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## *Chappar* by Jai Prakash Kardam: A Comprehensive Study

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### Abstract

The paper intends to deal with the plight of Dalits and their miserable condition in Jai Prakash Kardam's Hindi novel *Chappar* first published in 1994. The book highlights the social disparity and discrimination faced by Dalits, whether rural or urban. The still existing feudalism in Indian villages compels Dalits to abide by social norms framed in the interest of the landlords, Brahmins or the dominants. The entrenched caste system deprives Dalits to access educational institutes. They are denied even to touch scriptures as they have been reserved for upper castes only. The novel also exposes the cruel treatment of powerful, bureaucrats, policemen and politicians toward Dalits. The Ambedkarite ideology ignites the radical minds of Dalit youths in setting out a movement of liberation and emancipation which is the base of the book. 'Dalit women', the phrase narrates endless horrible incidents in the lives of Dalit women as they are raped, gang-raped, harassed, humiliated, abandoned or even forced to commit suicide or live a life of curse in their own land. The author has raised all these serious issues confronted by Dalits in a small village setting along with various other social problems in urban areas. The present paper attempts to explore the horrible narratives,

incidents and challenges through the extensive reading of the characters and their actions. How they achieve their target of egalitarian society? Who and what are the forces behind the struggle against the dominants besides the community? Do the Dalit women accept their fate of curse passively or dare to challenge the self-proclaimed authorities?

Keywords: Dalits, Oppression, Subjugation, Discrimination, Injustice, Inequality, Egalitarian

The story of the novel is about Dalits and their plight. It revolves around Chandan, the protagonist of the story. He is a Dalit young boy whose parents, despite their miserable condition, send him to city to pursue higher studies. Since Chandan is the first young boy from the village Matapur, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, who has gotten the opportunity, it annoys the upper castes or the dominants. Kana Pandit, a Brahmin, is the first person to object Sukha, Chandan's father, for his education. He tells him that by sending Chandan to study in the city he has made a blunder. He warns him that it would invite misfortune for the village as the scriptures are not for Dalits. They should not even dare to touch it; and by doing so Sukha has brought in a bad name for everyone. Thakur Harnam Singh, a landlord, also joins the Pandit to convince Sukha to call his son back to the village immediately

“I have heard Sukha, your son has gone to city for studies!”

“You have brought disaster, even more than disaster!” (p. 32) (trans.)

“You need to do penance, Sukha. Call your son immediately from the city.” (p.32) (trans.)

They try to make him believe that there is much work for Chandan in the village. However, understanding their trap of words, Sukha remains calm. He controls his nerves and tells that Chandan would not agree for this; so, he is helpless.

Consequently, the dominants shun all the possible activities of Sukha within the village. In the beginning, Sukha and his wife Ramiya, efficiently lead their lives; but later it becomes impossible for them to stay there any longer. Their house and land come under the

possession of the ruthless people Seth Durga Das and Thakur Harnam Singh respectively. The mess shatters and compels them to abandon the place. They feel uprooted and loss of identity. The word 'chappar' stands for existence and identity.

On the other hand, in the city, Chandan faces difficulty in finding a place to live in his capacity. Hariya, a drunkard, the owner of a shanty, takes him as a tenant; but seldom accepts rent from him. He would treat him as his child, Chandan also reverts the same kind of affection to him. Although he is destitute, yet he helps Chandan meet his financial problems.

Chandan is a revolutionary Dalit youth who thinks differently. Simultaneous to his studies, he opens a school in the slum for the needy, poor and marginalised children. According to him, ignorance is the leading cause of the pain and suffering of Dalits; which can be eradicated only through education. He convinces the people to make available education to their children so that they could live a good and dignified life.

"...if you are determined to educate your children, there is not any reasons not to free them from the life of hell."(p.42) (trans.)

One day, a woman, Kamla, in her tatters comes in the school to enrol her son, Khiladi. Chandan asks his father's name for the school record.

"What is Khiladi's father's name?"

She answers, "Kamla"

"I am sorry, asked father's name not mother's" (p.43) (trans.)

Then her eyes filled with tears. She feels uncomfortable with the queries and leaves immediately without uttering a word. Chandan traces her whereabouts. He comes to know of her horrible past, which makes him agitated. She confides in him that she became the victim of a gang-rape at a very young age.

