

## THE CHANGING SOCIAL TOPOGRAPHY OF BANARAS IN KASHINATH SINGH'S REHAN PAR RAGGHU

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### ABSTRACT

*Close to his retirement, Raghunath believed he had lived a comfortable life, with a secure government job, well-educated children, some ancestral property in his village, and a respectable position among his peers and acquaintances. But the onset of liberalisation would change his world in ways beyond his recognition. Set in the Banaras of the 1990s, Kashinath Singh's novel Rehan Par Ragghu captures the changing familial and social spaces, particularly the impact of liberalisation on villages and small towns. This paper examines the changing social topography of Banaras through a close analysis of Singh's novel.*

**Keywords:** Liberalisation, Kinship, Villages, Banaras, Kashinath Singh

### 1. INTRODUCTION

India entered into the last decade of the twentieth century in a state of extreme turmoil. The economy was in shambles when the then Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, under the leadership of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, announced liberalisation to address the immediate fiscal and current account deficits. The changes had ramifications that extended far beyond the economy, including changes to the country's topography. The cities expanded rapidly, engulfing the village landscapes so emblematic of Indian identity. The cities themselves underwent drastic changes to meet the goals set by other 'world' or 'global' cities of a world economy. The period also witnessed significant social unrest over the Mandal Commission's recommendations, which advocated expanding caste-based reservations. The 1990s were thus also the era in which caste-based identities reformulated the way politics was envisioned, leading to the emergence of caste-based political parties. From the perspective of gender, when liberalisation was attributed to having empowered/disempowered women in significant ways, how much it affected their social status and individual identity remains a difficult question to answer. Close to his retirement, Raghunath believed he had lived a comfortable life, with a secure government job, well-educated children, some ancestral property in his village, and a respectable position among his peers and acquaintances. But the onset of liberalisation would change his world in ways beyond his recognition. Set in the Banaras of the 1990s, Kashinath Singh's novel *Rehan Par Ragghu* (2016) captures the changing familial and social spaces, particularly the impact of liberalisation on villages and small towns. This paper examines the changing social topography of Banaras through a close analysis of Singh's novel.

### 2. THE BREAKING DOWN OF THE FAMILY UNIT

At the beginning of the novel, Singh writes that if *Kashi ka Assi* (2002) was a reflection of his city, then *Rehan Par Ragghu* is an image of his home, and, maybe, that of the reader too. The family unit, thus, remains at the centre of the novel, and its breaking away is reflective of what is happening in the world outside. The family unit is a sacred space, and its breakdown signals the destruction of all that one holds dear, all that is valuable and beautiful. It indicates a break from the past because it strikes at the very core of traditional family structure. But the very idea of a joint family is an upper-caste narrative that has been questioned by critics (Oommen, cited by Sooryamoorthy, 2012). In fact, D' Cruz and Bharat (2001) point out that theoretical research in India on family suggests a transition from a study of family patterns to that of family dynamics as a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation. There are also those who have tried to link globalisation and technological determinism to a changing conception of family in India (Gliding, cited by Sooryamoorthy, 2012). The protagonist of *Rehan Par Ragghu* is a seventy-one-year-old retired college teacher, Raghunath, who has lived a 'successful' life by conventional standards. He has all that one can ask for: a comfortable government job, a respectful position among his peers and acquaintances, well-educated children with settled jobs (except for one), and some ancestral property in the village to ensure a safe future post-retirement. But the fate that he is so thankful for is not keen on sticking to this plan.

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A rude joke in the form of VRS is actually a tactic that affected many at this time, when companies and organisations were terminating employees in the name of managing a market crunch. Sudden notices, like the one Raghunath receives citing 'negligence of duty' and 'insubordination', were part of this technique that employers deployed country-wide. Decline in labour in the organised sector is a fact that many critics of liberalisation document. But there is more to it. Liberalisation offered alluring opportunities for many, introducing them to the world of the global economy, and globalisation opened up avenues to the forbidden realms of foreign locations. Raghunath's eldest son, Sanjay, cannot resist the temptation of a job in California in a software company, even if that means he has to marry his professor's daughter against his father's wishes. This well-calculated marriage is a 'contract' that passes off as 'love' in front of others, including his father (Singh, 2016, p. 20). Another shock that Raghunath needs to bear at this point is his daughter's refusal to marry someone who asks for a dowry, and her adamant decision to marry a man of her own choosing, a lower-caste acquaintance, Sudesh Bharti, the SDM of Mirzapur. The crudeness of the new world the country is entering is felt by Raghunath in his younger son's behaviour, who is not only ill-mannered and inefficient but also consumed by the desire for material possessions like a motorbike, a phone, etc. And thus, when the novel begins, one already knows that, part by part, this world of Raghunath is falling apart, and what will follow will be the story of a man left alone, struggling to make sense of the scattered pieces of his shattered world. However, apart from the family, there are other spaces from which one can derive strength and support. The community structure of a village is one such system. But, as the novel explicates, these are under threat too.

