

Research article

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Merā bacpan mere kandhom par, by Sheoraj Singh Bechain: Childhood wounds and collective struggle

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on *Merā bacpan mere kandhom par* (2009), the autobiography of the Hindi Dalit writer Sheoraj Singh “Bechain,” with the aim of elucidating the traumas experienced by the author during his childhood and the associated images of “wound” and “burden,” while underscoring the role of the body as a site of autobiographical knowledge. It will demonstrate how Dalit writing is both individual and collective in nature and show how Bechain’s autobiography, as an academic memoir, seeks to substantiate and reinforce the writer’s current social and professional position on the basis of a complex and often challenging life journey.

Keywords: autobiographical writing, academic memoir, childhood trauma, Hindi Dalit literature, embodiment

*Life’s journey is replete with memories of people and places traversed,
My strength has been gained from those who were weakened by circumstances.
I have closely watched my own people and others, friends and foes for long,
All too human they seemed, although to different castes and creeds belong.
For centuries I have been cursed to silence—
Many have spoken on my behalf, all to no consequence.
There is no point in speaking of my moment of arrival—
It’s the experiences of the journey of my life,
Benefit from which many people may derive.* (Bechain 2018, p. 252)

1 Introduction: Dalit autobiographies and the Hindi literary landscape

In the South Asian region, Dalits have endured centuries of caste-based oppression and discrimination. They have been marginalized within society, and have lived in inhumane and dehumanizing conditions. Their lives are often characterized by a state of insecurity and vulnerability, resulting in a profound sense of rootlessness and precariousness. Dalit autobiographies (Hindi *ātmakathā*, literally “story of the self”) typically provide a medium for the articulation of life experiences, in which crises and traumas, experienced at both the individual and collective levels, play a pivotal role. As Pramod Nayar (2006) and Sharmila Rege (2013) have pointed out, especially with regard to the life-writing of Dalit women, Dalit autobiographies can be effectively interpreted as *testimonios*, narratives “of trauma, pain, resistance, protest, and social change.”¹

¹ This is generally well-recognized. Nevertheless, in her paper “Narrating Dalit Womanhood and the Aesthetics of Autobiography,” Laura Brueck (2019) issues a cautionary note regarding the category of *testimonio* as a means of analyzing Dalit women’s writing. For example, she demonstrates that, in the works of Kausaliya Baisantri and Sushila Takbhaure, the emphasis on the interconnectivity of multiple generations of Dalit women does not ob-

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Dalit texts document the sufferings and atrocities committed against a significant proportion of the population. However, these texts usually show that the victims have fought back, overcoming these challenges and demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity. As Cathy Caruth (1996, p. 57) observes, “trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival.” Dalit life-writing is concerned with the reconstruction of the self, often following a series of traumatic events. It often presents narratives of determination and success, emphasizing the significance of Dalits’ personal achievements as individuals and as members of their communities. For instance, they may recount the experiences of those who were the first in their families to receive a formal education or to pursue occupations outside hereditary caste-based livelihoods.

It is of great significance that Dalit writing is both individual and collective in nature (see, for instance, Abraham & Misrahi-Barak 2016, Beth 2007, Brueck 2014, and Thapan 2022). The authors of these texts explicitly seek to voice not only their personal experiences, but also those of the many marginalized individuals silenced by social and literary exclusion. Although written by individuals, these works articulate a collective voice that speaks of selfhood, complex identities, and the pursuit of freedom within a shared realm of struggle, expression, and agency. As Thapan (2022, p. 1) observes, “while this collective voice is indicative of a shared identity, this is not merely an expression of a homogeneous identity. Their subjectivity lies in the shared but diverse and complex ‘communal identity’ their writing expresses.” Dalit autobiographies therefore serve a dual purpose: they document personal journeys from degradation to self-realization while simultaneously functioning as political texts that affirm identity and reclaim agency. Furthermore, it can easily be argued that Dalit life-writing frequently functions as a form of autoethnographic reflection (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Holman Jones 2005) on the socio-historical context and the power dynamics that have shaped the authors’ experiences of oppression and exclusion. These texts are typically poignant and accessible accounts grounded in the authors’ own lives. They aim to sensitize readers to the shared struggles of many Dalits that have long been shrouded in silence. In this regard, Arnold and Blackburn (2004, p. 6) aptly observe:

Life histories reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segment, of which they are part. [...] finding the “voice” of the otherwise apparently voiceless has a force propelling the investigation of life histories as a whole, and not least in South Asia; in this way, the life-history approach is a means of breaking the silences imposed by society and history.

Since the 1990s, there has been a notable increase in the number of Dalit autobiographies, which have become a significant presence in the Hindi literary landscape. These texts can be seen as alternative histories or forms of counter-history that integrate with, or even openly challenge, the dominant historical narrative (see, for instance, Browarczyk 2021). In the context of Dalit History Month², Gautam, a Dalit artist from Delhi,³ made the following observation:

The history I read in school was not mine, but I was made to believe that it was mine, too. The authors that I read in schools and colleges were not my people. They did not write about my people, and if they

secure their role as narrative subjects. Rather, it facilitates a more expansive conceptualization of the narrative subject and, indeed, of the self. On the relationship between Latin American *testimonio* and Dalit life-writing, see also Gupta 2021.

