



The Death of Dukhi Chamar

Shampa Roy

Abstract. The essay examines how a pedagogic practice centered around reading Munshi Premchand's "Sadgati" (Deliverance, 1931) in terms of crime and justice rather than as a sentimentalized narrative of a poor man's suffering can draw attention to its limits in adequately exploring issues related to caste.

The body of Dukhi Chamar, dead from exhaustion and hunger, lies on a path that leads to a well from where only the dominant caste Hindus—Brahmins—of his village draw their water. Dukhi, the protagonist of Munshi Premchand's Hindi short story "Deliverance" (Sadgati, 1931), belongs to the so-called *chamar* (tanner) caste in a village in North India, and the story is meant to be read as a realistic exploration of the poor grass-cutter's suffering and death within a brutal caste system.¹ When a wretchedly poor and ailing Dukhi visits Ghasiram's house to obtain an auspicious date for his daughter's wedding, he is forced to perform several physically taxing tasks at the Brahmin priest's behest, and subsequently collapses and dies. Within the heinous system of hereditary caste amongst Hindus, the *chamar* constitute the lowest social group—an *ati-shudra*—whose very touch would be considered polluting and shunned by Brahmins. Alive or dead, Dukhi's body is primarily perceived by the Brahmins as a disgusting pollutant. Looking at Dukhi's corpse, the remorseless Ghasiram frets only about its removal, especially when the rest of the tanners refuse to help him after a Gond man (from one of the largest tribal groups in India) alerts them that the death is a police matter.

For some years, "Deliverance" has been part of the University of Delhi's undergraduate, first-semester syllabus of the optional literature-based Discipline English course (as part of a section titled "Caste") for students in the BA program. Although the university's

Shampa Roy is an associate professor in the Department of English, Miranda House, at University of Delhi, India. She has coedited and contributed to Towards Freedom: Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore's Home and the World (Orient Longman, 2007) and "Bad" Women of Bombay Films (Palgrave, 2019). She is also the author of Gender and Criminality in Bangla Crime Narratives: Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (Palgrave, 2017) and True Crime Writings in Colonial India (Routledge, 2020). Her chapter "Coloniality and Decoloniality" is part of the Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction (Routledge, 2020).

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