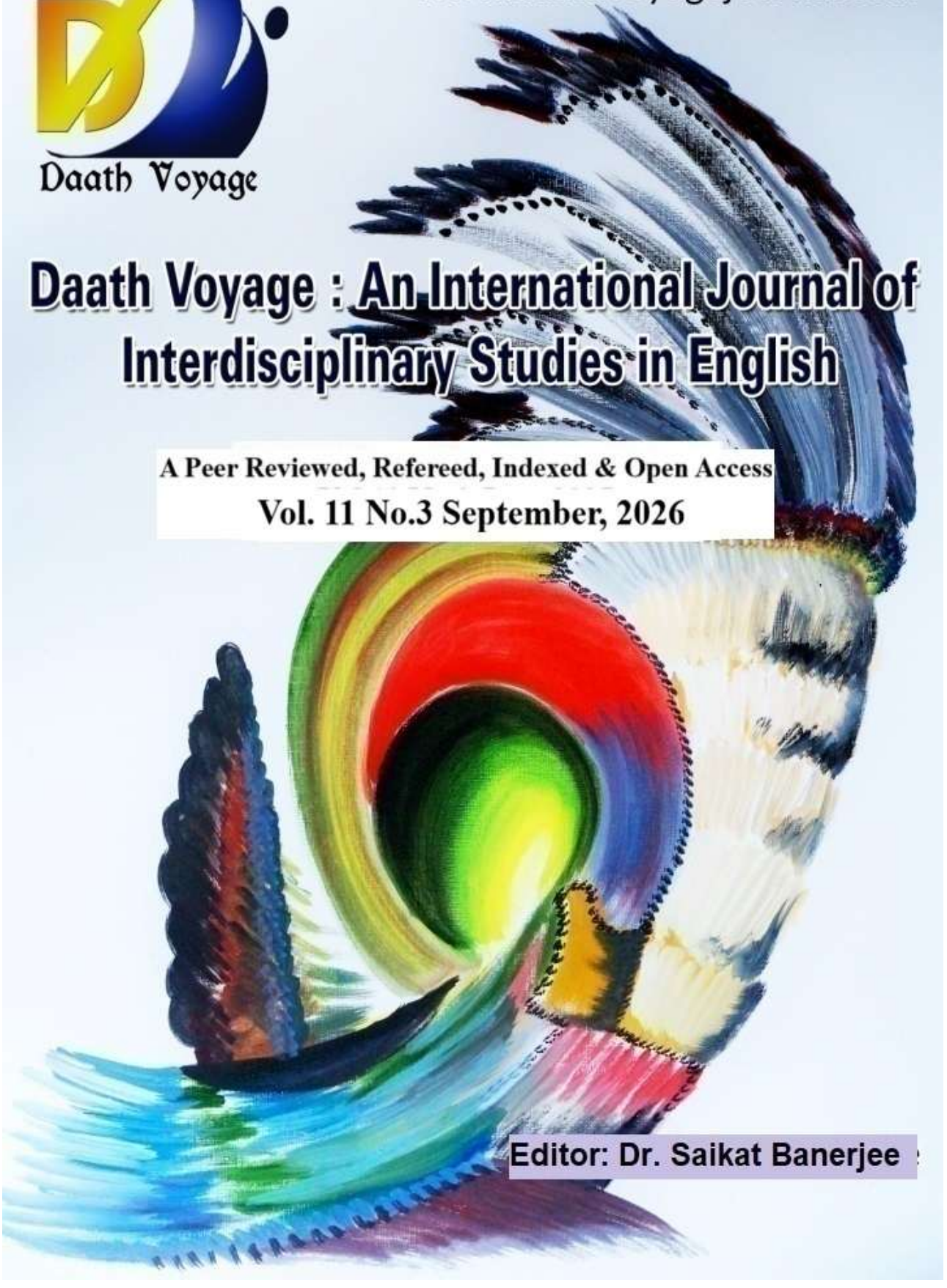
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Dalit and Disabled: The Blind Tau in Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders*

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Abstract: The intersection between the Disability and Dalit discourses can act as a mutually illuminating lens on the complexities of these identities. Often defined as a form of social disability, caste shares several features with the definition of disability as a cultural and social construct. This paper will examine the multiple jeopardy of caste, class and disability with reference to the figure of the blind Tau in the well-known Hindi Dalit writer, Sheoraj Singh Bechain's autobiography *My Childhood on My Shoulders* and offer insights into how these are transformed into sites of resistance, disruption and transgression.

Keywords: Dalit, Disability, Shared Marginality, Resistance, Disruption and Transgression.

