



An Analysis of Mohan Mukht's Poetry Collection "*Himalaya Dalit Hai*"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the Dalit assertion from the hill regions of Uttarakhand through the poetry collection of Mohan Mukht titled "*Himalaya Dalit Hai*" (Himalayas are Dalit). It is the first Dalit deliberations from the hills (Bharti, 2022). The paper argues that the poetry collection challenges the political, cultural, gender, and social structure of Uttarakhand. It has poems on various themes, such as the caste system, the idea of purity and pollution, caste discrimination, gender discrimination, folk culture, and women's issues. The poetry collection also highlights Uttarakhand's current political and social issues, such as land law, migration, and development. The paper is a thematic analysis of selected poems around the problems of identity, caste and gender oppression, and caste ideology. The poet also deals with common myths, metaphors, and religious beliefs. "*Himalaya Dalit Hai*" is a resistance to the Brahmanical hegemony. The title reveals that the poet looks at the Himalayas from a completely new lens. The paper tries to understand the perspective, where he challenges the religious narrative imposed on the Himalayas. The paper analyses how the poet breaks those myths and beliefs. The paper also emphasizes the need to translate such regional poems and works, which are necessary to understand the society and politics of regions, which are sometimes ignored and not talked about.

Keywords: Dalit, Poetry, Himalayas, Uttarakhand, caste ideology, Mohan Mukht

Introduction

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“*Himalaya Dalit Hai*” (Himalayas are Dalit) is the first Hindi poetry collection of Dalit poet Mohan Mukt. It consists of 97 poems. He belongs to the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand state. His poems expose the operation of the caste system in Uttarakhand. He has composed poems on other issues such as land law, feudalism, hills, labour, migration, folk culture, his hometown, and his mother. He also criticizes Hindi poets and their poetry as their poetry reeks of the language of hierarchy and hegemonic culture.

This paper is a thematic analysis of poems. The paper analyses few of his poems like “*himalaya dalit hai*” (Himalayas are Dalit), “*merapahad?*” (My Mountain), “*bhoo kanoon*” (Land Law), “*samant tum fir aa gye!*” (Feudals, you have come again!), “*vohbacche*” (Those Children), “ये बच्चे” (these children), and “*aslihissedaar*” (Real Shareholder).

These poems are important for understanding how does caste system operates in Uttarakhand. How hills are perceived in the literature and common people? What are the major issues in the hills? What is the caste reality? How does Dalits and women experiences caste and gender discrimination?

The poetry collection is very much different in the sense that it brings a new articulation where mountains and hills are seen as Dalit. Mohan Mukt has included Himalayas in the definition of Dalit as given by Dalit panthers. Dalit panthers coined the term Dalit which means oppressed people. It included women, farmers, labourers, lower castes, lower classes, tribals, everyone under the term Dalits. Mohan Mukt through his poem asserts that Himalayas as a geographical region is oppressed. The politicians and capitalists exploit it.

Himalayas are oppressed

Among the tallest, they say
I say, conquered
Countless rivers flow through them, they say
Countless rivers live in them, they say
They are frozen, I say
They are stalled, I say
Said to be the newest
I find them old
At least older than civilisation
Said to be expanding
Quite slowly, I feel

Great civilisations flourish on their waters, they say
I add that I concur
Must be saved, they say
Stay away, I state
Said to be an abode of gods, sacred
Dalit, I say
Shuddering with rage, they ask how could that be?
I answer —
If people could be Dalits, why not mountains?

Himalayas are Dalit is the English translation of Mohan Mukht's poem "*Himalay dalit hai*" by Bharatbhooshan Tiwari (Tiwari, 2024). Amulya B, the editor of The Bombay Literary Magazine writes in his editor's note that Mohan Mukht "subverts the idea of the loftiness of the Himalayan mountain range, considered sacred in Indian lore, and reveals the absurdity of considering any human being as inferior"(Tiwari, 2024).

The Himalayas are considered as godly figures. They are great, kings, and protectors of empires from enemies in our stories and religious mythologies. They have an abnormal superiority over human beings. It is absurd and strange. He argues that no geographical structure can be higher or superior to humans. The poet highlights that this is the result of a particular Brahmanical culture where few human beings are ranked in a hierarchy. He is strongly against the language of ranking which is prevalent in our religion, culture, poetry, and practices etc. He argues that we have even ranked nature and geographical structures.