“One day I had gone to fetch water from the tap. The owner along with others were drinking.....the owner called me to get a glass of water for them....as I went inside a man shut the door....they took turn on my flesh and fulfilled their lust.” (p.48,49) (trans.)

Chandan often finds Hariya in a gloomy mood and lost; so, once he asks him the reason. Hariya reveals his past about his gang-raped and separated daughter years ago. Chandan links both narrations and comes up with the conclusion that Kamla might be his daughter. Subsequently, Hariya approves it. He impatiently brings her back to home. Kamla is a dauntless and resolute woman. Instead of regretting or cursing her past, she involves herself in Chandan's movement and aids him in all possible ways.

On the other hand, Chandan's parents go through utmost poverty, and they also pine to see him. Rajni, the daughter of Thakur Harnam Singh, takes care of them. She is Chandan's childhood friend and knows him very well. She always accolades his courageous and indomitable nature. She often drops in to see them and fulfil their needs. She makes them aware of Chandan's national-level movement for the upliftment of Dalits. Sukha and Ramiya also support Chandan and his mission. They do not want to lay any obstacle in his sole purpose. They understand Chandan's position in society and also confirm his priorities.

Rajni actively participates in Chandan's operation of educating people about constitutional rights and makes them conscious against exploitation. She often argues with her father in defence of Chandan, Dalits and about their pathetic condition. She asks him what is wrong with him if Dalits get educated. He retaliates in disgust that if they were getting educated; very soon they would lose their hegemony on them. He warns her of fragmentation of ancient old social hierarchy, which he perceives as a disaster to Hindu society.

“...but if all chuhre, chamar become educated following Chandan's footprints, all of them would find jobs in cities. Then who will work for us in our fields and houses?”

(p.65)(trans.)

Once she eavesdrops District Collector, Police Commissioner, Seth Durga Das, Kana Pandit and her father, Thakur Harnam Singh conspiring to crush Chandan, egalitarian and Dalits' campaign. The Police Commissioner retorts:

“They can't stand against the local administration, showing mere a sign of agitation.

Very soon they will learn lesson and back out.”(p.81) (trans.)

She retaliates and defends the campaign against injustice. She controverts the Kana Pandit justifying the appropriateness of the agitation.

“...for the self-betterment to sacrifice others how could it be justified? ...are Brahmin and

Bhangi not have like bodies?” (p.83) (trans.)

Chandan could not go to see his parents for long due to his dedication towards Dalit society. He remains engrossed with his struggle, movement and social work. His campaign disseminates firmly in all direction. He gets co-operation and support from nationwide. Now, he is a champion in the field and gets acknowledgement as a pioneer. He anticipates himself closer to his dream-world of equality, brotherhood and fraternity. He vehemently sees the people breaking the shackles of caste, oppression, subjugation. They deny working without wages for the dominants, which results in favourably.

People like Seth Durga Das, Kana Pandit and Thakur Harnam Singh find it hard to comply with their work without the support of a lower section of society. They begin to quit their traditional occupation and jobs, which necessitates them to move toward cities. Seth Durga Das abandons Sukha's house with no claims, Rajni repays revenue of his land and sets it free. Thakur Harnam Singh realises his faults; guilt-stricken he tries to commit suicide by drowning in the well, but Sukha saves him. Finally, he feels obliged to them and donates his money and property to the poor and becomes part of them.

“He gives away all his property and fields to the poor of the village except a little part of the land for himself to earn his livelihood” (p.112) (trans.)

Kamla makes Chandan realise that Rajni's unconditional affection is her love for him. She sacrifices herself in an attempt of saving Chandan's life. Chandan's parents return to their village with pride and dignity. They find it an ideal village. Chandan and Rajni glance each other with love.

The novel contains several themes at different levels. Mainly it deals with casteism in Hindu society. Since it is a part of Dalit literature, it raises the issues of Dalits to confront in their daily lives, which they have internalised through ages. Though they are sufferers, they have accepted it as their fate. For them, being born in a Dalit family means carrying forward the ancestral legacy of humiliation. It exposes the harsh reality – which is an ultimate goal of the Dalit literature- of the Hindu society and its customs by depicting the ages-old social hierarchy in which the untouchables are placed at the lowest level. It is a scathing critique of the oppressive caste system which unfolds the atrocities, oppression and suppression of Dalit voices for their rights meted out to them by the upper castes. Chandan, the protagonist of the novel, belongs to a lower caste family whose parents are victims of the same social arrangement. They are under debt to the landlords of the village. Chandan is their only child who studies in a city college. The landlord, Thakur Harnam Singh and a Brahmin, Kana Pandit who has lost his one eye due to chickenpox, dissuade Chandan's father Sukha to withdraw him from the college and make him work for them. According to them, he has brought stigma on the villagers by educating him as education is not meant for Dalits. In this way, he has been defiling their sacred books which would bring misfortune upon them. They did not want him to be educated; otherwise, it would create trouble in the future for them. Sukha remains reluctant to obey them, which makes them furious. They threatened him to face dire consequences of being disobedient. Subsequently, Sukha and his wife Ramiya are