### 3. THE CHANGING STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF A VILLAGE

Dipankar Gupta (2005) and Arun Kumar Ghosh share a similar understanding of villages, highlighting the "urban pull factors" and "rural push factors" changing the face of rural landscape, along with the decreasing size of landholdings, which results in loss of caste domination on landless peasants (Ghosh, 2005, p. 1294). With the "abolition of landlordism", there are hardly any big landholdings left, and medium-sized owner cultivators have taken over agriculture, a consequence of which "the propertied class in rural India can no longer exercise economic domination over the landless peasants" (Gupta, 2005, p. 753). Rajesh Kochhar (2004) gets a step ahead and highlights the link between the so-called middle-class, the main beneficiary of globalisation, and the upper caste. Kochhar believes that Mandalisation would have led to "a new equilibrium state" if it were not for globalisation, which allowed the "upper-caste dominated middle classes" to "decouple (themselves) from mainstream India and to attach themselves to the west" or to have become "denationalised" in a way (2004, p. 20). Politicisation of caste reached new heights after Mandal Commission report, with the emergence of parties like Janata Dal (1988), Samajwadi Party (1992), Rashtriya Janata Dal (1997), Samta Party (1994) and Bahujan Samaj Party (1984); and leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and Mayawati (Sen, 2012, p. 367-368), eventually leading to valorisation of caste identities, instead of rejection. Satish Deshpande (2013) adds another dimension to the discussion by commenting upon the 'general category' itself, which had been "colonised by the upper castes" with negligible participation from OBCs, and the true nature of whose composition stands exposed after the Mandal Commission report (p. 38).

Singh's depiction of Pahadpur, Raghunath's village, follows more or less the above-discussed line of thought, showcasing its changing dynamics in terms of caste composition, importance of land, the lure of the urban market, and the migrating masses. After his VRS, Raghunath finds it hard to adjust to the village. It does not take him long to realize that he could not belong to it anymore, for the villages themselves weren't villages anymore, and so he couldn't be a villager either. His village, Pahadpur, was known for its orchards, *baswar* (bamboo plant area), and *pokhar* (water-body); for the sound of birds and bellowing of cows-buffaloes; the tinkling of bells around bulls' neck that would fill up *bastis*. But now all that has changed: trees have been cut down, *baswar* has been cleared, and *pokhar* has been divided into paddy-field sections (Singh, 2016, p. 61).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this paper the author is using her own translation of the Hindi novel.

And more importantly, after Ambedkar village, Pahadpur changed drastically. It now had electricity, cable lines, and newspapers. Some houses have TVs, fans, and phones as well. Only a few roof tile houses were left; the rest of them were cemented structures now. The ones that weren't cemented had bricks laid out in the front (Singh, 2016, p. 61).

