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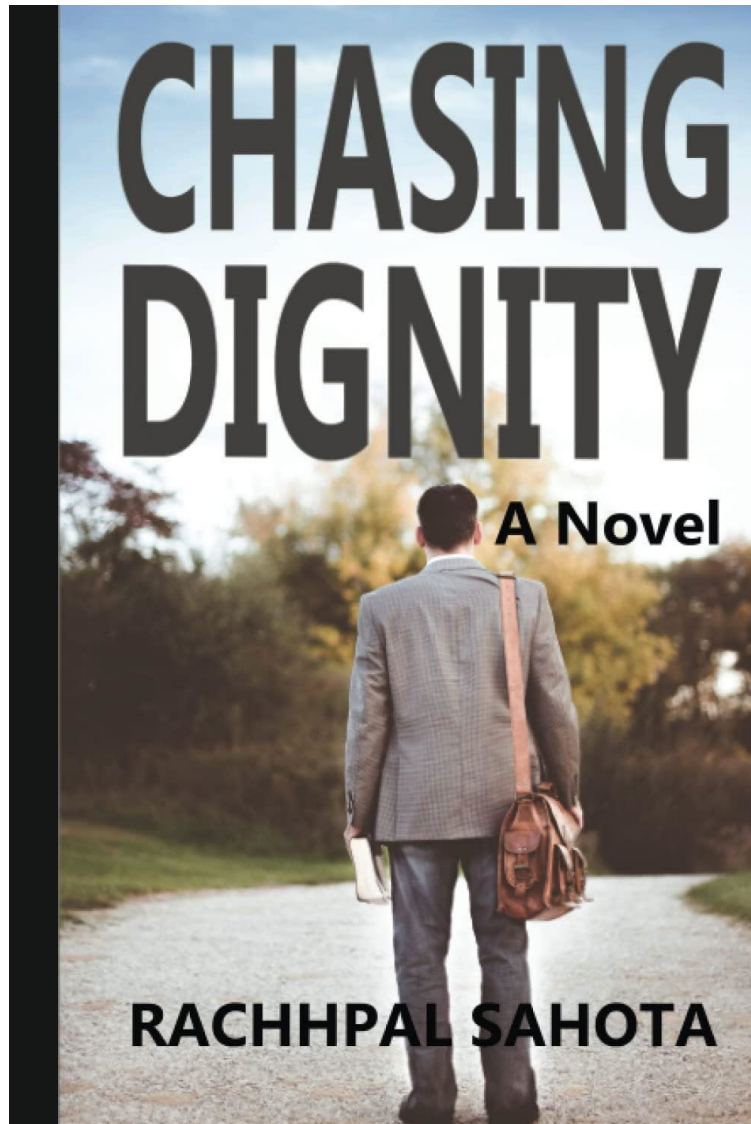
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Book Review: “Chasing Dignity”

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Chasing Dignity

Rachhpal Sahota,

Tirchhi Nazar Media, 2023

384 pp., \$19.95 (pb), ISBN 9788196192327

Rachhpal Sahota's novel *Chasing Dignity* is a compelling narrative, set in the 1980s and '90s in Punjab, India, tracing the many twists and turns in the life of a low caste boy, Jaggi. The Indian caste system is a social stratification system characterized by hereditary status and endogamy, enforcing crippling social barriers for those on the lower end of that spectrum. Bound by this rigid system of social hierarchy, Jaggi, a Keera, faces many hurdles as he sets out on his pursuit of a successful life. In the story, his mother Bindo, and his friends, Navi and Rani, serve as catalysts on this journey.

A very young Jaggi starts school with the eager anticipation of learning but is knocked down, time and again, due to his speech impediment, but more so, due to his low caste background. He picks himself up and edges forward with encouragement from well-wishers. When a distant uncle visits the USA, Jaggi learns that the new world holds boundless opportunities and the promise of egalitarianism, and that with hard work and dedication, he stands a chance to lead a life of dignity. He starts to harbour the dream of America. Acing elementary, middle, and high schools, Jaggi goes on to attend college in the nearby town, where he realizes that the deep-rooted caste-based prejudice has followed him from his village to town, leading him to grow distrustful of the world. Later, when he goes to the city to attend university for postgraduate studies, he meets Navi, an upper-caste girl, who restores his faith in humanity. Navi's high regard for him elevates Jaggi, encouraging him to become the finest version of himself—a fearless, pathbreaking young man out to defy the odds. The lovers begin dreaming of leading a life of togetherness in the USA. Life, however, has other designs for the two. Tragedy props up to rip their dreams. In Jaggi's darkest hour, his childhood friend Rani steps up to stand by his side. Like Navi, Rani, too, hails from the upper caste but boldly rejects the divisions of caste. With Navi by his side, Jaggi carves out a successful personal and professional life in the USA even though caste-based prejudice continues to hound him across oceans and borders to America.

In taking the readers through the many trials and tribulations in Jaggi's life, Rachhpal Sahota presents an authentic picture of rural and urban Punjab of the 1980s and '90s where caste continued to define people's lives decades after Indian Independence, impeding equity and inclusion. The narrative stays true to the time period and mentions the Mandal Commission Protests of 1990. It thereby brings to light the ongoing distressing ramifications of the Indian caste system.

Sahota's imagination and understanding are expansive enough that it gets the reader to compare and contrast caste with race in America by hinting at the prejudices that African Americans continue to face despite the abolition of slavery and the end of legal segregation. A slightly pronounced mention of the African-American question as well as the Native American and anti-semitism questions, would have given the novel a sharper edge, however. It would remind readers of the many injustices that are prevalent even in an advanced nation like the USA, and how imperative it is for humankind to transcend prejudices to achieve collective progress. Overall *Chasing Dignity* offers an enriching reading experience and scores on all fronts: plot,

characterization, and setting, the conflict at the heart of the narrative gaining urgency to achieve a prudent resolution.

Sahota should be commended for his painstaking research and for presenting an age-old facet of Indian society to a wider audience through his lucid writing which makes the novel easy to read and enjoy. Unlike his literary predecessor Jagseer, the low caste protagonist in Gurdial Singh's 1964 epochal Punjabi novel *Marhi Da Deeva*, who succumbs to the evils of the caste system, Jaggi slays the caste system through his pursuit of education and ultimately emerges as the hero to be reckoned with, inspiring fortitude and courage in the face of adversity and injustice.