

Homes without Windows

Praise for the Book

‘This is a truly remarkable book, a vivid and empathetic portrait of the precariousness of Dalit working-class life that is rich, insightful, very moving and often quite witty too. The narrative is strikingly visual, with superbly rendered descriptions of social behaviour in public spaces: schools, hospitals, offices and, not the least, community toilets. Memorable, too, are the tender portraits of friends and family members, above all of the author’s stoic father and his resolute and resilient mother. The translation is sensitive and seamless, making for a compellingly readable memoir, in which elements of hope and humour are always peeping out amidst the struggle and the suffering.’ – **Ramachandra Guha**, Indian historian, environmentalist, writer and public intellectual

‘Gujarat cannot be known by knowing only Narsi Mehta and Mahatma Gandhi. It cannot even be known by reading about the ghastly communal riots. This is the Gujarat known in literature, history and politics. But the reality of Gujarat cannot be grasped without understanding the deep-rooted caste discrimination. Chandu Maheria’s forensic examination of caste segregation takes us to the heart of what Gujarat is, has been. His searing prose makes the intense recollections of a life lived under the shadow of India’s age-old curse – the demeaning reality of caste – equal to the most memorable Dalit life-writing. This English translation by the poet Hemang Ashwinkumar brings every word of Maheria’s original to life, in all blood, pain, stench and sweat, all like Chandu Maheria’s own.’ – **Ganesh Devy**, writer, thinker and cultural activist

‘A readable and wonderful story of Gujarat seen through the lens of a twofold Dalit activist – a Gandhian in an Ambedkarian complicity. Chandu Maheria invites us into his private space and shares the stories with ascendant prose. It relates to you because it is told in the companionship of truth and purpose. He speaks of life but also of how death feels like a boring act in the calendar of a humourist. Buttered by a highly enjoyable translation, it is a story about the Gujarati chamber of untouchability.’ – **Suraj Yengde**, scholar and author of *Caste: A Global Story*

‘This elegant collection of essays by Chandu Maheria, translated with verve and grace by Hemang Ashwinkumar, is a study in poetic irony. Recollections of food and shit, festivals and work, worn feet and precious chappals, and the unsung trauma of the monsoon for urban Dalits, sit alongside affectionate and tangential portraits of Gandhi, the author’s Ambedkarite father and resourceful mother and various other colourful figures ... Blending humour and sorrow, this is a sharp and poignant reflection on Dalit material life, its meagreness and toil, and equally, on the imaginative and verbal energy that sustains it.’ – **V. Geetha**, author of *Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the Question of Socialism in India*

‘Chandubhai’s writing has long been celebrated in Gujarat for its piercing clarity – penetrating yet free of bitterness, incisive yet humane, unflinchingly realistic yet untouched by social stereotypes. This translation opens the door for English readers to encounter the brilliance of his craft and the authentic world of lived experience he so vividly brings to life.’ – **Urvish Kothari**, journalist and writer

Homes without Windows

Chandu Maheria

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Hemang Ashwinkumar

 **juggernaut**

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*Dedicated to all those
who are selflessly fighting
the battles for rights*

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Introduction



‘Not a poet, oh no.
A rebel, that’s what I wanna be.’

– Chandu Maheria, ‘Value of a Poem’, *Asmita* (1984)

Dalit literature in Gujarati had a belated beginning compared to its flamboyant start in Marathi and other Indian languages in the 1960s. As a matter of fact, Dalit prose writing began to be practised seriously only after two shattering anti-reservation riots that rocked

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the state in 1981 and 1985. Once the terms of Dalit writing were set in 1987 through a manifesto included in the first collection of Gujarati Dalit short stories,¹ writers like Dalpat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam and others did substantial work in the genre of fiction, such that Dalit fiction in Gujarati has come of age in the three-and-a-half decades since its inception.

However, the same is not true for Dalit non-fiction, especially for genres like autobiography, memoir, reflective essays, and so on. And of the few works in this category by writers like Dahyabhai Deenbandhu, B. Kesharshivam, P.K. Valera and Vitthal 'Rai', only Kesharshivam's autobiography, *The Whole Truth and Nothing but Truth* (2008), is available in English.² Chandu Maheria's memoir comes as a milestone in this incipient tradition and promises to renew and revitalize it through its cultural and political force.