excommunicated. Their land and the Chappar (their hut) are confiscated on the pretext of non-payment of revenue. Ultimately, they are forced to leave the village and stay as outcasts on the periphery of the village. They have lost their identity as well as contact with the village people. They feel uprooted from their land.

The second major theme is education, which opens the gate of ignorance leads towards enlightenment. It is said that education is the key to success. Chandan uses this tool against caste system and feudal system for the emancipation of his people. He creates awareness among them that only through education, they would enable themselves to break the shackles of bondage and poverty. They would attain a collective voice to eradicate injustice, discrimination and inequality from the prevailed setting of the society. Moreover, they would be able to live a life of dignity and self-respect. The doors of education would be accessible for their future generation. Being a radical thinker Chandan emanates Ambedkar ideology with great fervour anticipating an equal, just and free of prejudices society. He opens a school for poor and downtrodden and organises movements at different places. The movements bring hope and solidarity to create a dream society for Dalits.

Another theme is the condition of Dalit women and their sufferings. The two words 'Dalit' and 'women' are enough to bring to light their vulnerable existence. They are often trapped in patriarchal societies which ensures severe discrimination against them. They become the target of violence, sexual violence, mental agony and injustice. They face double torture at the hand of their male partners as well as the perpetrators of the dominant caste. Even police often neglect or deny the Dalit women of their rights to seek legal and judicial aid.

Here the author exposes the cruel side of the dominant castes' atrocities on Dalits and their women through the character Kamla. Her father Hariya with others would work in a brickkiln for their livelihood. Kamla is gang-raped at the age of sixteen by the dominant

people when she goes to fetch water from a tube well in the premises. When the matter comes to Hariya's knowledge, he dares them. He resists and raises voice against the culprits, which causes him much loss. He is beaten and thrashed until he is unconscious. Later he goes to the police stations where he is poorly treated. The police officer has already been bribed by the perpetrators. There he has been beaten again and forced to leave at once. The incident forces Kamla to leave the place, and she comes to Sant Nagar after struggling with her fate. Later she gives birth to her son, Khiladi. She confesses to Chandan that she wanted to get rid of the unwanted child who would remind her past. However, being a mother, she could not abandon him. At such a tender age, she struggles with society. She is an optimist. She does not kneel down in front of the cruelty of society. She wants her son to bring her justice. She even emerges out as a strong personality and helps Chandan in his movement of emancipation. She saves Chandan from an attack taking upon herself and sacrifices her life.

The novel highlights some cultural, social and economic issues- rain scarcity, drought, flood, epidemic, superstition and alcoholism- which affect the lives of the poor segment of the society drastically. Chandan finds people of J J Colony at Sant Nagar are superstitious. Due to monsoon delay there is rain scarcity, which causes concern among them. They collect fund to perform yajna to please the god Indra who holds the position of 'god of rain' in the Hindu mythology. Chandan observes their orthodox mindset. He logically removes the dirt of superstition from their brains and gives them a clear vision. He persuades them to utilise the fund for their own welfare.

"If we suppose God is there, why he is so cruel and unjust... better is utilise this amount for the upliftment" (p.19) (trans.)

After a long await rain comes which brings relief to them. However, incessant rain causes a flood. People bear a loss of their property as well as cattle. Flood causes break out of the epidemic. Chandan also observes that these people are alcoholic; so, they are abusive and

violent. They are unorganised. Chandan is a progressive and revolutionary young man. He becomes a torch-bearer and guides them towards righteousness.