At the same time, he doesn't consider human beings as superior to nature. Rather he speaks against the human attitude of conquering and acquisition. He speaks against the exploitation of nature. He argues that today the Himalayas have been reduced to a state similar to that of Dalits. The term Dalit means oppressed or broken people. Initially, it was used to address the untouchables or scheduled castes. But the term was extended to women, farmers, workers, lower class, *Adivasis*, and broadly people who were oppressed by the structures of inequality and the state by the Dalit Panthers (Remembering The Dalit Panthers, 2024). Dalit Panthers was a movement prominent in the late 1970s in Maharashtra.

Mohan Mukht considers the Himalayas as oppressed and therefore terms it as Dalit. He highlights that the Himalayas are exploited due to developmental activities and religious tourism. Development policies such as dams, roads, and tunnels harm the mountains. The

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mountain ranges are affected due to climate change and global warming. The excess human interference has polluted the mountain ranges. The poet has thus added the Himalayas to the definition of Dalit.

He rejects the godliness of the Himalayas. Instead, he asserts that the Himalayas are “untouchable”. They should not be touched. People should stay away from them. In this way, he is exposing the Brahmanical narrative which on one hand worships Himalayas as god, calls Uttarakhand as *Dev Bhoomi (land of gods)* but on the other hand, continues to exploit and disturb the ecology of Himalayan regions. There is a lack of political will to save forests, rivers, or mountain ranges.

“जो भी कहता है ‘मेरा पहाड़’
वो प्यार नहीं करता
वो जाता है दावा
जीती गई
लूटी गई
छीनी गई
कब्जाई गई
और बांटी गई
जमीनों पर
जागीरों पर
बर्फ जंगल पानी और बुगयाल
किसी के हो कैसे सकते है भला”(Mukt, 2022, pp. 64-65)

whoever says “my mountain”
he doesn't love
he claims
the lands
the estates
was won
was looted
snatched away
captured
and distributed
snow forest water and meadows
How can it belong to someone?

In the above excerpt from the poem “*Mera Pahad?*” (*My Mountain*) Mohan Mukht highlights that mountains are just seen as something to be conquered and owned (Mukt, 2022, pp. 63-65). He writes that the many rulers, kings ruled Uttarakhand such as *khas, Katyuri, Aryans, Shankaracharyas, chands, gorkhas*, and Britishers. The Brahmins came from Maharashtra such as *dabrals, sharmas, pathaks*. These rulers and Brahmins never loved mountains but only claimed ownership over them. They “conquered, looted, snatched lands, mountains, forests, and meadows” (Mukt, 2022, pp. 63-65). But according to Mukht, these mountains can never be claimed and owned. Our nature never belongs to any individual.

“सारे कवि जो मुग्ध हैं पहाड़ों के सौन्दर्य पर
जो पहाड़ों को ऊंचाई और मजबूती का रूपक बताते हैं
वो बेईमान हैं
वो शिकार में मारे गए बाग की लाश पर
उसकी ताकत का बखान कर
दरअसल गा रहे हैं हत्यारे की प्रशस्ति” (Mukt, 2022, पृ. 65)

All the poets who are fascinated by the beauty of the mountains
Who use mountains as a metaphor for height and strength
they are dishonest
On the dead body of tiger who is killed in hunting
Those who proclaim his strength
Actually, sings the praise of the murderer

He further writes that poets and writers talk about the beauty of mountains. They equate mountain with strength, stature, and highness. Mohan Mukht makes an interesting comparison here. He says Himalayas are like a tiger and invaders are hunters. And after hunting the tiger (Himalayas), the hunters (invaders) praise and sing about the strength of the tiger. And by doing that they are actually praising themselves. Thus, those who talk about the beauty and strength of the mountains, in reality they praise themselves who have conquered the mountains (Mukt, 2022, p. 65).

Caste violence in Uttarakhand

One of the major themes in the poetry collection is the caste system, the supremacy of Brahmins, and the ideology of purity and pollution. The caste system divides members of a society into various castes ranked in a hierarchy. Their position in the caste system determines

their social, economic, political, and cultural domination. The Brahmins are at the top of the caste hierarchy. Shudras and Dalits are at the lowest rank. The Brahmins and upper castes accumulated wealth, land, and other important resources of the society. They also held religious authority. They shaped common sense, beliefs, values, thought processes, lifestyle, food culture, etc.