In the Indian context disability and caste are factors that shape locational and spatial discrimination, and the implied similarity between the shared marginality of people with disability and Dalits opens up a fertile common ground for comparisons. The intersection between the Disability and Dalit discourses can act as a mutually illuminating lens on the complexities of these identities. Often defined as a form of social disability, caste shares several features with the definition of disability as a cultural and social construct. As Nilika Mehrotra points out, "the cosmological understanding of caste and disability are interconnected" (298-99) and the theory of Karma and rebirth, backed by scriptural texts, are often invoked to explain the existence of disability as well as the caste system. Apart from the social and cultural impediments, structural barriers like poverty, lack of development, illiteracy, employment and mobility are also factors

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that link the lived reality of people with disability and Dalits in India. Additionally, negative stereotyping and stigma, inequality of opportunity mark the everyday experience of both the disabled and Dalits. The discrimination, which in both cases also expresses itself in terms of accessing resources, medical care, public places and availing services, induces as well as sustains psychosocial disability and social exclusion. However, when both these identities overlap, an intersectional approach provides a useful entry point to unravel these marginalities within marginalities. Statistics reveal that there is a higher prevalence of disability among Dalits and although, as Mehrotra concludes, that the majority of disabled are engaged in some form of economic pursuit and that there is only a small proportion of disabled people who are unable to work due to the severity of their impairment, "their life conditions seem to be clearly determined by complex intersection by their caste, class, that is social status, gender and disability" (320).

Significantly, both the Disability movement in the West and the Dalit movement in India began around the same time and also drew their inspiration from the African American struggle against racism. A similar imperative underpins both the Disability and Dalit discourses, insofar as they seek to radically challenge the dominant discourse of ableism and casteism respectively. As Alan Roulstone et al point out in their Introduction, Disability studies has critically unpacked, "the structures of 'ableism,' normalcy and the construction of disabled people as the categorical 'other'" (4). Similarly, Dalit literature too, is a corrective body of work that addresses the caste-blindness of the dominant literary tradition, and has set for itself the task of deconstructing its tropes and narratives through innovative forms of resistance. This counter-canon constitutes an oppositional site that contests established representations and brings visibility to the lived reality of Dalit life. In terms of nomenclature too, there exists the politics of naming and just as the so-called ex-untouchables have embraced the term 'Dalit' as an expression of their resistance to casteist inscriptions, so too has disability been reclaimed as "something more than tragedy, dysfunction or

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misfortune" (Snyder and Mitchell 4). In their exposition of the cultural locations of disability, Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell deconstruct the dominant understanding of disability, which draws upon the Eugenic belief in 'biology as destiny' and the scientific and medical categories which construct the people with disability as "biological outcasts" (18). They also point to the systemic discrimination against people with disability and the derogatory epithets such as "cripples," "evolutionary throwbacks," "feeble-minded," "defectives," among others to show how these terms come "replete with stigmatizing beliefs" (2). In its challenge to the normative discourse and what has been referred to as "the hegemony of normalcy," Disability discourse recognizes "disability as a politicized self-naming strategy," which is both "a process of expose and a productive locus for identification…a site of resistance, and a source of cultural agency" (Mitchell and Snyder 10).

In a similar trajectory, the use of the term 'Dalit,' devised during the Ambedkarite movement, represents a rejection of the casteist terminology, in which demeaning terms such as "atishudra," "mellechha," "achhoot," and other such abusive synonyms were used to construct the Dalit as a social leper (Guru 213). The term 'Dalit' gained currency as a political term to assert a new level of pride and self-respect by repudiating the casteist ideology of pollution, Karma and justified caste hierarchy (Zelliot 267). The Dalit movement has also undertaken a writing back to the hegemonic discursive traditions, invoking the idea of 'Dalit chetna,' a critical, revolutionary consciousness of the nature, forms and extent of oppression and the need to resist it, alongside a demand for a just social order. Thus, both disabled people and Dalits occupy an "undesirable location in a geography of beliefs" (Snyder and Mitchell 21) and often also face public backlash created by the perception that both groups get special treatment due to the apparent benefits of the affirmative action policies. The specious argument regarding merit and ability ignores the skewed nature of privileges that accrue to those not belonging to either of these communities

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and the inbuilt structural mechanism holding back both the disabled and Dalits. However, when both these identities coincide, the resultant consequences can leave a deeply scarred history of exploitation and humiliation, while also generating a dignified resistance to the hegemonizing tendencies of the dominant sphere.