- 2 Dalit History Month is observed in April to commemorate the birth of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. It emerged as a means to reclaim the narrative of the Dalit past and present in India. The inaugural observance of the event in 2015 comprised a series of combined on-site actions in India and abroad (New York, Boston, Princeton, Houston, San Francisco, and Toronto), as well as online activities.
- 3 Siddesh Gautam is a multidisciplinary artist and designer from Delhi who uses his work to address social issues, particularly those affecting the Dalit community. His art often explores themes of caste discrimination, personal freedom, and social justice. He draws inspiration from the Dalit movement and the ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

did, they did with a gaze. I was orphaned from history and forced to adopt someone else's as mine. Made to believe that our history did not matter. The history of the people who built, cleaned and cremated for this country did not matter. But our history matters. (Gautam 2023)

According to the majority of Dalit writers and activists, it is essential to narrate Dalit experiences from a Dalit perspective and with Dalit consciousness (Hindi *cetnā*). As articulated by Hindi Dalit writer Jai Prakash Kardam, the experience of the Dalit community is characterized by a perpetual cycle of adversity and subjugation. This includes enduring the pain of being considered less than human, experiencing hatred and disrespect, facing injustice and inequality, and being treated as impure. Those who are not Dalits lack this experience. Dalits have specific life experiences that are distinct from those of non-Dalits. Only Dalit writers are able to authentically express their experiences, as others may lack the necessary perspective. While non-Dalit writers may sympathize with the Dalits and wish them well, they cannot fully understand them, since they have not experienced the same forms of oppression and discrimination (Agarwal and Kardam 2008). Dalit *cetnā* is thus defined by direct experience and is distinctly political in nature. It is in these terms that Dalit literature aims to demonstrate how violence and oppression have always played a crucial role in the preservation of caste-based privileges, and to raise awareness of the issues that have characterized, and often still characterize, Dalit life-experiences. The contemporary understanding of the Dalit *cetnā* is predicated on the principles of political liberation, renunciation of Hindu identity and eradication of the caste system from society, as espoused by Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. The objective of Dalit writers and intellectuals is thus to de-Brahmanize mainstream Indian literatures and history, while simultaneously presenting alternative “little stories” (or, in Lyotard’s terminology, *petits récits*) pertaining to a particular *jati*. These are individual life stories that subsequently become the narratives of families and entire communities.

2 Sheoraj Singh Bechain

Sheoraj Singh Bechain (1960–) is a Dalit poet, essayist, columnist, and short story writer. He adopted the pen name “Bechain,” which means “restless,” at the time when he began his writing and academic career. Sheoraj was born in Nadroli, Uttar Pradesh, North India, into an extremely poor Chamar family. Despite the traditional limitations of their socio-economic status, he was the first member of his family to pursue formal education. After his father’s untimely death, Sheoraj was forced to travel extensively through northern India, resorting to child labor at various times in order to survive. Nevertheless, he ultimately earned a postgraduate degree in Hindi literature and was awarded a Ph.D. in 1995. In 2010, he was appointed Professor of Hindi at the University of Delhi, becoming the first Dalit Professor and Head of the Department.

Bechain’s autobiography, *Merā bacpan mere kandhom par*, was published in 2009 and is available in an English translation under the title *My Childhood on My Shoulders* (2018). As one might anticipate, the author’s *ātmakathā* is largely concerned with his childhood and youth, specifically up until he enters high school. On the final page, he states his intention to write a second autobiography that will cover his subsequent studies, professional life and marriage. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of autobiographies written by Dalits tend to concentrate on the author’s childhood or, more broadly, on experiences that occurred during their formative years. Other prominent works, such as Omprakash Valmiki’s *Jūṭhān* (Leftovers) and Kausaliya Baisantri’s *Dohrā abhiśāp* (The Double Course) exemplify this trend. This is relevant because, as Kate Douglas has highlighted, autobiographies of childhood may function as acts of memory—as cultural memory practices. That is to say, they are narratives propelled by particular political and cultural conditions that extend beyond their recent autobiographical intertexts. They offer counter-memories and histories that challenge existing cultural memory and may, in turn, become part of it. It is difficult, however, to ascertain the extent to

which memories of childhood are influenced by social institutions and cultural practices, and shaped by psychological processes. This is particularly evident in the case of Dalit autobiographies, such as Bechain's.

Merā bacpan mere kandhom par begins with the death of Sheoraj's father when the author is about five years old, and this is the earliest memory mentioned in the book. I would argue that this episode opens the book not for reasons of chronological order, which is not especially relevant in Bechain's life story,⁴ but rather because of the pervasiveness of this experience throughout the author's life. As Howe, Goodman and Cicchetti (2008, p. 1) have observed, traumatic experiences in early childhood are thought to be highly formative and likely to be retained in memory. They exert a lasting influence throughout our lives, even if we are unable to consciously recall them. The author explicitly identifies the death of his father as a significant source of emotional distress and a series of practical challenges that shaped his childhood and adolescence.

Young Sheoraj is forced to work at an early age because of the physical disabilities of the other male members of his family, who are unable to support the widow and her children. He is employed in a brick kiln, in agriculture, in shoe repair, and in a sugar mill. Later in Delhi, he works as a floor polisher and sells lemons and eggs. He is forced to perform a variety of tasks that are physically demanding for his frail body and is often separated from his mother and siblings and lives with relatives. His circumstances appear to deteriorate further when his mother remarries, resulting in the appearance of a violent and hostile partner who treats Sheoraj as an unwelcome presence in the family. It seems that, as a consequence of his father's death, he is destined for a life of poverty, child labor, the pain of being an unwanted stepchild and, for an extended period of time, an inability to receive an education.

A characteristic that marks the writer's entire existence is his love of words, poetry and songs (Krishnan 2020, pp. 130–131). From a very early age, Sheoraj demonstrated a keen interest in reading, and he acquired this skill independently. His passion for reading led him to purchase books while economizing on food expenditure, to borrow them from relatives and acquaintances, and at times even to resort to theft. He soon began composing poetry extemporaneously while engaged in manual labor, and in fact this activity paved the way for his eventual enrolment in school. One of his poems, composed while he was helping to distribute building materials for the construction of an extension to the junior school in his village, caught the attention of a member of the teaching staff. Another schoolmaster, Massaab, urged him to study and provided assistance by helping him overcome a series of formal obstacles; this resulted in his admission to Class VIII at the age of approximately 15.

