

## VOICE OF RESISTANCE AS REFLECTED IN THE SELECTED GUJARATI DALIT POETRY

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### *Abstract*

*In this research paper, the researcher has made a detailed study of the selected Gujarati Dalit poetry. The researcher has explored the Dalits' voice of protest against the unjust and discriminative pressures they have been living for ages through the selected poems. A close study of their poetry shows that the poets wish to create revolution in the society where they are marginalized. These poets are having some questions haunting in his mind: if they all are the children of the same God, then why are they subject to discrimination on the basis of certain man-made rules? Why is it that the Dalit people are branded as untouchables if they really belong to the same culture? Why is it that they are not allowed into the temples for worship if they belonged to the same religion? If they are people belonging to one nation, one culture, one religion, one political system, then why are some denied their share of self-respect? In order to get remedy of this, several Gujarati Dalit poets have put across their point of protest through their poems. Their poetry is a voice of protest against this unjust system.*

**Keywords:** *protest, marginalization, varna order, caste system, injustice*



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In Gujarat, Dalit literary trend has started around 1970s. Slowly and steadily, the Dalit literary trend in Gujarat has become a national literary trend. The publication of *Aakrosh*, a poetry journal of Dalit panthers on the 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1978, can be considered an important milestone. It has been observed that Marathi Dalit literature stemmed from the socio-political ideologies of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule, whereas Gujarati Dalit literature germinated from the anti-reservation agitation, communal riots happened in 70s. And thus the way for Gujarati Dalit literature was paved in around 1975. Today Dalit literature in Gujarat itself has established as a genre which can never be ignored. Poetry comes first followed by other kinds of writing such as autobiography, drama, criticism, etc.

Gujarati Dalit poetry is basically the articulation of the experiences and feelings of an entire community. In fact, their poetry is a mass movement, a cultural revolution against Brahmanic superiority. The versatility of these poets is amazing and originality of theme is the hallmark of their poetry. These poets are having definite motive, goal, direction and commitment. They in giving voice to their struggle against discriminating upper castes are giving shape to the

Dalit identity which is located in Dalit unconsciousness. These poets are committed to the noble cause and thus they are the custodians of the castle of Dalit literature.

In India more than one-sixth of its population continues to suffer neglect and humiliation simply because they are born in depressed class or Dalit caste. Historically, Dalits were outside the hierarchical Hindu system, more specifically they were 'outcastes'. Thus they were excluded from the participation in the social, economical, cultural, intellectual and political life. This caused the Dalits to live in utter poverty, life full of superstition and at the mercy of the upper caste. They did not have their own identity nor do they possess any self-esteem. They were denied education and kept away from the process of development in all walks of life. The suffering they undergo is man-made and hence more painful and unfortunate. Today we live in an age of science and technology and we talk of the ideals like free society, welfare state, egalitarianism, socialism, freedom, prosperity and equal opportunities for all. But can we envision an egalitarian society as long as there is an existence of ill-treatment and suppression of one class by the other on the name of caste or creed? For Dr. Ambedkar, caste is the monster which crosses our path wherever we go to. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he puts forward his argument in the following way:

“This is only another way of saying that, turn in any direction you like, caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster”

(Ambedkar, 31)

Talking about the Gujarati Dalit poetry, it has been colored by the Ambedkarite philosophy and these Dalit poets are devoted to a noble cause i.e. social awakening and ready to eradicate social evils. Their poetry has been the story-teller of their own anguishes told after getting the first-hand experience. Its protagonist is usually projected as a rebel standing up as against subjugation, humiliation and atrocities and also shown singing the songs of the dawn of a new life. Exploitation, more cultural than social or economic, is manifest in every page of it. It is an untold story of the people who have already remained in the darkness, unheard and unsung with a burden of thousand years' history on their backs. It is thus poetry of protest voicing its opposition to all that is orthodox, traditional and conventional.

The Gujarati Dalit poets cooperatively worked and collectively became a part of conscious team work. They started singing songs of their pains, sufferings and agonies. They want to

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break the strong web of orthodoxy. They have used poetry as their weapon to be used to fight against their immeasurable miseries. Harish Mangalam says in this regard:

“The feeling of dedication to the society fully flows in the Dalit poetry. The Dalit poets have continuously done the job to split the web which is the hurdle in the social uplift. Racial theme-caste exploitation- in their poems is like a red color in the blood. With the social reality, poet’s self-connection is presented. So to understand and enjoy their poems the social reality of their community plus poet’s financial, cultural and social situation must be known.”