Written and published over the past three decades as standalone essays in literary journals and magazines like *Nireekshak*, *Sarthak Jalso* and *Dalit Adhikar*, and in anthologies of Dalit writing, Maheria's powerful

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work has remained largely unnoticed in Gujarat by literati and academia alike. Part of the reason for this apathy might lie in Maheria's overarching reputation in Gujarat as a prominent Dalit intellectual, formidable scholar, firebrand activist, prolific journalist and columnist, something that overshadowed his literary persona as a poet, writer and editor. Part of it also has to do with his indifference to the publication of his literary writing until it was cajoled out of him by his close friends and people he trusts (as was the case with the poet Arun Kolatkar).

Born in 1959 in a sprawling family of nine, Maheria spent the first four decades of his life in the chawls of Rajpur, a working-class suburb in east Ahmedabad. This memoir provides a fascinating account of his early academic pursuits and initiation into intellectual and political radicalism amidst dire poverty and crippling privations. That journey crystallized his ideas about power structures in caste society and drove him to search for truth in the interstices of conflicting ideologies. As a teenager, Maheria realized that the emancipation of his community depended as much on the enlightenment

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of minds as on the struggle for rights. The numerous letters he wrote to newspaper editors, the study circle called ‘Valay’, which he organized in the veranda of his house in 1976–77, and the teach-ins he hosted for Dalit children in the wake of anti-reservation riots of 1981 under the aegis of the Bhimrao Students’ Association – the root of it all can be traced to his zeal for social reform and Dalit empowerment. It was this zeal, he told me, that inspired his decision to remain unmarried and commit his entire life to the battles of ideas and rights.

In the late 1970s, Maheria began to write poems that appeared in *Kalo Suraj*, a journal devoted to Dalit literature founded and edited by veterans like Dalpat Chauhan and Neerav Patel, and in *Naya Marg*, a reputed fortnightly committed to an exploitation-free society. The razor-sharp language and finely whetted sensibility informing Maheria’s creative and intellectual production drew the attention of Indukumar Jani, the seasoned socialist editor of *Naya Marg*, and before long, Maheria was actively working with the magazine. In about two decades of this association, *Naya Marg*

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became a prominent mouthpiece of progressive, liberal politics in Gujarat, and Maheria evolved as a formidable Dalit voice. During this period, he edited two seminal collections of Dalit poetry, titled *Asmita* [Self-Identity] (1983) and *Visfot* [Explosion] (1984); edited collections of critical and creative prose like *Anamatni Andhi* [The Cyclone of Reservation] (1985) and *Madi Mane Sambhare Re* [How I Miss Mother] (1994); and wrote books of reportage like *Sambaradathi Swamannagar* [Dalit Exodus from Sambarada to Swamannagar] (1995) and *Pranprashna Panino* [Water: A Life and Death Question] (1994).

In 2001, Maheria founded Adhikar, an organization that provided enriching intellectual space for discussing Dr Ambedkar's writings and issues surrounding Dalit literature and the Dalit question. Attended by respectable writers and Dalit intellectuals, these weekly soirées aimed to bridge the gap between thought and emotion, intellect and affect, Dalit literature and Ambedkarite ideas and thus, in thirteen years of its existence, broke new grounds in Dalit–Ambedkarite discourse in the state. In 2005, Maheria founded *Dalit*

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Adbikar, a fortnightly that remained in print till 2019 and emerged as a major mouthpiece for Dalit rights.

Maheria may be the speaking voice in *Homes without Windows*, but the reader encounters a breathtaking polyphony in the memoir – it features his extended family, his friends across religion and caste, his neighbours, his community and gives us glimpses of a hegemonic Hindu order that has acquired new strength over the years. The memoir unearths, for the first time, the vibrant community life of the Dalits who had migrated after Independence to Ahmedabad from far-flung villages because, as Maheria's father reminisces, 'There was no place for us there, just none. No work, no home, no dignity, nothing. So, consider this place your village. Wherever you get shelter, and a piece of bread is your homeland.'

The harried, unhomed humanity finds a home in the seedy chawls, mushrooming in the shadow of chimneys towering over the industrial city. A home without windows, with a leaky roof, crumbling walls and reigning dark. Even so, the labour settlements, overflowing with people from diverse caste, class,

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religious and ethnic backgrounds, become a theatre of love and compassion, of communal coexistence amidst caste/class struggles, of unyielding hope in the face of precarity. Maheria depicts a life that, though forged in the crucible of privation, is full of joie de vivre, like the Diwali his family celebrates, a low-key affair, but ‘a Diwali no less, that’.