The multiple jeopardy of caste, class and disability find their devastating documentation in Sheoraj Singh Bechain's autobiography *My Childhood on My Shoulders*, in which many personages, notably from the author's own family suffer from one impairment or the other. Bechain's autobiography is a compelling narrative about growing up Dalit in India and although it centers around the growth and development of the author, as most critical commentators have pointed out, the 'self' in the Dalit autobiography metonymically represents the community as a whole. Born into a family of Chamars and therefore, stigmatized as an 'untouchable' within the framework of India's caste society, the members of his family are not only constrained to bear the burden of acute economic hardship, two of his paternal granduncles and one Uncle are blind and his own grandfather is physically challenged. The only so-called able-bodied member of the household apart from his paternal Aunt and mother is his father, who passes away when Sheoraj is just five to six years old. Known as the 'house of the disabled,' many members die as a result of the stranglehold of superstitious beliefs and lack of faith in modern medicine, while most people from the village hold the opinion that, "This family seems to have carried over a curse from a previous birth" (86).

After the demise of his father, Sheoraj's granduncle, the blind Gangi Babba is compelled to scour around for any kind of work for which he receives a meagre meal as wages disproportionate to his labour. This hard-earned meal is also doled out as charity in a separate vessel. Expressing rage at the disrespect shown to his elders, Bechain also points to the untouchability practiced by those who would employ Gangi

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Babba to grind the grain and then consider it contaminated if he touched the flour. Bechain likens Gangi Babba's constant labour with the rigorous imprisonment served by a prisoner, "I had begun to see in Babba the image of a captive, except that in his case, I could never figure out what his crime was. While we could make our escape from the village by looking for work elsewhere to bail us out of trouble, Babba being blind, was tethered to his toil" (131). Bechain is quick to not only record the devaluation of the labour of his disabled elders but also comes to recognize it as a cruel patrimony and does not hesitate to call himself "the grandson of two disabled Chamars- Gangi and Bidharam-who despite their hard and unpaid labour found it difficult to sustain themselves without proper food and clothing" (95).

A particularly heart-rending episode in the autobiography takes place at the Bade Yadav's sugar press, where Gangi Babba's dhoti catches fire when he is adding the crushed, dried cane and leaves to the furnace. Having to shed his clothes to prevent further harm, Gangi Babba stands nude in the bitter cold and far from coming to his help, people heap scorn upon him, unwilling to donate clothes to a Chamar. Acutely aware of his nudity and helplessness, Gangi Babba's deep sense of shame is compounded by the fear that this accident might jeopardize his prospects of getting any work in the future. Babba is compelled to wrap his grandson's shirt around his waist but they refuse to accept the jaggery wash that has been licked by a dog as wages and also do not return to work for the Yadav from the next day.

However, it is these very disabled elders who come to Bechain's rescue by asserting themselves at important junctures in the author's early life on more than one occasion. When Bechain's stepfather Bhikarilal, tries to sell him and his sister, who are six and seven years old respectively, to a brick-kiln contractor, both the blind elders, Gangi Babba and Baburam Tau act swiftly by calling a Panchayat to intervene and stall Bhikari's plans to prevent the exploitation of their child labour. Similarly, it is Baburam Tau again who rescues Bechain from the hazardous work of brick-moulding when he develops chilblains,

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working at his other Uncle's home. While the so-called able-bodied relatives of the author ruthlessly extract unpaid labour from him in the name of looking after him, it is Baburam Tau's admonishment that compels his Uncle to recompense him. Therefore, crucial to this bildungsroman with a difference, is the seminal presence of Bechain's blind Tau, who has a formative influence on the making of him as a writer.

A man of many talents, Tau is an exemplary exponent of the orality of the subculture of Chamars. Having memorized several ballads hailing the separate pantheon of gods and goddesses that the Chamars worship, the blind Tau plays a key role in the prayer rituals that would take place in their mohalla. Later, Bechain devotes an entire chapter to his Tau, entitled 'Here Lived a Mochi' commemorating the time he spent with him in Kaser Kalan, while assisting him with his work as a cobbler. It here that Bechain is apprenticed to learn not only the ropes of the trade but also acquaint himself with the repository of values of Chamar culture that the Tau represents.

