

## Chapter IV

### Praveen Gadhvi: Village, *Vas* and the Question of Authenticity

Praveen Gadhvi, though by caste he is an OBC (Other Backward Caste), has engaged himself with Dalit literary activities since the commencement of conscious Dalit literary activities in Gujarat. He has been writing short stories and composing poems on Dalit life and issues since 1970s. His poetry collections are *Bayonet* (1985), *Padachayo* [Shadow] (1996), *Tunir* (2000), and *Dalit Vani* [Dalit Voice] (2006). His Dalit poetry is also translated into English in two collections— *The Voice of the Last* (2008) and *Poet's Voice* (2013).<sup>1</sup> He also writes Dalit short stories. He has published his short-stories in two collections— *Black Pain* (2011) and *The City of Dust* (2011). At present, he is the President of Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Akadami.

In this chapter, I discuss Gadhvi's poetry in the context of the idea of the village. I situate these ideas in the conceptual schemes proposed by Gandhi and Ambedkar. I deal with the question of how village as a social space affects Dalit life. Another strand of this chapter deals with the question of authenticity, as it is often argued that the non-Dalits cannot adequately deal with Dalit issues in their literary expressions. In order to do this I draw on Praveen Gadhvi's poetry. I juxtapose them with other poems of Gujarati Dalit poets in order to probe the question of authenticity in a richer way.

Village as an ideological category has retained its hold on the modern Indian imagination. The village is a unit of the rural. Rural is often defined in the context of socio-economic entity, a

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<sup>1</sup> Harish Mangalam has selected some poems from Gadhvi's earlier collections and published as *Dalit Vani* (2006). *The Voices of the Last* (2008) is English translation of *Dalit Vani* (2006). *Poet's Voice* (2013) is translation of selected poems of Gadhvi by Atul Parmar.

geographical area where Industry has not developed yet and population largely depends upon traditional occupations like farming, animal husbandry, artisanship etc. The Indian rural society is not uniform in its cultural manifestation. Its cultural symbols, language, food, costumes and social customs vary from area to area. The extreme geographical, historical, ethnic peculiarities make its cultural patterns diversified and unique. Its agrarian socio-economic structure has been largely self-sufficient for its social and economic existence. The rural society comprises a large number of villages. In India, a majority of population lives in the villages. The village generally reflects the values of social organizations of its inhabitants. The village “was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design which was reflected in the basic values of Indian civilization” (Beteille 1980:108). In India, village has acquired the status of a primary unit which represents basic fabric of the Indian civilization in general and Hindu social organization in particular. Renowned social scientist M. N. Srinivas claimed that one could generalize about the social processes and problem to be found occurring in a great part of India by studying a village culture as its specimen (Srinivas 1955: 99).

The idea of the village took strong hold during the freedom movement where many leaders invoked it in different contexts. Though disagreement and differences prevailed among them due to their different ideological leanings, the ‘village’ continued to be a core concept in the formulation of the idea of traditional Indian society. Thus, the village remains an important category which represents the general Hindu social culture with its regional diversities throughout India. This importance can be gauged from the fact that on the road to independence, the Constituent Assembly of India had to grapple with this category while defining the basic unit of Indian polity. It became the matter of much heated debate whether to consider the individual or the village as the primary unit of political structure of the country. To go back to the structure

of villages, mostly the religious and cultural scenario of a village was primarily dominated by the upper caste Hindus, especially the Brahmins. The caste system was strictly maintained in the villages. It is important to keep in mind that although the social structure of the Indian villages underwent change throughout the history, the significance of caste system in the inter-relation of inhabitants never changed.

The socio-political scenario in the Indian villages has witnessed interesting changes in history. The Indian villagers were not inclined to politics. This tradition of socio-political passivity among the Indian villagers continued during the medieval period too. However, the Indian villagers begin to be active in political affairs during the British period particularly after the advent of Gandhi.

The village as a geographical and mental space looms large both in Gandhi and Ambedkar but in radically different ways. Whereas for Gandhi, village symbolised the very ‘essence’ of the Indian civilization, Ambedkar considered village as nothing but the very symbol of backwardness and squalor. To understand the total disconnect between Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s concept of village, we need to look at their idea of village first and then compare it.