The concluding part of the autobiography narrates how Sheoraj ultimately gained access to formal education and encountered communist literature and Ambedkar's ideology for the first time. The works of Maxim Gorky, introduced to him by a cousin studying at a medical college in Delhi, are described as particularly relevant to Sheoraj's life trajectory, since the Russian writer also began his life in an environment of severe economic deprivation and had to engage in various forms of manual labor to support himself. Despite these challenging circumstances, Gorky managed to achieve scholarly recognition and became a writer of considerable talent, and was a source of inspiration for Sheoraj. Both Leftist literature and Ambedkar's ideology are perceived as crucial achievements, since for centuries ignorance and lack of education and resources prevented people from marginalized backgrounds from "feeling fully human." According to the author, there was a conscious attempt to prevent entire communities from accessing education, literature, and the arts, and to make them lead an "animal-like existence" (Bechain 2018, p. 208).

4 The author does not recount his childhood and early youth in an entirely linear fashion, and the narrative is characterized by frequent temporal shifts. The use of flashbacks, anticipatory reflections, and cyclical returns, may serve as a methodological strategy to unveil intricacies of trauma, marginalization, and identity formation that resist linear explanation.

3 Early traumas

3.1 Childhood and death

Recalling the tragic episode of his first encounter with death, Sheoraj Singh Bechain writes that, at the age of five or six, he attended a wedding with his father in a nearby village. When they arrived at the celebration his father was served a drink and soon began to feel ill. Bechain recalls that he woke up at midnight and couldn't see his father. Then he saw several people gathered around the poor man, who had started throwing up and was having difficulty speaking. The situation did not improve, and the following day some relatives decided to call a team of exorcists instead of a doctor. The exorcists began their ritual, invoking spirits with strange gestures and whipping and slapping the poor man. The patient's condition rapidly deteriorated, and his requests for proper medical assistance were disregarded. He succumbed to his ailment within a few hours. Sheoraj thus links the premature death of his father to superstition, ignorance and limited access to basic healthcare services, afflictions that are considered common among Dalits and low-caste people (Kuttiatt et al. 2025). Bechain describes the effect of his father's death as follows:

It was a gloomy morning the next day, one which I have never been able to forget. In the interlude of forty years, there have been many mornings and evenings and not all of them were full of joy either, but somehow that morning imprinted itself on my consciousness as a morning just gone by. I wonder why that melancholic and distressful morning has become so deeply entrenched in my memory! Why am I still enveloped in its darkness? (Bechain 2018, p. 8)

A few pages later, in a similar vein, he describes the heartbreaking experience of being at the crematorium, where he stands aghast, his eyes completely dry:

This sight was stamped in my memory for years afterwards [...] A measure of how horror-stricken I was by all that I had been enjoined to perform, and how strangely affected my mind had become by the turn of events, is that till today I am unable to expunge the traces of those occurrences from my memory. Often, when I relive my moments of loneliness, the memories of that unfortunate day appear before me in all their glaring clarity. It seems to me that it was only the other day that I cremated the body of my father. (p. 10)

Forty years after his father's demise, images of illness and death haunt the author through flashbacks and intrusive thoughts, highlighting the impact of the experience on his young mind. In the aftermath of this tragic event, a pervasive sense of darkness seems to envelop his family, with the young Sheoraj perceiving a "two-fold of shroud of darkness" (p. 7) enveloping him.

Sadly, his father's death is only the first of many losses that he suffers. In the following years, he loses several more family members, including his younger brother, his brother-in-law and his mother. The author provides minimal detail about the deaths of his brother and mother, focusing instead on Jeeja's (his brother-in-law's) death and linking it to the fate of his father. Bechain recollects how his sister was forced, at the age of eleven, to marry a man some ten to fifteen years her senior. In the period following the marriage, her husband Jeeja began to lose his voice. In response to this, the villagers again suggested an exorcism ritual. They invoked the Chamar gods, but the man's condition did not improve. Sheoraj recalls having to make an arduous journey to another village and cross a river during a rainstorm to obtain the necessary offerings. The prolonged exertion, coupled with the bad weather and the need to swim across the river, led to a significant deterioration in his health. Following the unsuccessful exorcism attempt, Jeeja was admitted to a hospital in Delhi thanks to the intervention of a cousin who was pursuing a medical degree in the capital. However, Sheoraj's mother was reluctant to undertake this course of action, because she had encountered negative perceptions of the medical practitioners in the city and their treatment of economically disadvantaged individuals. It was rumored that doctors tested their methods on patients with limited financial means in or-

der to develop superior methods of care for their more affluent patients (p. 79). The veracity of these rumors remains uncertain. Nevertheless, Jeeja underwent a tracheotomy, but ultimately succumbed to severe hemorrhaging exacerbated by a lack of prompt medical intervention. Bechain writes on this episode:

I can never forget the helpless expression I saw in his eyes as he confronted his death. Watching him in the throes of death, I began to see in his image the scenes of my father's untimely demise. Their faces seemed to blur into each other. His speechless communication was that I must look after my sister. (p. 77)

The two deaths, which appear to have exerted a profound and foundational influence on the writer's life experience, are so intertwined that the images of the two men in their final moments seem to merge into one. These traumatic events bring to the fore both the individual and the collective dimensions of trauma. The trauma associated with the death of loved ones is obviously individual, yet it is also collective, as numerous impoverished Dalits have faced similar fates. They either died prematurely themselves or witnessed the deaths of their loved ones due to a lack of adequate medical care and the influence of superstition. Even when medical treatment is obtained, as in Jeeja's case, the patients are often regarded as inferior and receive inadequate care, which can result in fatal outcomes due to neglect (pp. 78–79). Furthermore, the consequences of these fatalities are profound for the families of the deceased, as evidenced by what Jeeja seeks to communicate (though non-verbally), thereby highlighting the significant social and emotional repercussions that extend beyond the immediate context of the patient's passing. The perception of these early traumas is thus reasonably dependent on a complex interplay between personal experiences and collective narratives.