He writes about how caste operates in a village of Uttarakhand. There is a clear and strict residential segregation based on caste. Dalits are not allowed to enter the upper caste villages. Uttarakhand has a history of violence against Dalits. The villages in Uttarakhand are highly segregated. The caste violence in Uttarakhand has increased over time (Das, 2022). The Dalit grooms are killed for taking out wedding procession on horse or from the village of upper castes, for growing moustache, for eating food in front of the upper castes (Kushal Choudhary, 2022)(PTI, 2024)(Das, 2022).

“गाँव में कोई चीज़ नहीं होती अकेली
वहाँ हमेशा दो होते हैं
दो रास्ते
दो नौले
दो थान
दो पुजारी
दो देवता”(Mukt, 2022, पृ. 72)

“Nothing is alone in a village
there are always two
two streets
two water bodies
two places
two priests
two gods”

In the above excerpt from the poem “*Gaon mein*” (In Village) Mohan Mukt highlights the unequal access to water resources. There is a clear prohibition of entry of Dalits into various public places such as temple, streets, wells etc. In Uttarakhand, water resources are called “*naule*” (नौले). The upper castes do not allow lower castes to use their water resources. There are instances of caste violence by upper castes where lower castes were banned from using

many local resources such as water, forest and land(Das, Uttarakhand SC body to seek seers' help to fight caste discrimination, 2024)

Caste discrimination in schools

“वो अपने
पूर्वजों की विरासत को
परिवारों के गर्व को
खून की अपनी शुद्धता को
खराब नहीं कर सकते
उन पर बड़ी जिम्मेदारी है
सरकारी स्कूल में मिड मील खाने वाले बच्चे
भविष्य हैं देश का..
वो दूषित कैसे हो सकते हैं..”(Mukt, 2022, p. 248)
"They cannot harm the legacy of their ancestors
or the pride of our family,
or the purity of their blood,
but those who eat mid-day meals in government schools have a huge responsibility,
they are the country's future..
how can they be corrupted"

In the above excerpt from the poem, “*vohbacche*”(Those Children), the poet writes about how even school-going kids practice caste discrimination by rejecting the food prepared by *bhojanmata* (cook) in the school (Mukt, 2022, pp. 247-252). Therefore, we also see Dalit *bhojanmatas* are not recruited. They are fired from the job after students reject food cooked by them. Brahmins cooks are hired in place of them (Bhojanmata’s Struggle for Dignity, 2022)(Rajput, 2021). It violates Dalit women’s right to equal access to the opportunity in the employment. Poet writes that “the upper castes students cannot be polluted”. It is their responsibility that “they cannot pollute their ancestor’s legacy, pride of their family, purity of their blood”(Mukt, 2022, p. 248). This shows that the Brahmanical ideology of purity and pollution is also stringent among children. It is very important for the continuation of the caste system that children do not mingle with lower castes in modern educational institutions. “The caste hierarchy is strictly maintained by children who otherwise are considered to be ethically innocent of caste consciousness”(Bhojanmata’s Struggle for Dignity, 2022).

Land law

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The poem “*BhooKanoon*”(Land Law) provides a critical lens to look at the discussion of land law in Uttarakhand. People, politicians, and activists are talking about the land law in social media and newsrooms(Mukt, 2022, pp. 83-86). There is a demand for a strict land law in Uttarakhand. It restricts the selling of land to “outsiders” who are not the domicile of Uttarakhand.

“कौन बाहरी कौन प्रवासी
कौन यहाँ का मूल निवासी”(Mukt, 2022, p. 83)

“Who is an outsider and who is a migrant?
who is native here?”

Mukt looks at the issue of Land Law from the vantage point of subalterns. He raises the question of “*moolnivasi*”(the original habitant of a place). He asks difficult questions about the identity of those who are called “insiders” and “outsiders.”He argues that those who are now fighting for the land law to restrict entry of “outsiders” are themselves immigrants.

“कौन थे पहला कब्जाधारी
किसकी मारी हिस्सेदारी”(Mukt, 2022, p. 83)

“Who was the first occupier
whose share was snatched?”