Living on the outskirts of the basti and given the frequency of thefts in the area, the author notes that it was the presence of Mochis and dogs that provided a sense of security. However, the anomaly does not escape him that, "We acted as watchmen for everybody but if anybody was unprotected, it was us and us alone" (151). Bechain marvels at the survival tactics that his Tau has evolved over the years, working for almost a decade on the pavement as a Mochi. Cooking his meals on a borrowed chulha, with a minimal store of vessels and the public hand pump serving for supply of water to sustain themselves, Bechain records the subsistence level of existence upon which Tau teaches him to eke out a living. Bechain is also amazed at how his Tau could shave his beard without soap or cream by using only water and a bare blade and even manage to leave a thin streak of moustache! In an amusing episode in which the author stealthily gobbles pieces of fish before Tau can serve him the dish that he has cooked for him, Bechain discovers that he has been caught red handed because Tau had counted the pieces beforehand. He promptly

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acknowledges his guilt and apologizes to Tau for thinking he could take advantage of his blindness. Even in his dealings with the shopkeepers and other inhabitants of the basti, Tau stands out as a man to reckon with. In fact, it is to Tau's renditions that Bechain credits the "musicality and sensitivity that became a part of me forever" (171). Tau would regale the neighbourhood by singing out stories from the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Raidas Katha*, recite Kabir's verses and extracts from hosts of folk tales. These sessions would particularly irk the brahmin halwai cum astrologer, Omi Sharma, who felt such mastery over religious texts was his exclusive right.

As Bechain points out, "Which Chamar… would endear himself to a brahmin who did not consider him to be learned by birthright or an equal human being, and especially if the Chamar could, at will, adopt the posture of a Kabir" (152)? Improvising on Kabir's satire on brahmins through self-composed verses, Tau's songs hark back to the anti-brahmanical strain that characterize the poetry of the Kabir and Raidas tradition: "O Peers! The brahmins ruined our garden! / Neither any wisdom imparted/ Nor any reforms started/Castes invented, people's unity dented! / O Peers! The brahmins ruined our garden!" This would provoke Omi Sharma all the more, who would jeer at Tau to enquire if he sang these songs to beg for a living, for which Tau would have a ready reply, "If I wanted to beg for a living, why would I be mending shoes? God has decreed that it is the brahmin who should beg" (153)!

Apart from exposing what he considered to be the "guiles of the brahmins," Tau also composes songs about fake devotion and religious cant: "There is neither mercy nor kindness in your heart/ What then can your image in the mirror impart?/ Merely by bathing in the Ganga who of sin can be cured/Would not then fishes that dwell in water, be to heaven lured?" as well as on general philosophical themes like the fatality of death as the ultimate leveler: "What fate has destined,/ No one can rescind./When Fate will call, each one will fall./ The pandit will go, the mullah will go/ the vaid, hakim also./ Fate will take them

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one and all,/ Who can resist Fate's call?/ The king himself will pass away/ Nor will the pauper his time outstay./So Baburam announces,/ The power of Fate to kill pronounces" (171).

Tau's defiant attitude on one occasion also translates into a retaliation against the local goon who refuses to pay his dues and upon being asked to do so, proceeds to slap Tau. Not one to accept this lying down, Tau aims a shoe at the goon, which does not miss the mark. As Bechain points out, "A roadside cobbler, all but blind, and to top it a totally destitute Chamar, would hit a Lodh who claimed to be a Rajput, with a shoe in return for a slap-such rebuttal was beyond the ken of the Lodh" (154). Thus, the subversive content of his songs, his everyday acts of resistance and the sheer grit with which he meets the challenges of life invests the presence of Tau with a transgressive potential and disrupts the conception of disability from "either a medical pathology or signifier of social discrimination into a source of embodied revelation" (Roulstone et al 10).

It is significant that Bechain's portrayal of his Tau runs counter to the more stereotypical representation of the blind Chamar Soordas, the protagonist of Premchand's magnum opus *Rangbhoomi*. As Dalit critics have pointed out, despite possessing land, Soordas begs for a living, which they claim is completely antithetical to Chamar culture, where work is assigned supreme dignity. Also, in *Rangbhoomi*, Soordas is portrayed as a votary of the Brahminical values of Karma and rebirth, who regards cow worship as the best form of devotion, which Dalit critics argue, runs contrary to Chamar *chintan*.

Thus, the Dalit oppositional stance to their representation by canonical writers is similar to the argument made by the disability scholars, who have pointedly drawn attention to the function of disability in literary texts. Mitchell and Snyder refer to the use of disability as an "opportunistic metaphorical device" by coining the phrase 'narrative prosthesis' to point to the manner in which, "disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power…"

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(49). In the case of Bechain's autobiography, although the portrait is sentimentally drawn, the blind Tau comes across as a man full of courage and dignity even in the face of extreme humiliation and adversity. The narrative highlights the figure of the Tau as encapsulating the Dalit vision of social transformation on a more egalitarian basis and as an embodiment of Dalit *chetna,* he bestows upon Bechain an enduring legacy.

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