But it is not the village's structure alone that has been altered. The most important dimension of the changing dynamics in the village is the assertion of lower castes, who are ready to stand against economic injustice, fight for social and personal dignity, confront rising caste politics, and deal with the conflict around the Mandal Commission. Raghunath was not liked by members of his own Thakuran community, for he was the only upper-caste teacher in his college who had welcomed the Mandal commission, and also because he favored the plowmen of Chamtol, asserting that their demands were justified, when they went on strike (Singh, 2016, p. 62). Likewise, his suggestion that the upper-caste employ a tractor to deal with the situation is met with aggression, for it is beneath their dignity to take such a job. The narrative is clear in its stance on the caste issue and is critical of the upper-caste youth who are idle and slothful, who use 'coaching', 'forms', and 'tests' as an excuse to meet their friends in town. "What they all do is to use the 'reservation' or 'quota' argument as their armour behind which they hide all their failures" (Singh, 2016, p. 63). They would not do jobs that are beneath their caste status, but at the same time, they are not interested in keeping their traditions alive. Thus, except for Chabhu Pahalwan, the others have left wrestling and bodybuilding, as the new generation sees them as useless and prefers the power of a pistol (Singh, 2016, p. 74). The narrative divides upper caste youth into two categories: those who are whiling away time in the name of research and coaching (Singh, 2016, p. 83). The other group comprised men like Naresh and his brothers (Raghunath's nephews), one of whom works as an electrician in a government department and used to supply electricity illegally. The other three brothers were interested in politics, and each associated himself with a different political party: Devesh (Samajwadi Party), Ramesh (Bahujan Samaj Party), and Mahesh (BJP); so that no matter who was in power, they had control over things all the time, like arranging somebody's transfer or obstructing it. They often went out to rallies, had links with important politicians, and exerted immense power over the area and its people (Singh, 2016, p. 83). These are the same men who would bribe the eight Thakur families in the village to keep silent so that they can grab Raghunath's land by sheer force.

The village economy runs on the labour of the lower castes, a fact that comes across clearly in the novel: farming in the fields of Chabhu depends on Jhuri; in Raghunath's case, on Ganpat and Snehi; and, likewise, the entire Thakuran depends on Chamtol. Thus, the ploughmen's strike, asking for an increase in wages, brings everything to a standstill. "What is different about their strike this time was that none of them came begging for work, and they managed to feed themselves. When required, they went to Ahiraan but didn't come to the Thakurs, for they knew that the future of the entire Chamtol of the region depended on this strike" (Singh, 2016, p. 64). There are other areas where caste boundaries are eroding or changing, at least; for example, despite apprehensions about the response of Thakurs, who still practice 'purity' and 'pollution' as caste concepts, Ganpat plans to open a flour mill (Singh, 2016, p. 68). Also, accessibility to education has ensured that his son has a government job and that his relative, Sudesh Bharti, can become an SDM. The caste structure is an important tool that binds residents of the village, as does the respect and status of the elderly (men) in the village. This is what is gradually fracturing and is taking a new shape. Caste boundaries are still marked out, and there exists a power hierarchy that gets depicted in the image of Chabhu Pahalwan, who sexually exploits his ploughman Jhuri's wife Dhola, despite the knowledge of the village men and Jhuri himself. Chabhu is also the sole reason that an event like *Pechaiya* or *Naagpanchmi*, which is celebrated purely as a religious festival in other villages, is still practised in Pahadpur with proper rituals in place (Singh, 2016, p. 74). His murder, with an explicit attack on penis, is not only a statement of assertion from the lower caste (though it is not explicitly clear who killed him), but it also exposes the fragility of the Thakur community, for whom the news came like a bolt from the blue, for "no matter what he was like, he was - a Thakur and nobody would have dared to look at their quarters as long as he was there! And now!" (Singh, 2016, p. 74), and now they were all left to themselves, defenceless. It is not surprising then that though the police made all the necessary arrangements to contain what might

follow, nothing really happened- “neither riots happened, nor Chamtol was burned (in revenge), nor was any retaliatory measure taken!” (Singh, 2016, p. 75). In fact, there was no one there to even file an F.I.R, for the only person left in the name of family was Chabbu’s widowed sister-in-law.