Every character in the novel has a unique, symbolic and crucial role in the development of the story. Chandan is the protagonist of the novel. He belongs to a Dalit family of Matapur village, in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. He is a radical thinker, egalitarian and an altruist. He finds the root cause for the pathetic condition of Dalits in India. He blames the upper castes for conditioning the minds of the lower castes. According to him, the Dalits are given the treatment in such a way that they find no faults in humiliation, harassment and mistreatment by the upper castes. He observes that it is impossible for them to free themselves from the clutches of the Sahukars, Zamindars, politicians and bureaucrats. According to him, it is difficult to break the vicious cycle of poverty, but he is optimistic. He has a solution to this problem. He uses education as a tool against the ancient social order of the Hindu society. He starts a movement to educate the Dalits who are oppressed, dominated, suppressed and belong to the lower caste. He teaches them to abandon their habit of alcoholism and to respect each other. The sole mission of his life is to work for the upliftment of the downtrodden. He raises voices against the atrocities on the poor. He propagates Dr Ambedkar's ideology to achieve his target. At the end of the novel, he succeeds in transforming the heart of a prominent figure of the village Thakur Harnam Singh. Chandan also gives due respect to the women of the society. He understands well that contribution of women power is essential in the movement against the dominants. He knows that lower caste women become victims of the lust of the upper caste very easily. They cannot dare to raise their voices against anyone. No one is there who could provide them legal help in their fight against the powerful. Chandan values women empowerment and considers it a useful weapon in the battle between oppressed and oppressor.

Thakur Harnam Singh is an egoist and a dominant landlord. He is against the education and progress of Dalits of the villages. He does not tolerate a Dalit's son getting educated and having a better position in the village. He weaves a web against Chandan through his words to convince Sukha, Chandan's father, to call him back to the village from the city college and join them in their menial jobs. He assures him that there is much work for Chandan in the village. However, when he realises that Sukha was adamant about letting Chandan study, he threatens him. He, along with other upper castes, organises an open meeting in front of the villagers. In the meeting, Sukha is accused of not abiding by the village rules.

Consequently, he is denied all village privileges, even labour work. The order of the head of the village forces Sukha to leave his ancestral property and migrate to another land. Thakur Harnam Singh lays the foundation of corruption along with Politicians, bureaucrats, police and other powerful in position. His daughter Rajni, his only child, remains opposite to him. She remains a constant supporter of Chandan in his movement against feudalism and Dalits' exploitation. Thakur Harnam Singh intrigues along with others to crush the movement against them. At the closing of the novel, he acknowledges their defeat as his aids leave the village in search of employment. He accepts the faults in their part and feels guilty of the Dalits' such inhuman condition. He is a broken man now. He does not want to struggle any more with his own life. He tries to commit suicide, but Sukha saves him at the eleventh hour. Eventually, he is accepted by the Dalits and respected by them as their family member. He also assists them in their problems and gives away his property to them as a token of love.

Rajni is a prominent figure in the novel. She is the daughter of Thakur Harnam Singh who has created a whirlpool in lives of the outcasts or Dalits. She is courageous, bold and believes in egalitarianism. She, unlike her father, assists Chandan in the struggle against her own community to create equality in society. She is a sensitive person who empathises with

the poor, needy and subjugated people. She creates a conducive environment for Chandan in wedging fight for the rights of the oppressed. She becomes a strong pillar in the construction of an ideal society for everyone. She participates actively in social work with Chandan. She takes the responsibility of Chandan's parents and leaves no stone unturned in providing them comfort. She makes aware Sukha about Chandan's national campaign for the upliftment of the Dalits. She makes him understand the importance of Chandan for society. She argues with the District Collector in the presence of her father for the rights of the Dalits. She protests her father along with other dominants for their ideology and meanness. She agitates against the narrow-mindedness of her own people. Ultimately, she succeeds in her mission in transforming her father's perspective. The dream which Chandan had seen in transforming the orthodox society into an egalitarian becomes true.

Sukha is a compassionate and soft-hearted man. He is also a man of self-respect and dignity. He starts earning his livelihood on his own land after the dominants pronounced punishment, in defiance of them. He had a buffalo, which also supported him in hardship. Soon the buffalo died due to the spread of contagious animal disease. Since he was unable to pay land revenue, his land was confiscated by the landlord resulting him abandon his land. He builds a hut at the periphery of the village and somehow keeps his body and soul together. Being a considerate father, he is concerned about Chandan's future. Despite meagre income, he supports his son to accomplish his education. He bears sufferings and sorrows without complaining anyone in order to keep intact his urge to make Chandan a successful. His independent and broad outlook gives him strength in his struggle with poverty. He knows very well his social obligations, which makes him deny his fatherly claim to Chandan. Being a true patriot, he sacrifices his expectations from Chandan and gives him the freedom to lead the movement. He desires to see a change and envisions a better position for his fellow Dalits.