(Mangalam, 142)

Neerav Patel is also one of the pioneering figures in the Gujarati Dalit literary arena. His advent at the literary scenario changed the very face of Gujarati Dalit poetry by filling it with a note of revolt against the existing socio-cultural and economic order of the society. His poetry attacks the rampant social evils like injustice, atrocities, inequality, poverty, violation of human rights etc. and presents the pitiable plights of the downtrodden section of the society. His poetry is also an enlightening discourse for the Dalits of all hues. It is a discourse of revival and awakening. He is of the view that though half of the century has passed since India became independent; Dalits have seen no significant changes in their lives. It means to say that though several amendments are made to uplift the downtrodden section of our society, there have been no changes in their lives. There has been a widespread feeling among the Dalits that all institutions ultimately do nothing concrete for these poor people. It is for this reason that they have lost respect and faith in such reformers and institutes.

Neerav Patel’s is poetry of commitment. It has a powerful and pungent language of resistance. Anger, pathos and irony are the largely used devices. It has explicit and serious messages to give to the readers. It constantly stimulates his brethren to transform the society. In one of his long poems titled *Discarded Flowers*, he proclaims the revolution:

“You all forgot  
That only yesterday you were all having a spittoon  
tied at your neck and broom tied at your back?  
Forgot you were all eating carrion-  
and now you have become lions?  
Forgot you were holding the horns

and you were holding the legs and we were dragging the carcass  
and we were dragging the carcass and enjoying the feast?  
Those were our bad days. Someone took a spade  
and someone took an axe and someone took a spinning rod  
and someone took a broom.  
You forgot how we were harassed those days?  
and even today we are insulted equally bad.  
We are still for them  
Children of devdasis- children of the temple prostitutes.  
...  
How shall tell you You are all born to my womb –  
all real brothers Forgot so quickly  
Your Baba's Advice? Educate, organize and agitate?  
They will send you in jungle once again.  
Read your Baba's will again.”

(Patel, 16)

The poem is quite a long one which has a different way of lodging protest. Here the protest is not to provoke and incite but to persuade and empathize. The poet remembers the sad part of their history. The bitter conditions under which the Dalits lived are brought to the light to his fellow beings. Some with their unclean traditional occupations like tanning, sweeping, scavenging, carrying dead animals, burning dead bodies in the cremation ground. The central message is given in the last part of the poem. 'Baba' here is none else but Dr. Ambedkar, and his children are none else but all Dalits. The poet asks all the Dalits to unite and treat one another as their brothers. Their emancipation is collective and not individual. The poet is of the view that the fraternity among them and solidarity are the only weapons against the oppressors. The prime goal of the poet is to rescue and remind the Dalits that they are as good as anybody else. They have to bring out Dalits from their sense of victimhood and get them ready for fight and sacrifice. So that Dalits will establish themselves as a respectable citizen of this country and would become equal to everyone else.

A close study of their poetry shows that the poets wish to create revolution in the society where they are marginalized. They want to shake the pillars of the edifice created by high caste on the name of caste. Blowing the trumpet of revolt, they wish to get justice for their

brethren. It has been observed that these poets aspire to diminish it by raising weapons and bluntly asks all to join this battle to fight for righteousness and integrity. A vehement rebellious tone is found in their poetry. The mood of these poets in their poems shows that they are totally dissatisfied with what is offered to him by his society. It is because their culture, history and all those essential ingredients which give them existence have been buried under the edifice of Aryan history and culture. These poets are having some questions haunting in his mind: if we all are the children of the same God, then why are we subject to discrimination on the basis of certain man-made rules? Why is it that the Dalit people are branded as untouchables if they really belong to the same culture? Why is it that they are not allowed into the temples for worship if they belonged to the same religion? If we are people belonging to one nation, one culture, one religion, one political system, then why are some denied their share of self-respect? In order to get remedy of this, several Gujarati Dalit poets have put across their point of protest through their poems. Their poetry is a voice of protest against this unjust system. Dalpat Chauhan shares his painful experience of his life in the poem *Untouchable* and asks some such unanswerable questions:

“The first day in school, the doom’s day.  
With trembling hand I did not write  
One, two, three... I wrote  
On the fireland of burning desert,  
My chest, My caste. Since then  
‘I am untouchable, untouchable, you cannot touch me’,  
Echoed in every atom of my existence.  
It was an introduction to pain caused by hundred scorpion bites.”

(Chauhan, 41)

The Dalits are supposed to live a miserable life. They cannot mingle with others, cannot enjoy a normal life as others are living. Such kind of bitter truths of life were taught to the poet when he entered the school. He feels humiliated when he was introduced this and thus feels his first day of school as a ‘doom’s day’. The pain he feels is indescribable and thus is compared with the pain “caused by hundred scorpion bites.” He cannot understand that why he has been discriminated with others. On what part of body has it been written that he is untouchable? Such kinds of questions have been raised by him at the end of the poem which shows a deep cry felt by the poet:

“O god of hate I search till day. On what part of my body  
Are written the richas of untouchability?  
That’s why, o giver of name untouchable,  
I ask you Where is the name that you gave me  
Which has tortured me all my life?”