As previously mentioned, the deaths of Sheoraj's father and Jeeja are not the only such occurrences that the author experienced during his youth and documented in his autobiography. However, these events are elaborated upon in greater detail, likely due to their profound impact on his personal history, their symbolic significance, and their role as a vocal protest against superstition and limited access to medical care. Conversely, the demise of his younger brother is scarcely documented. Bechain merely states that the brother fell ill and quickly succumbed due to his inability to receive medical care or sufficient nourishment. Similarly, he devotes about a page to the death of his mother. He mentions that he had left the village in search of an education, but in the meantime his mother, who was suffering from tuberculosis and malnutrition, also died. By the time he returned, her body had already been cremated and he could not even see it. He adds "Amma was no more but I was grateful for her memories that remained with me" (p. 42).

As noted above, the images of the deaths of Bechain's father and brother-in-law haunt him throughout his life, but it is difficult to understand whether these memories are his own or are influenced by other people's accounts (for example, his mother's). When describing the grief caused by the experience of his father's death, the writer asks a series of questions:

Why must I rely on someone else's account? Don't I have my own memories of the past? Perhaps they are shadowy but at least they belong to me. So what if they are only fragments that I have managed to retrieve from the ruins of my past? (p. 8)

A little later, he mentions that, according to his mother, a few months after his father's death, he used to mumble in his sleep and beg for his father's salvation. Such reflections could indicate a memory problem known as overgeneral memory, a phenomenon associated with trauma that involves difficulty retrieving specific autobiographical memories.⁵ In support of this hypothesis, Bechain states

5 First described in a 1986 study of suicidal patients by Williams and Broadbent, overgeneral autobiographical memory (OGM) is defined as the inability to retrieve specific memories from one's autobiographical memory (Williams and Broadbent 1986). More specifically, "it refers to the finding that, when asked to recall a specific autobiographical memory in response to a cue word, individuals with certain characteristics are less specific and/or

that he is unable to recall the exact date or year of this traumatic event and it is impossible to recover the details. There is considerable evidence in the clinical literature that exposure to traumatic experiences in childhood is associated with autobiographical memory⁶ problems in adulthood. These difficulties may be due to deficits in the encoding and storage of autobiographical memories, impairments in the retrieval of stored memories, or an unwillingness to report retrieved memories. In addition, stressful childhood experiences lead to the development of a characteristic cognitive style that involves avoiding the retrieval of specific details of past events in order to blunt potentially negative effects (Howe, Goodman, and Cicchetti 2008).

Nevertheless, it may not be important to determine where Bechain's memories come from, since the narrative is of value in its own right. As Kate Douglas (2010, p. 29) points out, the stories people tell about their own childhoods, which inevitably inhabit an indeterminate land between truth and fabrication, "present a means by which the self can be constructed into history. Since this act of remembering and writing can never be truly reliable, it is the act of telling, the art of telling, that is important." In Bechain's autobiography, the process of recovering and writing the past is again crucial at both the individual and collective levels. Memories may be painful, but such a terrible and undeserved past must be acknowledged:

My memory is riddled with so many questions related to my horrific past. I slept in places not worth sleeping, I wore clothes that were not worth wearing and I ate food that was barely edible—the compulsions that dogged me still smoulder like lava within me. [...] There is no doubt that to reminisce about those days of slavery is to lose some of the possible peace of the present but that which cannot be forgotten should not be obliterated. (Bechain 2018, p. 97)

Wherever possible, the past must be reclaimed, and this is especially true for poor people from marginalized backgrounds, who are often completely unaware of their own history. Bechain points out that the past was indeed unknown to his family (his mother, for example, did not know his date of birth), his village and his entire community. This gap needs to be filled, at least for the benefit of future generations. Written memories, no matter how fragmented, can have a positive impact on individuals and the community as a whole. Such personal accounts can be seen as serving a dual purpose. On the one hand, they might help heal the author's wounds, in the form of scriptotherapy.⁷ On the other hand, they could help rebuild the lives of millions of Dalits who have had similar experiences, with the aim of both awakening Dalits' consciousness (so they understand the causes of their oppression and fight for their rights) and making non-Dalits aware of the violence and discrimination that Dalits have suffered for centuries.

3.2 Trauma: wounds of the body, wounds of the heart

Like a *testimonio*, Bechain's text is rooted in the trauma experienced by and through the body. The body is an important site of autobiographical knowledge, where life experiences are physically inscribed. It is a site where "memory recovers and reworks experience in constructing a sense of iden-

more overgeneral in their recall than others. Rather than retrieving a specific memory for an event that occurred at a particular time and place and lasted less than a day (e.g., 'My college graduation'), people with these characteristics often retrieve memories that are summaries or classes of events (categorical memories, e.g., 'When I'm with my family') or memories for events that lasted longer than a day (extended memories, e.g., 'My trip to Spain')". OGM is often associated with depression and trauma-related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Sumner 2012, p. 2).

6 Autobiographical memory can be defined as a mental representation of the events of one's past containing episodic memories and self-referential semantic information.

