

informed by the fact of Aurobindo's unpublished last article on *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance - "Boycott,"* used as an exhibit for the prosecution in the Alipore Conspiracy Case of 1908, in which Aurobindo was an accused. An examination of this dimension would have been welcome. The introduction is marked by a few startling disclosures, such as, that even by 1909 Gandhi was 'not a believer in representative government for India, being fond of saying "that benign autocracy was the best form of Government"'. It is also forthright in linking Gandhi's 'tirade against modern/western civilization' to a 'phobia' imbibed 'during his student days in London'; elsewhere Mehrotra states that Gandhi's 'treatment of "ancient Indian Civilization" was, to say the least, unhistorical, and his call for a return to it unrealistic.' The detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding the proscription of *Hind Swaraj* constitutes another positive virtue for the comprehensive introduction, although the repetition of the views of the Oriental Translator, mentioned once, could have been avoided. The introduction also probes the English psyche while discussing the validity of satyagraha. Even while having doubts as to the stated conclusion that the success of satyagraha depended substantially on the opponent, it is undoubted that the natural British inclination towards constitutional norms, outlined with such felicity by Mehrotra, left the conclusion of the Gandhian freedom movement much less in doubt, and so much more non-violent than may have been possible in a different political scenario. The closing section with its concise sketch of Gandhi's mind - 'a strange mixture of the Victorian liberal, Indian patriot, philosophical anarchist and simple-lifer' - dismisses through the sketch, the more trite and superficial criticisms of Gandhi's theories in general, and of *Hind Swaraj* in particular. The publication of this Centenary Edition of the *Hind Swaraj* is timely and relevant; its value enhanced by a scholarly and insightful introduction.

NOTE

1. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. LXX, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958-1978, p. 242.

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Sheoraj Singh Bechain, *Mera Bachpan mere Kandhon Par*, New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2009, pp. 422. Rs. 695

Sheoraj Singh Bechain's recently published autobiography, in Hindi, *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (My Childhood on My Shoulders) is remarkable in many ways and destined to be placed among the best books in this genre. The writer courageously recounts some of the most painful experiences of his childhood which was full of unimaginable hurdles and hardships. While going through the pages of this voluminous book no one can remain unmoved. Reading page after page one feels the prick of conscience which makes deep bruises on the hearts of the readers, taking the reader into a socio-economic arena which is virtually suffocating. The moment the reader enters into the world of the author the reader is stunned and wonders if this the real state of our much-touted, India Shining? In the book Sheoraj not only describes his childhood with pathos with the sharpest edge of his pen, wielding his pen ed like a knife, he has also pricked the festering boil of social discrimination that persists in our country despite many reformist, constitutional and legislative initiatives

Sheoraj's childhood was a construct of the many interwoven threads of socio-economic disparity, class injustice, caste exploitation, the superstitious ways of rural India, and above all the callous indifference of those whose responsibility it was to eradicate these. The child that Sheoraj looks back towards from his present position has three childhoods mixed in one - first, of a child who has lost his father and is the member of a family that has three blind grandfathers none of whom with sufficient earnings to fill the bellies of the hapless family, the second, of a child who is an untouchable *chamar* by birth and is ostracized by his own caste people because his family still depends on the meagre earnings of the shunned occupation of skinning dead animals, tanning the skins and selling them in nearby markets; and the third, of a child who despite all adverse circumstances cherishes a dream to educate himself. A child in any of these three conditions would find it hard to survive, yet here in Sheoraj's life as a child all the three conditions extended their stranglehold on him.

This child witnesses the tragic death of his father, the only able-bodied earning member of the family at a marriage function at which some people forcibly induce him to consume country liquor as a result of which he contracts poisoning in his stomach dies. The patient cries out to be taken to some hospital but the family elders take him to *ojhas* who treat him with brutal beating intended to exorcise the so-called ghosts that they said had possessed him. As a result death snatches away his

father the child Sheoraj is rendered fatherless.

From this juncture of his life begins a hard journey of survival for his child. Just to earn one square meal a day for himself, he works as a farm labor, as a tanner, as a shoe-mender, as a hotel worker, as a *nimbu* vendor, as a domestic servant and doing many other menial jobs. The people of his own caste who castigate and ostracize his family for eating the flesh of dead animals and living off their remains never suggest or offer any alternative way to make a livelihood. In Sheoraj's own words, "Those days we were the victims of dual contempt. We had no standing among our own caste -fellows and hardly existed for the outside world. For our own *Jatav* people we were *chamar* and for *Telies, Yadav, Baniyas* and *Bamans* we were *chamatta* (a highly derogatory word for *chamars*)."

Carrying the load of utter penury and the legacy of *Chamar*-hood this child tells so many moving stories in the long narrative about his childhood that it would take another four hundred pages to discuss them all. What this child experienced only about thirty years ago and after about thirty years following Indian Independence is a sad commentary on the nature of Indian society, (especially in the countryside) even today, For instance Sheoraj recollects an incident from the village into which his sister was married. Because of heavy rains the village was flooded and the well from which *dalits* took their drinking water was contaminated by filthy waste drained out of the sewer pipes. The people of the lower castes approached the upper caste people whose wells were safe for drinking water but no one gave them even a drop of water. Ultimately and helplessly they had to drink the polluted water resulting in infectious that took many

lives. The writer himself was afflicted with a disease that proved hard to cure.

How this boy pursues his ambition of getting education is a story of both incredible struggle and undying perseverance. His family members, even his mother, do not want him to waste his time on educating himself at a time when his income is much needed to fill their hungry stomachs. His stepfather goes to the extent of beating him for going to school or reading books. However, he, with the moral support of an Arya Samaji teacher who never helps him materially but took some advantage out of him, by demanding services from him, goes on with his study plans and ultimately passes high school. This becomes a turning point in his life.

Mera Bachman Mere Kandhon Par is not a simple autobiography of *dalit* writer but is an authentic document of the lives of the most impoverished and deprived sections of India's populations. This book not only questions the traditional exploitative caste structure but also indicts the so-called reformist changes that sometimes prove equally ruthless in making life a living hell for the low-caste people. Those successful folk from the *dalit* community who, with the help of reservations and other affirmative action measures, have acquired respectable positions for themselves behave the same way as their upper caste counterparts. Sheoraj has not shied away from exposing them too.

This book written in a novel style explores the harsh social reality of our times and thus becomes a landmark in the history of Hindi *Dalit* writings in particular and of Hindi literature in general.

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Former editor, *Rashtritya Sahara*

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