Chabbu’s death marks a decisive phase in Raghunath’s life too, for it marks for him the end of a safe life in the village. In fact, Raghunath’s relationship with Chabbu delineates the complex workings of the caste system. Chabbu was the one who would stand by him and take care of his well-being, without even being asked. An important occasion on which one witnesses this is when Naresh tries to capture Raghunath’s land, and Chabbu demolishes the illegally built wall, declaring that he should not think the ‘master’ is alone (Singh, 2016, p. 78). After his death, Naresh’s attempts to encroach upon Raghunath’s land become more aggressive, and he is pushed to a point where he is driven out of the village to the city. Not only was Raghunath beaten, verbally assaulted and abused by his own nephews, but nobody really came out to rescue him. This marks the end of the village life that Raghunath associates with. Standing alone, he wonders what has happened to this village. It is these circumstances that enable his sense of displacement and encourage him to migrate to the city. “Even though he had got exhausted by the village, he couldn’t bring himself to leave it either. His heart leapt to the city all this while- to the newness of life, to a new life, to proper cemented clean houses and coal tar roads, to the banks of Ganga, to unknown new relationships” (Singh, 2016, p. 93). There is an indication that this move might lead to his ultimate displacement: when the village is no longer safe, he might become homeless in the city as well, since the house belongs to his daughter-in-law (Singh, 2016, p. 93). It must be noted here that, though Raghunath and the male members of Chamtol both migrate out of the village in search of a better life, their fates are still very different. For Raghunath, the real agony is leaving behind his ancestral land, and for Chamtol, it is freedom from past humiliation. When for the former the future lies in ‘*vihars*’ of Banaras, the latter leads a search for work in the mines of Korba or to work as rickshaw pullers in the city. The story of the displacement and migration of Chamtol requires another novel, but as far as this novel is concerned, Singh writes about the travails of the lower-middle-class protagonist, who is usually the subject of his writings.

#### **4. THE DISPLACED RURAL MIGRANT IN THE BANARAS OF ‘VIHARS’**

Apart from the changes mentioned above, there are other outside forces that are also responsible for the transformation of the village landscape, or rather, their disappearance. The novel points out that the ‘colony’ culture emerged in Banaras around 1980-90, as land mafia and goons from Poorvanchal and Bihar gained prominence. They bought well-populated, settled villages, one after another, on all four sides of Banaras, and began selling them after ‘plotting’ (Singh, 2016, p. 103). It only took some fifteen to twenty years to erase the very existence of villages, and in their place came *nagars*, colonies, and *vihars* of new names. What is interesting about this new city is that it was modelled after metropolitan cities (Singh, 2016, p. 103). This meant the city’s composition changed, too. While the older residents continued to live in their *mohallas*, the new colonies were inhabited by immigrants who wanted a place to stay in the city whenever they had to visit it for professional or personal reasons. But only salaried people, or those with at least one family member working outside, could afford to buy a house (Singh, 2016, p. 104). In his study of the gated communities of Gurgaon, Sanjay Srivastava (2015) points out how “people want a community but not like a mohalla” for it speaks of a past that the ‘modernising-middle class’ wants to leave behind (p. 140). In fact, he writes, contemporary India has witnessed a rise in the number of gated colonies across different states and cities- Lucknow, Pune, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, etc. (Srivastava, 2015, p. 11).

Raghunath’s daughter-in-law’s father bought her a house in Ashok Vihar, which somehow turned out to be the “colony of the elderly” (Singh, 2016, p. 104). This is the colony of middle-income professionals, mostly those who had retired or were nearing retirement. “Their sadness was infinite” because the children for whom they had left behind their villages, their birthplace, their friends and relatives, were somewhere else. “The ones for whom they left their homes have homes of their own” (Singh, 2016, p. 104-105). Their love for land, their villages, the place where they grew up and lived their entire lives had little value in the eyes of the sons who valued only money- “the real thing is money! If you have money in your hand, then all those things for which you work so hard, day and

night, can be bought in the market. Without doing anything, without going anywhere” (Singh, 2016, p. 106). This conflict between parents and children can be seen as the tension between the old middle class, whose power resided in land and property, and the new middle class (NMC), whose prestige resides in corporate jobs and global connections (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). For example, “Raghunath had nothing else other than his land in the village, and he considered it priceless. But his sons looked at it in terms of ‘cash’ and were telling him that my monthly salary is more than this. Sanjay’s comment had sucked all life out of Raghunath’s body” (Singh, 2016, p. 149).

Murder and theft are the norms of these new colonies, where the elderly are left alone to take care of themselves. Rai Sahab of D-4 used to get random calls asking him to sell his plot. Raghunath’s sense of crisis, his inability to comprehend this new world, reaches a point of culmination when he is informed that his friend Bapat had been murdered and that his dead body was found in a canal. It is sometime after this that the danger that had been following others comes to his door. Two men came out of a Bolero jeep and asked him to sign some papers. It is then that Raghunath offers them the option to keep him on ‘*rehan*’ or mortgage, which they can encash either by demanding ransom from his sons or by taking money from him, in case the former does not occur (Singh, 2016, p. 163). This weird deal represents, somehow, Raghunath’s refusal to believe in the crudeness of the present world, or maybe it is a desperate last attempt to reach out to his sons, who have severed bonds without even saying, as if he is “already dead” (Singh, 2016, p. 161).