Maheria memorializes the invincibility of human spirit in the figures of his father (Ba) and mother (Ma). The saga of his father’s radical aversion to anything superstitious and the extent to which he stood by the truth, as well as his mother’s battle against dire poverty and commitment to give her children education and a better life – these are stories of Dalit predicament, but also of resilience and indomitable inner strength. Maheria’s long essay on his mother, ‘Sonny of a Sane Mother’, is a paean of love, devotion and admiration:

A woman as generous as she was truthful and optimistic, Ma never tired of running around for the welfare of her family, neighbours, remote acquaintances, even random passers-by and thus won glad, grateful hearts, almost in hundreds. Thus,

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my Dahima, literally a sane mother, was Ma to many. ‘Is there anything we humans can stake a claim on when we pop off?’ was her pet rhetorical question and refrain when someone asked her to just slow down and look after herself.

Personal is political. *Homes without Windows* is suffused with a politics that is neither abstract nor a slave to any ideology. It arises from the lived experience of deprivation and caste-based dehumanization. Maheria’s engagement with the canker of caste is gut-churning, literally and figuratively. Scatology becomes a pungent, poignant device in ‘The Mayor’s Bungalow’ to construct a profound and multilayered exploration of the fraught relationship of Dalits with the material, structural reality of toilets and, more significantly, with the idea of shit. The essay unpacks what Slavoj Žižek calls a ‘hermeneutics of toilets’ in Indian society. The whole memoir, in fact, constructs a powerful critique and a ruthless indictment of this degrading, inhuman social system, but the exceptional clarity of Maheria’s vision enables him to seek out the grey in the black-and-white discourse around caste. He

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espouses a recourse to identity politics but in a way that liberates and humanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.

His sharp and profound understanding of the politics of naming, shaming and taming led Maheria, in 2008, to take a considered, moral stand in the controversy surrounding Umashankar Joshi's play *Dhed² na Dhed Bhangi* (1935). The simmering ire and angst of Dalits against the use of proscribed pejoratives like 'dhedh' and 'bhangi' in Joshi's play, which was prescribed for study in an undergraduate degree programme offered by North Gujarat University, had exploded into a major agitation. The play constructed a brilliant, all-out assault on the evil of caste system; not only did it mock the hypocrisy and caste prejudice of Brahmins but also reflexively questioned the internal caste hierarchy among the Dalits. Quite expectedly, the copies of the disputed play were burnt. At the height of the controversy, Maheria approached Joshi and pointed out not just how the slurs in the play subjected Dalit students to anguish and humiliation in classroom spaces but also how they put the

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well-meaning orientation of the play 'out of focus'. Confronting Joshi, Maheria said,

The title implies that the Bhangis are dheds among dheds, just as the latter are dheds among the Savarnas. Such logic, in a way, justifies the Savarna disgust and prejudice against the Dalits; it's as if the dheds deserve an insulting treatment because they themselves treat the Bhangis insultingly ... The title of your play looks, at first sight, prejudicial and disdainful though it's quite likely that you might have used it innocently and in good faith.³

Maheria's polemic of caste is profound and perspicacious; it respects cross-caste solidarity but is also sensitive to the blind spots of uncalibrated, collective fight. If it does not spare the internalization of the logic of caste by Dalits themselves, it simultaneously exhibits a keen awareness of the prevalence of the worst forms of patriarchy within Dalit society. 'Your Chappals, Our Skulls' describes an incident that took place in Golana village in 1975. In an act of expiation, the Dalit leaders had to walk through the village holding in mouth the chappals, turban and torch of a Kshatriya man who had

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tried to assert his traditional right over the body of a Dalit woman and was chased away by Dalit youths. The same Dalit men, Maheria writes, expected their womenfolk not to walk past them while wearing a pair of chappals, as a mark of deference to patriarchal norms of propriety and gendered subordination.