Through this poem, he asks important questions: Who was the first occupier? Whose share/land was snatched? Who forcefully occupied these lands? He points out that *khas*, *Brahmins*, religious authority, and kings, Aryans came and settled here. The original inhabitants of Uttarakhand were *shilpkars*, *lohars*, *munda*, *kol*, and Dalits. He points out that now these immigrants claim to be the owners of these mountains (Mukt, 2022, p. 84). According to Mohan Mukt, the original inhabitants of Uttarakhand are the real “insiders”. They were dominated by “upper castes/*brahmin*” immigrants and labelled “lower castes” by them. They were looted and pushed into the lowest strata of the society.

“पहले उनको करो बेदखल
ऊंच नीच को कर दो समतल
बिसरा देंगे पिछला किस्सा
सबको दे दो सबका हिस्सा” (Mukt, 2022, p. 85)

“evict them first
level the high and the low

Will forget the past story
give everyone a share”
“जिसका पहाड़
उसी का नून
जो भेड़ चराये
उसी का ऊन
मुंडा कोलों का जो खून
उसके लिए हो भू कानून
उसके लिए जो भू कानून
सबके लिए वो भू कानून ” (Mukt, 2022, pp. 85-86)

“Who owns mountain
he owns the salt
one who grazes sheep
own its wool
the blood of *mundas-kols*
there should be land law for those
whatever is the land law for them
should be a land law for everyone”

He argues that the mountain belongs to the original inhabitants of Uttarakhand. According to him, a land law should be based on redistribution, equality, and eradication of caste hierarchy (Mukt, 2022, p. 85). In another poem “*aslihissedar*” (real shareholders) poet argues that Dalits and Tribals are the real shareholders of the land.

“जिनकी भागीदारी कहलाती आरक्षण
इस जमीन के असली हिस्सेदार रहे हैं”(Mukt, 2022, p. 261)

“whose participation is called reservation
have been the rightful sharers of this land”

Hypocrisy of politicians

In the poem “*Samant tum fir aa gye*”(Feudals, you have come again!), Mukt comments on those political leaders who come to eat, sleep, and stay at the house of a Dalit family before the elections, thus exposing the hypocrisy of Indian politicians (Mukt, 2022, pp. 89-94). He says there is a vast difference between staying for one night and your entire life. He says that one cannot learn about the daily struggles of oppressed classes/castes such as sweepers, farmers,

sanitation workers, manual scavengers, *Haliya* (who plough the land for farming), *lohars* (blacksmith), and *tamtas* (blacksmith community) in one night. He also writes that the way feudal lords come to water sources of lower castes for water without any hesitation; can they call lower castes to their water sources? Can these politicians call oppressed castes to their houses? He writes that politicians come to their houses because they are afraid of revolution against oppression and the caste system. Thus, he exposes the caste feudal mentality of the politicians.

Resistance

In the poem, “ये बच्चे” (these children) poet talks about the incident in Uttarakhand where Dalit children boycotted food cooked by the upper caste *Bhojan Mata*. This was in response to the earlier incident where upper castes students boycotted food cooked by Dalit women *Bhojan Mata* (Mukt, 2022, pp. 253-258) (*Bhojanmata’s Struggle for Dignity*, 2022). He argues that some people might call it as reverse casteism but the act is bold and surprises them. It challenges the caste system. The Dalit children reclaim their foundational right to get upset, and revolt with the society (Mukt, 2022, pp. 254-255).

बच्चे रूठ जाने का अपना हक क्लेम कर रहे हैं
ये बच्चे विद्रोह कर रहे हैं ये बच्चे प्रेम कर रहे हैं

Children reclaim their right to get upset

They revolt they love (Mukt, 2022, pp. 254-255).

And poet argues that this act of school children is an act to unite the society and spread love because they are choosing to raise their voice against casteism and caste discrimination.

Conclusion

The paper argues that the poetry collection of Mohan Mukt exposes the Indian society where the humans are considered inferior to mountains and hills. Few humans are not treated respectfully, denied dignity and humiliated and killed. But the hills and mountains are considered majestic and godly. They are seen as pure and are worshipped.

The hill regions are seen as peaceful, and the people residing as kind. Mohan Mukt brings out the harsh realities of hill regions where the caste system is stringent and actively followed. In Uttarakhand, human relationship with environment and ecology is greatly shaped and influenced by the caste hierarchy. Dalits still struggle for equal access to local resources such

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as land, water, forests etc. They are killed, boycotted and banned from using such resources by upper castes. The poet brings to our attention the ignored questions of caste and identity in the major political, social and environmental issues.

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