

ASSIGNMENT

BA Prog. First Year NCWEB English Language through Literature (10 Marks)

(Deadline: 4th April 2020)

Q. 1 On the basis of your reading of the short story extract given below, answer the questions that follow.

Our house was next to Chandrabhan Taga's cattle shed. Families of Muslim weavers lived on the other side of it. Right in front of the cattle shed was a little pond that had created a sort of partition between the Chuhras' dwellings and the village. The pond was called Dabbowali, and it is hard to say how it got that name. Perhaps because its shape was that of a big pit. On one side of the pit were the high walls of the brick homes of the Tagas. At a right angle to these were the clay walls of the two or three homes of the Jhinwars, another untouchable caste. After these were more homes of the Tagas.

The homes of the Chuhras were on the edges of the pond. All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit. Not just under the cover of darkness but even in daylight. The purdah-observing Tyagi women, their faces covered with their saris, shawls around their shoulders, found relief in this open-air latrine. They sat on Dabbowali's shores without worrying about decency, exposing their private parts. At this same spot they would have a conference at a round table to discuss all the quarrels of the village. The muck was strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights—this was the environment of my childhood. If the people who call the caste system an ideal social arrangement had to live in this environment for a day or two, they would change their mind. Our family lived in this Chuhra basti. Five sons, one daughter, and our uncles—two chachas, one tau, and his family. Chachas and tau lived separately. Everyone in the family did some work or other. Even then we didn't manage to get two decent meals a day. We did all sorts of work for the Tagas, including cleaning their homes, agricultural work, and general labor. We would often have to work without pay. Nobody dared to refuse this unpaid work for which we got neither money nor grain. Instead, we got sworn at and abused. They did not call us by our names. If a person was older than we were, then he would call us "Oe, Chuhre." If the person was younger than we were or of the same age, then he would use "Abey, Chuhre." Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one [a higher-caste person] happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw them away. A Christian used to visit our neighborhood. His name was Sewak Ram Masihi. He would sit with the children of the Chuhras around him. He used to teach us reading and writing. The government schools did not allow us to enroll. My family sent only me to Sewak Ram Masihi. My brothers were all working. There was no question of sending our sister to school. I learned my alphabet in Master Sewak Ram Masihi's open-air school, a school without mats or rooms.

One day Sewak Ram Masihi and my father had an argument. My father took me to the Basic Primary School. There my father begged Master Har Phool Singh: "Masterji, I will be forever

in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two.”

Master Har Phool Singh asked us to return the next day. My father went. He kept going for several days. Finally, one day I was admitted to the school. The country had become independent eight years earlier. Gandhiji's uplifting of the untouchables was having ramifications everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, and even that wasn't enough. I was not allowed to sit on a chair or a bench. I had to sit on the bare floor; I was not allowed even to sit on the mat. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. From there, the letters on the board seemed faded.

The children of the Tyagis would tease me by calling me “Chuhre ka.” Sometimes they would beat me for no reason. This was an absurd, tormented life that made me introverted and irritable. If I got thirsty in school, then I had to stand near the hand pump. The boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. They tried all sorts of strategies so that I would run away from the school and take up the kind of work for which I was born. According to these perpetrators, my attempts to get schooling were not justifiable. Ram Singh and Sukkhan Singh were also in my class. Ram Singh was of the Chamar caste and Sukkhan Singh was a Jhinwar, both untouchables like me. Ram Singh's father and mother worked as agricultural laborers. Sukkhan Singh's father was a peon in the Inter College [a junior high school]. The three of us studied together, grew up together, experienced the sweet and sour moments of childhood together. All three of us were very good in our studies, but our extremely lower-caste background dogged us at every step. Barla Village also had some Muslim Tyagis who were called Tagas as well. The behavior of these Muslim Tagas was just like that of the Hindu Tagas. If we ever went out wearing neat and clean clothes, we had to hear their taunts that pierced deep inside, like poisoned arrows. If we went to school in neat and clean clothes, our classmates said, “Abey, Chuhre ka, he has come dressed in new clothes.” If we went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, “Abey, Chuhre ke, get away from me, you stink.”

This was our no-win situation. We were humiliated whichever way we dressed.

I reached fourth class. Kaliram had replaced the headmaster, Bishambar Singh. Along with him had come another new teacher. After the arrival of these two, the three of us fell on terrible times. They would thrash us at the slightest excuse. Ram Singh would escape once in a while, but Sukkhan Singh and I got beaten almost daily. I was very weak and skinny in those days.

Sukkhan Singh developed a boil on his belly, just below his ribs. While in class, he used to keep his shirt folded up to keep the boil uncovered. This way the shirt could be kept clear of the puss, and he thought that if the teacher could see the boil, he would be decent and not hit him. One day the teacher's fist hit the boil while he was thrashing Sukkhan Singh. Sukkhan screamed with pain. The boil had burst. Seeing him flailing with pain, I too began to cry. While we cried, the teacher was showering abuse on us nonstop. If I repeated his abusive words here, they would smear the nobility of Hindi. I say that, because many big-name Hindi writers wrinkled their noses and eyebrows when I had a character swear in my short story “Bail ki Khal” (The Ox Hide). Coincidentally, the character who swore was a Brahmin, that is, the knower of Brahma, of God. Was it possible? Would a Brahmin swear?

The ideal image of the teachers that I saw in my childhood has remained indelibly imprinted on my memory. Whenever someone starts talking about a great guru, I remember all those

teachers who used to swear about mothers and sisters. They used to fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them.