## 5. CAUGHT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: ISSUES OF CASTE AND GENDER

The women characters in the novel are caught between tradition and modernity. Their dilemma is often to choose between their sense of independence and dignity and the pull of family, which expects them to behave in a certain way. For all three female characters- Sarla, Sonal, and Meenu Tiwari- caste boundaries are more defined, and they are not able to cross these in a way that men have managed to transgress, despite social disapproval. Raghunath’s daughter, Sarla, for example, is trying to explore exactly what she wants out of life, and the only thing she is sure of is that she does not want to enter into a marriage arranged by her father (Singh, 2016, p. 30). Her need to experience a romantic sexual encounter is part of this desire to assert individuality, which conventional marriage setups deny women. Having an affair before marriage, for her, is what love feels like, where you sneak out, fooling those around, as after marriage, it will be “betrayal”, “adultery”, “immoral”. What she wants before a socially sanctioned relationship is to know the taste of “a man’s body”, to have an “adventure”, something that one does “just for fun” (Singh, 2016, p. 31).

Raghunath, who otherwise is in favour of reservation, cannot come to terms with the idea of his daughter marrying a lower-caste man. The harsher, subdued caste feelings come to the fore when he says that if it were not for reservations, the same Sudesh Bharti would have been ploughing somebody’s field or would have been driving a rickshaw even after getting an education (Singh, 2016, p. 54). He cannot help but dream about how the village would tease him by enquiring after his son-in-law, his grandchild, his new relatives who would be people like Jhuri and his community (Singh, 2016, p. 55). Thus, proving that “caste is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those who are most vocal in condemning it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action” (M. N. Srinivas quoted by Sen 2012, p. 364).

A more direct commentary on the dilemma of the ‘modern’ woman is offered in the image of the short-haired Meenu Tiwari, Sarla’s neighbour and Vice-Principal of her school. Although she has a job and has bought a house on her own, a sense of loneliness seeps deep into her life, and one can see that she still has not managed to free herself from patriarchal surveillance and control. She recounts how she was in love with an *adivasi* boy named Michael Karma, and when her father found out about their relationship, her brother was made her “guard”, and even now he comes every month to collect his “tax” (Singh, 2016, p. 41). Sonal, Raghunath’s daughter-in-law, is no different. She is a university teacher and has a house in her name, but that does not mean she is free to make her own decisions. She is not ‘modern’ enough to understand the causal flirting between Sanjay and his colleague Aarti Gujjar. What surprises her is that even Aarti’s husband would tease her about her ‘boyfriend’. “She had come

to live in a society where, leaving aside dollars, everything else, like love- jealousy, was rejected as 'backwardness and uncouthness'" (Singh, 2016, p. 110). It must be noted at this point that studies on the conception of family in India reiterate this idea that, though education and job opportunities have altered the position of women, they have not been able to break patriarchal conceptions of gendered division of labour. Thus, when most women work because of economic compulsions, they are seen as "supplemental earners rather than 'providers' in their own right" (D' Cruz and Bharat, 2001, p. 180-181). And to add to that, "woman's autonomy over her salary" remains a conflicting space to enter (D' Cruz and Bharat, 2001, p.182). Singh's novel reiterates these ideas through the inability of the women characters to assert themselves despite economic freedom. Also, there is constant pressure to define them by their marital status, which prevents the reader from seeing them as emancipated characters.

## 6. CONCLUSION

While liberalisation and globalisation changed the familial and social fabric of the country, the political changes of the 1990s, particularly the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, dramatically changed the social topography of the villages. The transformation of villages into towns and towns into cities has left little room to keep the traditional fabric of caste and family alive. Singh's novel, *Rehan Par Ragghu*, explicates these changes, highlighting the complexities and contradictions of these socio-political shifts resulting from changes in economic policy. Or to put it in his own words, as he writes in the beginning of the novel, how the outside reshaped the inside world of his city, Banaras.

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