DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

Shades of resilience

Basudev Sunani's novel about a Dalit community from Odisha goes beyond the depiction of caste violence to paint a vibrant picture of a people.

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In the novel, immigrants in the big city form a community, united by common concerns. Here, slum-dwellers in Bhubaneswar share warmth and stories on a cold day.
Photo Credit: BISWARANJAN ROUT

Mulk Raj Anand published *Untouchable* in 1935, depicting a day in the life of Bakha, the son of a sweeper. Almost a century later, in *Burnt: Beyond Return*, the Odia writer Basudev Sunani asks, what has changed for the untouchables? Originally published as *Padapodi* in 2014, the novel is mostly set in a small village, Lathore, in western Odisha. As an 8-year-old, Makaru fled the village with his parents to avoid the caste-based atrocities his family was subjected to. He returns to Lathore in his 50s when he learns that the village's Dalit *basti*, Ganapada, was burnt to the ground in broad daylight, forcing his community to seek temporary refuge in the village school. The stories of his ancestors he recalls on his journey back to the village from Raipur showcase three generations of Dalit people trying to build a dignified life and find respectable work in a society that denies them both.

The novel is based on a real-life incident that took place in Lathore in 2012. A minor dispute escalated rapidly, resulting in the loss of homes and livelihoods for the Dalit villagers. More than a decade later,

they are still waiting to be rehabilitated. Sunani was one of them—like his protagonist, he returned to his village to witness the devastation and the indifference on the part of the police, the media, and the government to get justice done.

In his introduction to the text, the translator Raj Kumar notes that many Odia writers from privileged-caste backgrounds—Gopinath Mohanty, Kanhu Charan Mohanty, Basant Kumar Satpathy, Parshuram Mund—have also narrated stories of Dalit suffering. Sunani stands out because he has an insider's knowledge of the community he describes.

Burnt Beyond Return

By Basudev Sunani, translated by Raj Kumar

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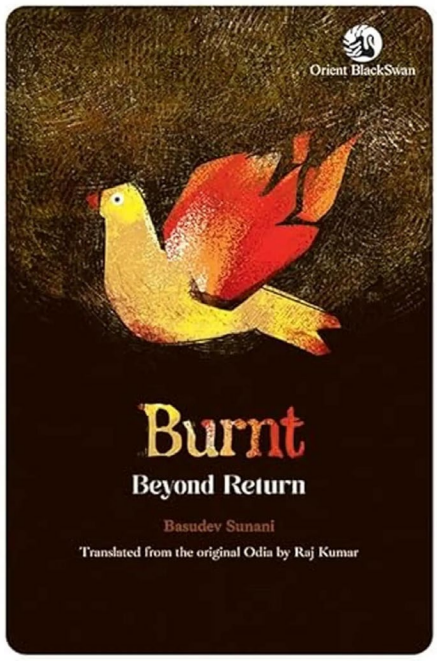
He depicts Ganapada in all its cultural richness, complete with local deities, festivals, musical instruments, and rituals. In the novel, Makaru's father wishes to be buried in the Gana way rather than being cremated like privileged-caste city dwellers. In spite of being an immigrant, his mother continues to pray to the local deity, Ma Nialimali, and wishes Makaru to do the same. The fear of being dissociated from the roots haunts her as she raises her son in a city far away from their community.

Nuanced picture

Sunani paints a nuanced picture of the lives of slum dwellers in the city. Makaru's family is assisted by Dambru, a rickshaw-puller, who not only helps them find employment but also gives them shelter. Raipur thus becomes the place where they find freedom: here they work for themselves rather than for landlords. The wage they get is minimal, but they no longer have to suffer the daily humiliations of servitude. They find community in other dispossessed people, forming a group bound together by fraternal ties. The flipside of the freedom they acquire is the growing distance from their roots.



In *Burnt: Beyond Return*, the Odia writer Basudev Sunani asks, what has changed for the untouchables since Independence? | Photo Credit: By special arrangement

Raj Kumar accepts the inevitable loss in translation as he narrates a story encompassing the linguistic changes taking place across generations. If members of the first generation from Ganapada relied heavily on folklore and folk songs to express themselves, those of the second tend to use more formal idioms as they gain literacy.

The nuances of different dialects are lost over the generations. Kumar writes: "[W]hen we read Sunani's Odia novel, we realise that while his rural characters who live in villages speak the colloquial native Odia, their urban counterparts in Raipur, in trying to fit into their new environment, emulate the speech habits of the city and speak in a mix of Odia, Chhattishgarhi and Hindi. Unfortunately, these intricate linguistic transfers and nuances are lost in translation into English."

However, there are certain ways in which Sunani's storytelling stays loyal to Odia oral traditions. For instance, in between the narration, he asks rhetorical questions about inequalities, as if addressing a live audience.

Through the character of Chitrasen Suna—a Dalit who becomes the *sarpanch*, advises people, resolves disputes, and rises financially through hard work—Sunani advocates Dalit pride, asking his community to stay true to its identity instead of mimicking privileged-caste habits. Why should they abandon local festivals such as Bhai Jiuntia in favour of 10-day long Durga puja celebrations that are not a part of their tradition? Dalit identity has been honed by generations of resilience against atrocities; it is something to be owned and announced rather than being hidden or discarded.

However, this is not to downplay the nuances of Dalit identity. Like Dadu Mandrekar (in *Untouchable Goa*, translated by Nikhil Baisane) and Baby Kamble (in *The Prisons We Broke,* translated by Maya Pandit) before him, Sunani too writes about how some educated Dalit people end up exploiting their community instead of uplifting them. The novel hints at the need for a radical change at the sociopolitical level that will help the community grab the attention of the people in power and get the dignity it deserves.

One expects to encounter a prose filled with gruesome details of caste-based violence while reading a book of this kind. However, Sunani highlights celebrations and brawls equally and portrays Dalit identity in all its complexity by putting it at the intersection of geography, religion, politics, and education. The narrative invites empathy for slum dwellers in cities and "untouchables" in villages. Each character is individuated, filled with shades of resilience, despite being placed under the shroud of caste-based violence.

Akankshya Abismruta is an independent books and culture writer based in Sambalpur, Odisha.