Hariya is a minor yet essential character in the development of the story. He is a drunkard; however, compassionate, gives Chandan place to live in his small hut. He becomes Chandan's guardian while he came in the city as a stranger. He takes care of him throughout his life after coming in contact with him. He even arranges money for Chandan's examination fee learning his inability and hopelessness in the unfamiliar surroundings. He reduces the intake of alcohol for the sake of saving so that Chandan could continue his study in the college. He inspires and encourages him in his mission of Dalit liberation through education. He remains ready to contribute his share at his beck and call. During the admission process for his school, Chandan learns the past of Kamla who later emerges out as Hariya's lost daughter. Hariya becomes a source of strength and courage for Chandan to lead his movement vigorously.

Kamla represents Dalit women who are exposed to danger at every step. At the age of sixteen, she is gang-raped at the workplace of her father. Hariya, her father in fits of rage blasts at the culprits; unfortunately, he is beaten up by them. He even goes police station to lodge a complaint against them but in vain. The corrupt policeman thrashes him and turns him back in despair. Kamla leaves her paternal home in distress and comes in Sant Nagar, J J Colony. Adversity makes her mother, the child whom she wanted to get rid of, but her conscious did not allow her to follow the path. Nevertheless, she does not surrender in front of her tribulation and turns up a strong woman. Unlike other victims, she neither wails nor seeks sympathy. She nurtures her wounds to take revenge from the vultures of the society, which spoils her charm for life as an ordinary woman. She associates herself with Chandan in his struggle for destitute and downtrodden. She saves his life in an event gathering and sacrifices herself.

Ramiya, the mother of Chandan, also holds a significant position in the story. She comforts Sukha, her husband, in the middle of commotion in their lives. She along with

Sukha goes through gruelling experiences, but never complains of their worse days. She seldom loses her hope of survival in harsh circumstances no matter how painful they were. She supports her husband in all his decisions and advises him logically whenever needed.

Kana Pandit - his real name is Shri Ram Sharma - is a shrewd, cunning, sly, devious and a deceptive character. He has lost his one eyesight to chickenpox in his childhood, that is why he has earned the name Kana Pandit. He has studied up to the third standard. He is a Brahmin, which is sufficient for him to attain a higher position in society. His ancestors form the priest background, so he is given due respect by the villagers. He does not possess any knowledge of astrology, and however, being from priests' lineage, people consider him a scholar in the field. He is the first character in the story who objects to Chandan's education. According to him, Dalits are not supposed to read holy scripture; doing so would cause bringing destruction for society. He provokes Thakur Harnam Singh against Sukha for letting his son pursue higher studies and intimidates him. He conspires to get a hold on the property of the marginalised charging high interest on the loan to them. Under Chandan's leadership, the campaign brought in a change in the attitude of the labour class, destitute and Dalits resulting loss of free labour which compels dominant class find new job opportunities. Finally, Kana Pandit also becomes the circumstantial victim of the wave of revolution and changes his occupation.

Thus, it can be concluded with the words that the novel is about Dalits and their struggle against the conventional norms of Hindu society. It can be said that it portrays a grim picture of contemporary Indian society. The division of the village symbolises a partition between two sections- rich and poor. It is evident from the opening paragraph of the novel where the narrator of the story delineates the setting of the village. Further reading makes the reader aware of the cruelty of the caste-based division, where Dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights. They are entirely dependent on the mercy of the few dominants. Sukha

and his family represent the oppressed class, and Kana Pandit, Seth Durga Das and Thakur Harnam Singh are archetypal of the oppressors. They are equipped with scriptures to justify their inhumane acts. Dalits are left with nothing but injustice and inequality to bemoan upon their existence. The novel also brings forth the role of corrupt bureaucrats in crushing and pushing back the marginalised in their crumpled holes. They remain in servitude of the powerful and assist them in venturing cruelty on the downtrodden. It comes to an end with the author's dream world or an egalitarian society where all are given equal rights. They are provided with equal treatment and equal opportunities in all spheres of life. Now there is no discrimination and prejudice based on caste, creed, race and economic resources.

The book integrates the fragments of Dalit lives and presents to the reader a collage to create their own perspective and understanding to it.

### Work Cited

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