7 The term scriptotherapy was coined by Suzzette Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects: Women's life-writing and narrative recovery* (1999) to denote the "process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience," re-enacting one's own psychological wounds in order to heal them.

tity through processes that are felt, physiological, neurological, and biochemical, as well as resonant in the body politic” (Watson 2016, p. 291). As Browarczyk (2021, p. 33) has pointed out, Dalit writers often use metaphorical images associated with bodily suffering to show how oppression can become an embodied experience. In *Jūthān*, for example, Omprakash Valmiki compares the suffering caused by hatred and discrimination to the pain of thin needles piercing his skin. The title of Sushila Takbhaure’s *Śikañje kâ Dard* (The Pain of Living in Shackles) alludes to shackles, and hence to a physical and possibly painful impediment to movement. Similarly, Bechain repeatedly resorts to the image of burdened shoulders, a metaphor suggested by the title of his autobiography. In the opening pages of his account, Bechain emphasizes that he went to a relative’s wedding astride his father’s shoulders, but after his father’s death he had to return to his village carrying his own childhood on his shoulders. Similarly, a few pages later he writes the following:

In this manner, my burdensome childhood became the load which my weak shoulders learnt to carry. I could not forgo my childhood or rush through it to escape its travails. The destinations of my life beckoned me to come forward. The road ahead was uncharted and uncertain. There were no means of survival available to me in Pali. I was an unwanted thing here and had to shoulder the responsibilities of my childhood all by myself. (Bechain 2018, p. 23)

Thus, a father’s shoulders, a symbol of paternal care, love and protection, become a symbol of the suffering that marked Bechain’s childhood. After his father’s death, there is no place for childhood as a golden age, as an age of innocence; on the contrary, it becomes a burden to be borne (pp. 86, 111). Similarly, his grandfather, who had to witness the deaths of two sons, a young nephew and three grandsons, is also described as having aged shoulders, bearing the burden of such a heavy loss (p. 25).

The body is extremely relevant in *Merā bacpan mere kandhom par*, and not only in a metaphorical sense. Bechain often stresses how suffering and physical pain had a considerable impact on his health and physical condition. As Nayar (2008, p. 88) aptly wrote “Atrocity victims are often called upon to show evidence of torture and suffering, as though the scars are texts that speak the language of oppression.” This is exactly the case for Sheoraj Singh Bechain and his autobiography. For example, he mentions a problem with urinary incontinence, explicitly linking it to the trauma of his father’s death. Urinary incontinence and bedwetting are in fact common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Bechain has suffered from rheumatic pain, a chronic inflammatory condition affecting his knees. This ailment has not received appropriate attention, causing significant difficulty in his daily activities and at work. Furthermore, Bechain recalls an incident that occurred while he was working in the fields. His left foot was caught beneath the disc of a harrow, leaving the bones of his foot exposed and causing significant bleeding.

Moreover, the autobiography clearly shows how the taboos and social barriers that have marginalized Dalits for centuries are enforced through a series of prohibitions related to the body. Young Sheoraj is not allowed to eat in the homes of upper-caste people, he has to use separate bowls and utensils, and even well-educated people will not accept food prepared by him. As is well known, caste discrimination has a lot to do with the body, as is clear from the very term *achūt*, untouchable, which is widely used as a derogatory way to describe Dalits. As Nayar (2008, p. 89) has pointed out, “Caste is inscribed upon the Dalit’s body through its very rejection: the body and how it is received/treated becomes a marker of caste.” Bechain meditates not only on his own body and suffering, but also on the bodies of other marginalized characters. For example, in a very moving scene, he describes the weak body of his blind grandfather as they work together at a sugar mill. One unfortunate day, his grandfather’s half dhoti accidentally catches fire. The old man immediately throws it off and tries to get out of the furnace. Sheoraj immediately tries to embrace him and protect him with his own body. Of this episode he writes:

Even today I can feel the poundings of his heart as if they were my own and the crouching figure of the blind man is very clearly etched in my memory. I grow extremely restless whenever I recall that scene, as if it had occurred this very night. (Bechain 2018, p. 98)

When his grandfather asks for some clothes to cover his private parts, it seems that no one has any to spare. Instead, the man they ask insultingly asks why Sheoraj's grandfather, a blind old man, is working at the furnace. The experience of suffering is the catalyst for the emergence of Dalit narratives and literature. This suffering is both individual and collective, the result of a complex interplay of social, historical and political structures that oppress Dalit people and entire communities. As Nayar (2008, p. 89) notes in reference to Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, "one suffers as a *Dalit*, even though the pain is singular to the suffering *individual* body."

The recurrent imagery of burdens and pain foregrounds the body as the primary site of autobiographical meaning, a locus where social hierarchies, affective memory, and individual identity intersect. As Judith Butler (1993) reminds us, the body is not a neutral biological entity, but rather a discursive formation, continually produced and reproduced through cultural norms and acts of repetition. In Bechain's narrative, the marked Dalit body is both the product of caste-based discourse and a medium of its subversion. By inscribing bodily pain and labor into the texture of his life story, Bechain transforms the stigmatized body from an object of social degradation into a subject of political articulation.

The act of narrating the body in this way can be understood as a performative rearticulation of selfhood, through which the historical constructs that have defined the Dalit subject are critically rewritten and reimagined. The theoretical framework of life-writing, as elucidated by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001), further illuminates this process. The concept of autobiographical identity is described as embodied, relational, and performative, emphasizing that self-narration always takes shape through bodily experience and social interaction. From this perspective, the emphasis Bechain places on the body, its burdens and its pain, enacts the very process by which the self is constituted. The narrator's shoulders bear not only personal grief but also the collective history of caste oppression. His body exhibits the marks of both trauma and endurance. In narrating his bodily suffering, Bechain engages in what Smith and Watson term an "embodied act of self-inscription," which transforms lived experience into narrative agency. Thus, the body is not merely represented in the autobiography; rather, it becomes the medium through which subjectivity is claimed and history is rewritten.

