter of pride among the Dalits. It even created envy in the upper class homes also. When rumours started to spread Dukhi feared for his family’s safety. As a precaution he went out of his way to be obsequious.

Every time he saw high classed person on the road, he prostrated abjectly, but at a safe distance so he could not be accused of contaminating them with his shadow (Pg.100)

At appropriate age Dukhi began teaching his children the skills of the trade to which they were born shackled. Ishvar, his first son was 7 and Narayan his second son was 5 when they were taken to the first dead animal. He gradually transferred to them the skills of a Chamaar. But the scarcity of work and a very bitter treatment from Thakur Premji made him try his cobbling skills in town. In town he happens to meet one of his old friends and tailor Ashraf, who advises him to send his children to learn tailoring. But Dukhi’s conditioned mind was not prepared for such a change. “It is not good to go far from your native village. Then you forget who you are. Better to stay where we belong”(pg 108) he says.

But when the cruelties of caste system started touching his children’s body he changed his mind. Once his curious children wander into the village school, forbidden for them and the school master punishes them brutally. And Dukhi finds no justice when he goes to Pandit Lallu Ram another upper class hypocrite who pretends to be very genuine.

Now Dukhi decides, enough is enough and prepares his sons to send them to Ashraf Chacha.

Ashraf Chacha is going to turn you into tailors like himself. From now on, you are not cobblers – if someone asked your name, don't say Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji.(Pg.115)

It was the first daring thing Dukhi Mochi ever did in his life. It was his win over the shackles of caste system. But fear and concerned hovered in the village.

His friends feared for the family. “Dukhi Mochi has gone mad” they lamented. With wide open eyes he is bringing destruction upon his house hold. And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift. (Pg.94).

Contrary to the fear of Dukhi and other villagers, Ishvar and Narayan fared really well as tailors. When the apprenticeship was over Narayan returned to village, whereas Ishvar remained with Ashraf Chacha as a partner. Soon Narayan married a Chamaar girl settled in the village as Tailor while Ishvar expressed his disinterest in marriages and remained in town. In the village the Chamaar community was quietly proud of Narayan. Gradually, the villagers found courage to become his customers, though there was not much money in it for Narayan because they could rarely afford to have something knew tailored.

Now among the Chamars in the village Narayan was looked upon as the spokesman for their caste, their unselected leader. He too took his success modestly. There was frequent tauntings from Thakoor Dharamji, who sent for Narayan whenever there was a dead cow or a got. But Narayan politely sent him reply that he was grateful for the offer but was no longer in this line of work. He even corrected his mother when she shouted at a Bhungi who had ventured towards their hut in the hope of stitching his rags. He said:

“I think, Ma, that you are wrong; I think I should sew for anybody who comes to me, Brahmin or Bhungi..... why did you sent me to learn tailoring. That is a stupid question. To improve your life – why else. Yes. Because the uppers treat us so badly. And? Now you are behaving just like them. If that is what you want, then I am going back to town. I cannot live like this anymore.” (Pg.139)

Soon Narayan was becoming more prosperous than many upper castes villagers. Narayan paid to have a new well dug in the untouchable section of the society. He leased the land on which the two huts stood, and replaced them with a pucca house, one of only seven in the village. It was large enough to accommodate his parents and his business.

Times rolled by, Narayans' family became prosperous, children were born and one of them being a boy, a matter of pride for the family. But Narayan was always thoughtful. One day while father and son sat on the porch at dusk, Dukhi asked:

“ What is it, what is bothering you?
I was just thinking that..... thinking that how nothing changes. Years passed and nothing changed.

Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. How can you say that ? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation from leather to cloth. And look at your house –

Those things yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new law. Says no more untouchability yet everything is the same. The upper caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.

Those kinds of things take time to change.

More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer ? I want to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like..... (Pg.142)

Dukhi was reminded of his own defiance of the caste system years ago. Though he felt pride, he also feared. He said

Son those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that. Narayan shook his head. That was your victory.”(pg 103)

That year during the parliamentary elections Narayan decided to go against the Thakur Dharamji's corruption, demand a ballot and vote. For years, Thakur Dharamji's system has been to present the election officer with gifts and he was led away to enjoy the day with food and drink. The villagers were made to put their thumb prints on the register and were told that they had voted and later the blank ballots were filled in by the landlord's men. But this year contrary to the flawless system of the Thakur, Narayan demanded for a ballot and two men behind him too were inspired by him and demanded for the ballot. But the outcome of such defiance was cruel. Thakur Dharamji ordered his assistants to take the three to his farm.

“ Through out the day at intervals, they were flogged as they lay naked by their angles from the branches of a Banyan tree. Drifting in an out of consciousness their screaming grew faint..... his men urinated on the three inverted faces. Semi conscious the parched mouth were grateful for the moisture, licking the trickle with feeble urgency. In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to their genitals and then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard trough the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still silent bodies were hanged and displayed in the village square. (pg 146)

Thakur Dharamji's gundas were now free of their election duties. They were let loose to plunder, loot, rape and rampage the untouchable village. Narayan's family members were bound and dragged to the main room. The mutilated body of Narayan was brought before them to see it.

A long Howl broke from Radha. But the sound of grief soon mingled with the family's death agony; the house was set alight. The first flames licked at the bound flesh. The dry winds, furiously fanning the fire, showed the only spark of mercy during this night. The blaze swiftly enfolded all six of them. Thus in Thakur Dharamji's words “achhoot jatis were made to learn a lesson” (pg146)

Dukhi's family thus paid the price for drifting out of the way.

From time immemorial there have been two kinds of people. One who always accepted everything that came their way without questioning the orders they thought came from their superiors. Then there was another sect who gathered enough courage to question the injustice done to them. But such groups were often suppressed and silenced forever. But such suppression is only temporary, there are thousands of Dukhi's and Narayan's replacing them and fighting for equality. Their fights have not gone vain for today except for some remote parts of India untouchability is completely eradicated.

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