One day the headmaster, Kaliram, called me to his room and asked: “Abey, what is your name?” “Omprakash,” I answered slowly and fearfully. Children used to feel scared just encountering the headmaster. The entire school was terrified of him.

“Chuhre ka?” the headmaster threw his second question at me.

“Ji.”

“All right. See that teak tree there? Go. Climb that tree. Break some twigs and make a broom. And sweep the whole school clean as a mirror. It is, after all, your family occupation.

“Go—get to it.”

Obedying the headmaster’s orders, I cleaned all the rooms and the verandas. Just as I was about to finish, he came to me and said, “After you have swept the rooms, go and sweep the playground.” The playground was much larger than my small physique could handle, and in cleaning it my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. I had dust inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day. I had never done so much work, being the pampered one among my brothers.

The second day, as soon as I reached school, the headmaster again put me to sweeping the school. I swept the whole day. I was consoling myself that I would go back to class the next day.

The third day I went to the class and sat down quietly. After a few minutes the headmaster’s loud thundering was heard: “Abey, Chuhre ke, motherfucker, where are you hiding your mother?”

I began to shake uncontrollably. A Tyagi boy shouted, “Master Sahib, there he is, sitting in the corner.”

The headmaster pounced on my neck. The pressure of his fingers was increasing. As a wolf grabs a lamb by the neck, he dragged me out of the class and threw me on the ground. He screamed: “Go sweep the whole playground—otherwise I will shove chilis up your ass and throw you out of the school.”

Frightened, I picked up the three-day-old broom. Just like me, it was shedding its dried up leaves. All that remained were the thin sticks. Tears were falling from my eyes. I started to sweep the compound while my tears fell. From the doors and windows of the schoolrooms, the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle. Each pore of my body was submerged in an abyss of anguish.

Just then my father passed by the school. He stopped abruptly when he saw me sweeping the school compound. He called me: “Munshiji, what are you doing?” Munshiji was the pet name my father had given me. When I saw him, I burst out sobbing. He entered the school compound and came toward me. Seeing me crying, he asked, “Munshiji, why are you crying? Tell me, what has happened?”

I was hiccuping by now. In between my hiccups I told the whole story to my father: that the teachers had been making me sweep for the last three days, that they did not let me enter the classroom at all.

Pitaji snatched the broom from my hand and threw it away. His eyes were blazing. Pitaji, who was always taut as a bowstring in front of others, was so angry that his dense moustache was fluttering. He began to scream, “Who is that teacher, that progeny of Dronacharya, who

forces my son to sweep?”

Pitaji’s voice had echoed through the whole school. All the teachers, along with the headmaster, came out. Kaliram, the headmaster, threatened my father and called him names. But his threats had no effect on Pitaji. I have never forgotten the courage and the fortitude with which my father confronted the headmaster that day. Pitaji had all sorts of weaknesses, but the decisive turn that he gave my future that day has had a great influence on my personality.

The headmaster had roared, “Take him away from here. The Chuhra wants him educated. Go, go—otherwise I will have your bones broken.”

Pitaji took my hand and started walking toward our home. As he walked away, he said, loud enough for the headmaster to hear, “You are a teacher. So I am leaving now. But remember this much, Master: This Chuhre ka will study right here, in this school. And not just him, there will be more coming after him.”

Pitaji had faith that the Tyagis of the village would chastise Master Kaliram for his behavior. But what happened was the exact opposite. On whatever door we knocked, the answer was, “What is the point of sending him to school?”

Or, “When has a crow become a swan?”

Or, “You illiterate boorish people, what do you know? Knowledge is not gained like this.”

“Hey, if he asked a Chuhra’s progeny to sweep, what is the big deal in that?”

Or, “He only got him to sweep; did not ask for his thumb in the gurudakshina like Dronacharya.”

And so forth.

Pitaji came back, tired and dejected. He sat up all night without food or drink. God knows how deep an anguish Pitaji went through. As soon as the morning broke, he took me along and went to the house of the pradhan, or village chief, Sagwa Singh Tyagi.

As soon as the pradhan saw Pitaji, he said, “Abey, Chotan? . . . What is the matter? You have come so early in the morning.”

“Chowdhuri Sahib, you say that the government has opened the doors of the schools for the children of Chuhras and Chamars. And that headmaster makes this child of mine to come out of the class and sweep all day instead of teaching him. If he has to sweep the school all day, then you tell me: When is he going to study?”

Pitaji was supplicating the pradhan. He had tears in his eyes. I was standing near him and looking at him.

The pradhan called me near him and asked, “Which class are you in?” “Ji, the fourth.” “You are in my Mahendra’s class?”

“Ji.”

Pradhanji said to Pitaji, “Don’t worry. Send him to school tomorrow.”

The next day I went to school with fear stalking my heart. I sat in the class in trepidation. Every second I worried that the headmaster was coming . . . Now he comes . . . At the slightest sound my heart pounded. After a few days things calmed down. But my heart trembled the moment I saw Headmaster Kaliram. It seemed as though it wasn’t a teacher who was coming toward me but a snorting wild boar with his snout up in the air.

(*Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki)

Q. a) In what ways does this account show that ‘the mentality of ordinary people had not changed much’? (4 marks)

Q. b) Joothan 'transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance.' Discuss. (3 marks)

Q. c) How do the school teachers fall short of the ideal image of the guru. (3 marks)