The experience of suffering is not just a matter of physical perception, however. At times, the author also emphasizes that the "wounds of the heart" are often more severe than those of the physical body. In *Merā bacpan mere kandhom par*, the first form of suffering is primarily associated with the consequences of the double discrimination that results from having dual identities as a Dalit and a stepchild. First of all, young Sheoraj is aware that *savarna* people look down on him as an untouchable:

"The donkey among animals," "The owl among birds," "The Chamar among castes"—such figures of speech are evidence of the Dalit-hating mentality of the *savarnas* towards us. These epithets were not coined in a day. The wounds run so deep that instead of wincing with pain, we have grown accustomed to bearing them and it is made to appear natural that is our fate to endure this suffering. These words of abuse are current in every house of our locality. (Bechain 2018, pp. 94–95)

However, it would be erroneous to assume that oppression and discrimination are perpetrated solely by the upper castes; they are also prevalent within his own community. At the outset of the autobiography, Bechain mentions his paternal uncles, who continue scavenging and skinning cattle carcasses, and trading the remains of the dead animals. It is reported that his uncles' family and his own are the only ones who persist in such practices. Those Chamars who had relinquished their former

occupations began to perceive themselves as members of a superior social stratum, despite having similar economic conditions to those of the author's household. In Bechain's words:

It was an extremely demanding and skillful job. If skinning was an art, then the job of processing the skin was a science itself. [...] These tasks did not require bookish knowledge, even though society looks up to bookish-learning as respectable while regarding the task of lifting carcasses as reprehensible. Any Brahmin would fail in this test. Notwithstanding the fact that the Chamars provide an essential service, society rewards them with incalculable contempt. (Bechain 2018, pp. 14–15)

In a highly significant episode in the aftermath of the incident at the furnace, Sheoraj and his grandfather are compelled to appear before a *panchayat*, much like criminal defendants in a court of law. Dalits from their own settlement threaten them, demanding that they cease drawing water from the well and abstain from consuming meat from dead animals. If they do not comply, they will have their faces blackened and be paraded through the village on a donkey. In general, Sheoraj and his family are subjected to discrimination within the Dalit community because of their continuing involvement in tanning and trading in animal carcasses, as well as their diet that includes meat. Hindu society deems these professions and practices to be profoundly impure. Despite their indispensable role in maintaining the societal order and the highest status of "pure occupations," they are met with considerable disdain.

Secondly, as a stepchild, Sheoraj is perceived as inferior, a notion further reinforced by his stepfather, Bhikarilal, who consistently treats him as an outsider (pp. 29, 32). Compelled by social expectations, Bhikarilal secures admission to primary school for Sheoraj and his son, Roop Singh. However, he becomes disconcerted upon observing that Sheoraj is achieving better outcomes. While Roop Singh evinces no interest in studying, Sheoraj is a promising student, and his teachers encourage Bhikarilal to allow the boy to continue his education. Instead, he ceases to provide financial support for his stepchild and, in a moment of intense anger, ignites a can of kerosene and sets Sheoraj's books alight. The author posits that this act was not merely an isolated expression of envy toward a non-biological son, but rather, a deliberate act of obstruction, aimed at hindering the child's educational aspirations and impeding his progress. Nevertheless, this incident did not deter Sheoraj from pursuing a formal education. Reflecting on this episode, he comments, "by burning my books, they had merely scorched the outward symbol of my quest for knowledge, but the spark of learning within me was not extinguished" (p. 35).

4 An academic memoir

How and why did I become a writer? When did it begin? To find the answers to these questions, I will have to keep looking back at the journey of my life, all the way to its beginning. Usually, behind every writer's life and authorship there lies the backdrop of their society, caste, and family. The same is true for me as well, but the nature of my background is not like that of most Indian writers. Writers generally inherit a knowledge tradition from their families. [...] As I sit down to speak my mind, looking far back into the past, I do not see any modern or ancient educational legacy that I can claim as my own, nothing I could consider helpful to my literary pursuits, nothing to feel proud of, as non-Dalit writers often do, or that I could credit for my becoming a writer. But to become a realist writer, it is essential to mention the wealth of hard-earned, lived experiences that I have inherited, because, like Gorky, my schools and universities were my places of labor. Even my formal education occurred alongside physical labor.⁸

8 All English translations from this text are mine. The original Hindi texts is as follow: मैं कैसे और क्यों बना लेखक? कब से बनना शुरू हुआ? इन प्रश्नों के उत्तर खोजने के लिए मुझे जीवन यात्रा को आरंभ तक मुड़-मुड़ कर देखना होगा। आमतौर पर हर लेखक के लेखन और जीवन के पीछे उसके समाज, जाति और परिवार की पृष्ठभूमि होती है। मेरी भी है, परंतु उसका प्रकार वैसा नहीं है, जैसा खास भारतीय लेखकों का होता है। लेखकों को ज्ञान की परंपरा उनके परिवार से प्राप्त होती है। [...] अपनी बात कहने बैठा हूँ तो दूर तक पीछे देखने पर मुझे ऐसी कोई आधुनिक या पुरातन तालीमी-विरासत निजी तौर पर

With these words, from a 2021 paper titled *Maim kaise banā lekhak* (How Did I Become a Writer), Sheoraj Singh Bechain reflects on his journey from systemic marginalization to literary and academic prominence. Unlike many Indian authors who inherit educational privilege, Bechain's path was shaped by child labor, caste-based exclusion, and self-education through physical toil. Despite the fact that no member of his family before him had received an education, either during British rule or Swadeshi rule, he has become a prominent figure in the Hindi literary and intellectual landscape and has produced a prolific body of work on the subject of Dalit literature and journalism.⁹ Moreover, he has assumed the role of Head of the Hindi Department at Delhi University.