(Chauhan, 41)

The poem reveals the evils of caste system according to which Brahmins are placed higher and others are given lower status. It leads to social discrimination. The poet urges the Almighty to give his people equal status and individual dignity in their society. The source of all discrimination and exploitation of whole community of Dalits is the caste system of Hindu religion. The Dalit poets like Dalpat Chauhan do not believe in religion. They reject the hegemony of religion. They want to destroy religion. They are in favor of secular society. According to them, religious deities lead to class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars and crusades.

It is apparent from the above lines that Dalpat Chauhan favors socialism and maintains that the real struggle is not amongst the castes rather it is between the two classes i.e. the rich and the poor which at certain times becomes apparent in the form of caste struggle. On the one side, there is a class of people who possesses everything and does not know the meaning of deprivation while on the other hand; there is yet another class which is deprived of even the ample resources to carry on the strings of life. Another such contradictory picture has been drawn by Sahil Parmar in one of his poems *India is my Country*:

“When on Janmashtami You left in your car with your family  
Busy I was mending my daughter’s torn frock.  
Ever since she has come of age. Full five fairs have come and gone.  
I have not brought her A toy car that can be wound.  
A stone came flying From your terrace one day  
During the reservation riots. And hit me hard on the temple  
Instantly drawing blood. A flaming torch followed  
And reduced my house to ashes.”

(Parmar, 50)

The image of four-wheeler ‘car’ and a ‘toy car’ shows difference between the richness enjoyed by high caste people and poverty endured by the low caste people. A poor father is

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not in condition to take his daughter to the fair and bring her a toy car, while rich people enjoying all whatever is offered by the Omnipotent God. In addition to this, Sahil Parmar reminds us of one of the historical incidences: Anti-reservation stir. Several Dalits were brutally treated during those riots. The poet in the above mentioned poem expresses the painful condition of the deprived ones. For this reason only he becomes furious and wants to create upheaval in the society.

A note of protest against the contemporary order is also quite apparent in the poetry of Shamat Parmar. Injustice done and atrocities committed against Dalits filled his heart with pain and agony for the sufferer. Gradually the accumulation of these feelings turned into a protest. Though the whole Gujarati Dalit poetry is full of the note of protest, Shamat Parmar is famous for the use of strong tone and harsh and sardonic language which indicates the depth of anguish filled in his heart. In one of his poems *Self-Pride*, he has attacked all high caste people:

“I am proud of myself. I am extremely grateful  
To God for making me a Dalit  
If God...Had made me a Brahmin  
(According to the Varnashrama)  
I would have deceived the people  
By my appearance and False chanting of shlokas,  
Frightened them in the name of religion  
Feeding on delicious food at ceremonies  
On good and bad occasions.  
If God... Had made me a Vaishya  
(According to the Varnashrama)  
I would be making profit By dishonesty and hoarding  
By creating artificial shortage And intellectual theft.  
By distributing I would gain By selling I would gain  
(the partition of India)  
If God...Had made me a Kshatriya  
(According to the Varnashrama)  
The king of a small kingdom would I be  
Enjoying wine and women. And looted eighteen times

The temple of Somnath. Armed fully with weapons  
Failed to protect this nation I would have watched it  
Becoming a slave.  
Thank...God...That He made me a Shudra  
And liberated me from all these sins.  
That is why I am proud of myself..."

(Parmar, 58)

The poet has called all high caste people as dissolute, immoral, dishonest, corrupt and devoid of any values. This is the new consciousness and new spirit. The new generation of the Dalits questions those who say their identities are better than that of Dalits'. Why should they be considered superior to Dalits who are hardworking, honest, living on their own labor, believers in human dignity and human fraternity?

The feeling of revolt can also be seen in the poetry of Kisan Sosa. In his poem titled *The Inheritance*, he talks of the wretched and dismal life the Dalits have inherited. He says this in the following words:

"The stale old air we have inherited  
The helpless prayer, we have inherited.  
As a ceiling we got rusted tin  
The wall of fear we have inherited.  
The back got the dried river of sweat  
And the eyes had inherited the empty well.  
The thirst in the corridor and in the house hunger  
The mind had inherited the desire for a silent cry.  
Where the self-esteem is wounded and screams,  
Lying in a bleeding corner, we have inherited.  
Wherein so many snakes move and move  
that black box, we have inherited.  
Come on, let us turn into a sun and set a fire  
The night that is nightmare, we have inherited."