The idea of Dalit *biradari* [fraternity/solidarity] that transcends the boundaries of narrowly contrived ethnic or social identities is central to Maheria's polemic. The concept of biradari is a call to solidarity across ideological enclosures, a heartfelt hail to join forces for imagining a common future on a shared, salubrious planet. Such progressive, accommodative politics drives Maheria to realistically assess the role of "That fellow, Gandhido"⁴ in shaping the past, present and future of the Dalit community. This essay is a precious gem in the entire gamut of Dalit discourse on the Mahatma and his philosophy, next in value only to Kannada intellectual D.R. Nagaraj's analysis of the old man's legacy. In so far as the call for forging solidarities is a call to recognizing our common humanity, Maheria's politics of (re)writing the self can safely be called

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Gandhian, or that of a satyagrahi, one who holds onto the truth.

The colour of truth is grey, its song always polyphonic, like the Natal Garba that symbolizes the rich histories of communal coexistence and religious intermingling that Maheria traces in 'Creed, Conversion and Childhood'. Maheria brings out the sheer complexity and fluidity of the idea of religious conversion in India. The attitude of the local Dalits, converted to Christianity, to the missionary imposition remains one of suspicion and ambivalence despite the promise of material aid and the liberation from caste hierarchy. Conversely, the Hindu Dalits of Rajpur, Maheria notes, 'Always used the term *deval*, the Gujarati equivalent of a church, to refer to local Hindu temples and shrines. Thus, the assorted deities in the Hindu pantheon like Baliya Dev and Mother Maha Kali sat guiltlessly in their separate churches that we, the Hindu Dalits, visited for worship.' The essay points back to a not-so-distant time when practices of intertwined religious worship and intercultural communion defined the existential realities of a multireligious, multicultural society.

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Maheria rues the emergence of a political context in Gujarat that has carved out hard-edged community identities and singularities of being. He brilliantly shows how the project of communal estrangement begins with the partitioning of language use and then leads to segregations and exclusions of hideous kinds. Thus, he shows how the Dalit and Muslim residents of Baharpura in Dhoraji remain *outside* not just of the town but *outside* the imagination of developers and policymakers. In fact, the memoir becomes a site for deconstructing hegemonic discourses of caste, patriarchy, communalism, authoritarianism and neoliberalism that, under the excuse of forging a national 'self', impose immense suffering and dehumanization on the toiling masses. Sadly, a large part of Indian society is made to believe, through institutionalized hate and the politics of fear, that such eviction and exclusion are preconditions for development, for the onward march of history and for re-engineering a home, a homeland and a Hindu Rashtra.

At a time when a crazed nationalist pursuit of such a home has spawned a fear psychosis and an era of

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precarity, Maheria speaks of his lost world with a sense of nostalgia; his mind keeps returning to it, just as he himself does to his ancestral home in Rajpur, for sustenance and emotional support. The home in Rajpur, aptly named ‘Nirant’ [a place without terror/fear], remains Maheria’s permanent home; the one in Gandhinagar, where he currently stays, is just ‘A Home on Probation’, the title of his short essay where he depicts what makes ‘Nirant’ a home:

Life in Rajpur’s melting pot, overflowing with its attendant ironies and contradictions, retains a lot of its old-world charm; it is still possible here to get a packet of oil on credit, scrounge two free matchsticks, buy tikka-kebab on the street, watch suspense thrillers in Usha-Sheetal Talkies, to enjoy kawwali and mujaras, and buy fat-rich milk from Sharmaji. Here one gets Hemingway and Neruda in the libraries of Gomtipur and Rakhial, vibrant discussions in ‘Valay’, the *karmashilas* [activists] of the Dalit Panthers and CPI(ML) and Dalit poets like Nirav Patel and Dalpat Chauhan.⁵

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Translation is linked to the close, intimate act of reading and translating *Homes without Windows* line by poignant line made me feel like a bird, weaving its nest one twig at a time. Maheria's words helped me build a home of hope in a literary context where the great majority of wordsmiths find their tongues paralysed over issues that Chandubhai so boldly and beautifully discusses.

At a time when bulldozers are tirelessly at work in the New India, razing down homes of the poor across castes and religions, this memoir might drive the reader to rethink the kind of home 'We, the people' want to build ourselves. The choice is stark: bulldozer or biradari, destruction or diversity, madness or what Dr Ambedkar called *maitri*. Hopefully, the reader will take a cue from 'Nirant' – Maheria's windowless abode of peace, prosperity and plurality – open the windows of their minds and let it flood over with the sunshine of solidarity and the luminescence of shared dreams.

– Hemang Ashwinkumar