In his autobiography, Bechain presents a compelling account of his life journey, which can be read as a way of substantiating and reinforcing his current social and professional status. As Gillian Whitlock (2003, p. 340) has observed, the academic memoir is a distinctive form of life-writing that is "frequently shaped in order to naturalize and confirm the professional identity and vocation of the narrating subject and to produce a pedigree of sorts." In other words, it can link past struggles to present achievements, transforming personal anecdotes into validated claims of intellectual authority. This is exemplified by Bechain's autobiography, in which a complex past and a personal struggle to receive a formal education strongly contributed to the author's current position of authority and credibility.

Another contemporary Dalit author, Sumitra Mehrol,¹⁰ followed a similar trajectory in her autobiography *Tūte pañkhon se parvāz tak* (Soaring Heights with Broken Wings, 2021). Mehrol chronicles the challenges she faced as a Dalit woman with a physical disability, positioning these experiences as catalysts for her growth and development into the woman and academic she is today. A review of the autobiography reveals that past experiences were pivotal in shaping the trajectory of her career and defining her distinctive profile. The current positions held by Bechain and Mehrol appear to be appropriate outcomes of their profound desire for knowledge and resilience in pursuing academic qualifications, despite the numerous challenges they faced in their formative years.

It is important to acknowledge that the majority of Dalit writers regard education and self-consciousness as crucial instruments for combating discrimination and oppression and effecting social change. Dalit autobiographies frequently focus on authors' experiences at school, as school functions as "a transitional space between childhood in the village, portrayed as a place of unchanging oppression and minimal opportunity" and their adult life in a city or other locations (Beth 2007, p. 549). Education is regarded as the principal means of acquiring an understanding of the world and one's own situation. It is imperative that Dalits develop a comprehensive understanding of the origins of inequalities to combat them effectively and dismantle the structures of oppression. Self-consciousness is a vital component of any protest against forms of humiliation (Guru 2009). In view of the aforementioned evidence, it seems appropriate to cite Bechain's own words on his first day at school: "The day I stepped into school with my endless hopes was a momentous day for me. I do not know whether my education benefitted or harmed my society, my country, or any person but I do know that my efforts did not remain barren" (Bechain 2018, p. 198).

मिली दिखाई नहीं देती जिसे मैं अपने लेखकीय उपक्रम में सहायक मान लूँ या गैरदलित लेखकों की तरह गौरवान्वित महसूस करूँ अथवा उसे अपने लेखक होने का श्रेय दूँ, लेकिन एक यथार्थवादी लेखक बनने के लिए मुझे जो श्रम संचित भोगे हुए अनुभवों की पूँजी विरासत में मिली, उसका जिक्र करना लाज़िमी है, क्योंकि मेरे श्रम के ठिकाने ही गोरकी की तरह मेरे स्कूल विश्वविद्यालय थे। मेरी तो औपचारिक शिक्षा भी श्रम के साथ हुई। (Bechain 2021, pp. 166–167)

9 Some notable academic works by Sheoraj Singh Bechain are *Dalit krānti kā sāhitya* (Literature of the Dalit Revolution, 1998), *Samkālīn hindī patrkarītā meṁ dalit uvāc* (Dalit Voices in Contemporary Hindi Journalism, 2007), *Ambedkar Gāndhī aur dalit patrkarītā* (Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Dalit Journalism, 2010), and *Sāmājīk nyāy aur dalit sāhitya* (Social Justice and Dalit Literature, 2018).

10 Sumitra Mehrol (born 1965) is a Dalit Hindi writer currently teaching at the Shyam Lal College in Delhi. The only girl among four siblings, she contracted polio as a small child. She faced a multitude of challenges as a result of her intricate intersectional identity, which included the identities of a Dalit, a woman, and a person with a physical disability, and the socioeconomic and educational limitations of her family. Despite these challenges, she pursued her studies and obtained a PhD in the early 1990s. She subsequently achieved financial independence through employment at a bank and later at Shyam Lal College.

A substantial portion of the autobiography is dedicated to elucidating the considerable challenges Bechain encountered in pursuing a formal education and in navigating the discriminatory attitudes that pervade the educational system. Following a period of financial adversity and child labor, he was finally presented with the chance to pursue an education. He was granted the opportunity to commence his studies by a teacher who hosted him. Nevertheless, this “privilege” had to be compensated for by undertaking lengthy periods of manual labor in the fields. Moreover, in the aforementioned incident involving his foot, there was a lack of willingness to provide him with the necessary assistance. Afterwards, Sheoraj was no longer a welcome presence in the teacher’s home due to his inability to work.

Recalling his formative years, Bechain acknowledges that he did not encounter the ideological contributions of Indian social revolutionaries such as the Buddha, Phule, Ambedkar and Achutanand for a long time. There were two main reasons for this. First, these authors and their works were absent from textbooks, rendering them virtually invisible. Secondly, a lack of translations of their writings into English further compounded their neglect. Additionally, caste-based intellectuals regarded the leaders of casteless communities such as Phule and Ambedkar as untouchables and overlooked them. The writer asserts that his educators never referenced to Dr. Ambedkar when discussing the Indian Constitution, neglecting to acknowledge his indispensable role in its formulation. Even teachers of history demonstrated a notable lack of awareness regarding the historical oppression of the Dalit community (Bechain 2018, p. 213). Despite the provision of scholarships to students belonging to the Scheduled Castes, none of the teachers that Sheoraj encountered viewed the financial assistance as compensation or partial repayment of a historical debt. Sheoraj was not awarded his scholarship until he had reached the 10th standard. Notwithstanding the numerous challenges he faced, Bechain was able to pursue and complete his studies at the highest educational level.