(Sosa, 75)

The feelings of deep agony and pain are reflected in this poem. The poet notes that the Dalits have inherited nothing except anguished life. Their gloomy life is projected in the phrases

like 'stale old air', 'rusted tin', 'wall of fear', 'dried river of sweat', 'empty well', 'in the house hunger', 'a silent cry', 'a bleeding corner', 'nightmare'. The Dalits have not gained fresh air to breathe, a clean house to live in, and enough food to eat. They are deprived of the basic essentialities of life- *roti, kapda aur Makan* (food, clothes, shelter). In addition to this, they are also not given due place in the society. They have continued to remain neglected and ostracized in the Hindu society. The ancient Hindu scriptures have imposed a series of social, political, economic and religious restrictions of the lower classes, making them completely dependent on those above them. They have been relegated to menial occupations, forced to live outside the village. They have lived a life full of physical degradation, insults, and personal and social humiliation. Physical contact with the untouchables has been said to be polluting, even their shadows have been considered defiling. That is why the poet says that their 'self-esteem is wounded'. They have menial jobs to do. They have to toil harder and harder getting exhausted for laborious work. The poet expresses their physical condition in the line: 'The back got the dried river of sweat'.

It does not require much intelligence to feel the pulse of the Dalits' problems. That humiliation and sense of nothingness which is associated with the status of the deprived people is a chief characteristic of the Gujarati Dalit poetry. The poets cannot forget how they have to keep on standing with folded hands in front of their masters and their begging. The pages of their poetry are filled with their servile and slavish condition. One another prominent Dalit voice, Raju Solanki highlights this image through following lines of his poem titled *To Walk on the Feet Mattered Most*:

"You came, conquered and enslaved us. Can history be so simple?  
You might have come on horses and fought with iron  
Was every epoch of progress full of pain?  
Let us ask Unknown frightening past  
Whose present is as frightening, too,  
Was slavery of man by man predestined?  
We too had danced with zest,  
Worshipped, Shivlinga, mysterious and meaningful,  
We too were afraid of the unknown land  
Where questions begin and reason remains without any answers.  
Perhaps your almighty could have showered compassion on us, too,

By giving us  
A small boat to rescue ourselves from this man-made disaster.  
But his doors remained shut, which was inevitable.  
We continued to sweat among the pyramids  
Got frightened by the moored ships on the seashores  
We were separated from mother, wife and children, dearer than life,  
Sold in foreign lands.  
...  
Exploitation, injustice, oppression.”

(Solanki, 64)

Raju Solanki puts forth a very apt question in the very beginning of this poem before the so-called upper caste- ‘Can history be so simple?’ for the depressed people, the past is ‘unknown’ and ‘frightening’ because they were forced to live in a dark, dingy and unhygienic place. There is hardly any light from the dim and flickering lamp blown by the *Savarnas*. The poet again asks an unanswerable question: ‘Was slavery of man by man predestined?’ or is it a ‘man-made disaster’. The latter is the answer because the God has made everyone equal, but it is high caste people who separated man from man. They have ‘conquered’ and ‘enslaved’ them so as to establish their supremacy. It is not their past which was humiliating for them, but also their ‘present is frightening’. The line ‘We continued to sweat among the pyramids’ shows the hardships these people have undergone throughout their life. For example, they have to bring water from a spring flowing miles away. They have to do lowly jobs like breaking of rock in a scorching heat, spreading of coal tar on the roads or selling bundle of firewood to get basic like salt or oil.

Thus Gujarati Dalit poetry can be seen as a product of new consciousness. It presages a new caste-system, overthrowing the dominance of the so-called middle-class conventional norms and standards. It breaks new grounds in terms of experience, sensibility and expression. It is revolutionary in terms of idiom, diction and style, opposing the established aesthetic norms and literary criteria. For example, if there is choice between truthfulness and elegance, a Dalit writer chooses to be truthful rather than being elegant. They shatter their poetry to pieces. They fill it, adding indecent expressions, with deliberate distortions. It is nothing wrong to say that their poetry is born out of a social situation, out of social context. It is an outcome of social compulsion as well as of individual creative urges. It is social document in the sense

that it is an imaginative reconstruction of vital truths about their individual lives and the lives of the members of their community. It is societal rather than an individual in character. It sustains itself on liberal, humanitarian ideology mainly drawn from such sources as Dr. Ambedkar's and Mahatma Phule's writings, Marxism. The stunning, heart-rending, traumatic experience it treats shakes the readers' consciousness. It destroys the readers' fake sense of self-assurance and self complacency and finally brings him out of his ivory-tower existence. It wounds his pride by giving expression to its author's fury and frustration but heals the injuries inflicted on him by presenting a vision in which all-encompassing love and humanity.

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