During the presidency of Bhalchand Munekar, an economist and expert on Ambedkar, Sheoraj was presented with the opportunity to become a member of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (Rashtrapati Niwas, Shimla) for a research project titled “History of Dalit Hindi Literature: Research and Creation.” According to a lead story in *The Times of India*, Sheoraj Singh became the first Dalit Fellow in fifty years. Following his admission, opportunities arose for other Dalit intellectuals. After Bechain, Dalit writers such as Mohandas Naimisharay, Omprakash Valmiki, and A. Achuthan were admitted.

This was his first opportunity to immerse himself in Dalit literature and journalism through the medium of creative literature. In his previous studies, he had had the opportunity to read Nirala, Premchand, Nagarjun, Ajneya, Shukla and Dwivedi, all of whom were readily accessible, while Dalit literature was not included as an option in the program. Bechain perceived Dalit literature as unique, as a cry for justice and human rights. In Dalit writing, he found a protest against untouchability and man-made slavery. This experience subsequently served as a catalyst, propelling him towards his vocation as a writer and proponent of egalitarianism. In a number of instances, Bechain asserts that upper-caste authors are unable to authentically depict the lives of Dalits. Moreover, the uniformity of representation and the monopoly held by these authors could potentially have an impact on Indian literature, hampering its ability to compete with American, African, British and Russian literature. He writes:

Due to caste and lineage equations, Indian upper-caste writers may snatch the biggest awards, but in terms of fair and unbiased criteria, they will be unable to bring world-class recognition to the country. Dalits and Adivasis have endured pain without having a voice to express it. This left me dissatisfied, so I thought I should write my own story. If such burning experiences stir a person to express themselves, then what is their writing if not creation? If they remain suppressed, they will either explode like a volcano or, due to lack of an outlet, turn into an uncontrollable flood, breaking through all barriers. So, in the process of writing poetry, stories, and novels, I made up my mind to write an autobiography. Once

I had made up my mind, I went on to write *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (My Childhood on My Shoulders).¹¹

Paraphrasing Whitlock's words (2003, p. 353) in relation to academic women in 21st-century England, it is evident that when a Dalit author opts to document his/her own education and intellectual vocation in an autobiographical format, the genre finds itself on the verge of a new frontier. This is because Dalits had previously been denied such an opportunity. By engaging in acts of memory and imagination, these individuals begin to occupy a new landscape as Dalit intellectuals. They use memoirs as spaces to reflect on, consider, and emotionally navigate the traumas of their past. Additionally, they use them to consolidate their efforts and energies, striving to become Dalit intellectuals.

5 Concluding remarks

Merā bacpan mere kandhom par, by Sheoraj Singh Bechain, represents a discourse that transcends the author-self and illuminates a historical narrative of caste-based oppression and discrimination. This discourse is both individual and collective in nature. Although life histories are undeniably individual in their articulation, they are simultaneously "collective in their social practice" (Blackburn, 2004, p. 204). They constitute both a cultural form and a "narrative strategy" (Blackburn, 2004, p. 204), positioning them not simply as repositories of personal experience, but also as potent agents of transformation. Through the articulation of shared knowledge grounded in collective experience—and through the exploration of diverse conditions and modes of resistance—these narratives function as deliberate "narrative strategies" that foreground the potential for social and political change (Thapan 2022, p. 4).

Bechain's work focuses on a series of traumatic childhood experiences, including early encounters with death and casual labor, as well as late and complicated access to education. Similar recollections of childhood have emerged in other contexts, including among Aboriginal writers in Australia (Douglas 2010). These experiences share some relevant features. They have emerged within a broader political landscape in which stories of collective trauma have helped to challenge dominant versions of the past shaped by high-caste male figures. Bechain offers an account from the perspective of an adult who has articulated the experiences of a previously silenced child. As an adult, he is able to address the suffering and injustices he endured as a child, offering a critique of the feelings instilled in him as a poor Dalit boy and a stepchild.

The paper initially sought to elucidate the interconnections between body, memory, identity and history, with a particular focus on the manner in which trauma and oppression can become an embodied experience. For example, Bechain frequently employs the metaphor of burdened shoulders to represent the distress and adversity he endured in his formative years. He underscores the profound impact of traumatic and distressing experiences on his physical and mental wellbeing. Secondly, the paper illustrates how the autobiography is structured in a manner that serves to legitimize and affirm the author's current position and professional identity. As an academic memoir, *Merā bacpan mere kandhom par* can be seen as a negotiation between the professional self of a Dalit individual and his efforts to come to terms with a degraded past self.

11 वंश-जाति समीकरणों के चलते भारतीय वर्ण-लेखक बड़े से बड़े पुरस्कार झपट लेंगे, परंतु निष्पक्ष कसौटी पर विश्व स्तर का कोई पुरस्कार देश को नहीं दिला पाएँगे। दलित, आदिवासियों का दर्द जिसने सहा है, उसने कहा नहीं है। इससे मुझे असंतोष हुआ तो सोचा कि अपनी कहानी मुझे खुद ही लिखनी चाहिए। इस तरह के जलते हुए अनुभव व्यक्त होने के लिए बेचैन करें तो ऐसे व्यक्ति का लेखन सृजन नहीं तो और क्या होगा? वह दबगा तो ज्वालामुखी की तरह फटेगा या निकास के अभाव बाढ़ के पानी की तरह बाँधों को तोड़कर अनियंत्रित बहाव में बदल जाएगा। सो, कविता, कहानी और उपन्यास लिखने के क्रम में आत्मकथा लिखने का मन बना लिया। मन बना लिया तो फिर 'मेरा बचपन मेरे कंधों पर' लिख डाला गया। (Bechain 2021, p. 182)

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