### **Gandhi and the utopia of Indian village:**

For Gandhi, the village was the core of Indian civilization. In a letter to Nehru on August 23, 1944, he wrote, “For me India begins and ends in the villages” (*CWMG* Vol.76: 45). He considered the village as a specimen of traditional Indian culture. For him, it reflected Indian society and culture in its purest form with its vices and virtues. In fact for Gandhi, the village represented India in microcosm where one could witness Indian culture and social life. This is not too far from the sociological understanding of India in Gandhi’s time. This understanding of

the village is common to modern Indian imagination. The village, it was taken for granted, generally reflects the values of social organizations of its inhabitants. Gandhi has often idealized the village life in his writings and speeches. Though his thoughts evolved with time, he did not advocate urban life at any point of time. For him, the idea of the village had become a handy ideological construction that could bring the necessary cultural confidence among the rural masses. He contrasted Indian villages with the cities developed by the British Government and attempted to prove that India lives in the villages

Gandhi asserted the tradition of the Indian village by glorifying the institution of *the Panchayat*. This can also be seen as a deeply political move by Gandhi where he realized that no mass movement in the country can be carried out without getting the people of the villages along. So, he sought support not only from the elites of urban localities, but also from the village folks. Gandhi idealised village. For him, “Village was the site of authenticity, the real / pure India, a place that, at least in its design, had not been corrupted by the western influence” (Jodhaka 2002: 3346) Gandhi wanted to establish real Swaraj by reviving and reforming the village culture that is why he insisted, “The uplift of India depended solely on the uplift of villages” (3346). Moreover, early in his political life, in a letter addressed to Lord Ampthil in 1909, he wrote: “To me the rise of cities like Calcutta and Bombay is a matter for sorrow rather than congratulation. India has lost in having broken part of her village system” (CWMG Vol. 11: 509)

For Gandhi, the village was not a small settlement but the essence of Indian civilization. He believed that the Indian village has a system and patterns that can be a healthy alternative to the urban life. Indian village for him is ‘a congeries of republics’ (CWMG Vol. 76: 4). When he asked about revival of village life, he was not blind to its flaws. Gandhi believed that compared

to the urban areas, where people are 'educated and broad minded', the villages are the 'centres of orthodoxy' (Jodhaka 3347). In his revival and reform agenda he wanted the village society to give up the practice of untouchability and he also wanted to 'reform' the Dalits. He wanted the untouchables to help in this endeavour. He wanted them to "observe the common cleanliness, refrain from eating meat of dead animals and from drink, send children to school, remove untouchability among themselves and generally carry on such reforms within as is possible" (CWMG Vol 51: 406). Considering his reform efforts, it can be said that his ideal village didn't exist; it was only 'a futuristic one'. His ideal village was yet to be constructed with concentrated efforts by dedicated workers. Gandhi writes in *Harijan* in 1942:

There will be no caste such as we have today with their graded untouchability.... To model such a village may be the work of a life time. Any lover of true democracy and village life can take up a village, treat it as his world and sole work, and he will find good results. He begins by being the village scavenger, spinner, watchman, medicine man and schoolmaster all at once. If nobody comes near him, he will be satisfied with scavenging and spinning. (CWMG Vol 76: 308-309)

Gandhi sought to provide an alternative to the West by ensuring social equality in the Indian village not by stern laws or by violence, but by persuading people and invoking their moral duty. His aim was to achieve welfare without law and punishment. His vision of the village was based on the simplicity of a village. The simplicity includes self-reliance and equality. The most striking thing about Gandhi was that he wanted to sustain and strengthen the village and its structure. Gandhi's 'village' is not the resurrection of the old village with its crude inequalities and scarcity but the fresh formation in the context of modern democratic values. Village, as conceived by Gandhi is "the practical embodiment of non-violence in the spheres of politics, economics and sociology" (Vyas: 07).

### **Ambedkar and the dystopia of Indian village:**

Whereas for Gandhi, village is the utopia of socio-cultural organization, for Ambedkar the same village is the site of dystopia. Ambedkar locates the Indian village as a site of social evil. Ambedkar perceives the village as a unit of the Hindu society where inequality dominates in every sphere of daily life. He portrays a vivid picture of this inequality: the village is divided into various caste *mahollas*. The caste Hindus live inside the village whereas the Dalits are forced to live on the outskirts of the village. The Dalits have to follow every code decided by the upper caste Hindus without any questioning. The Hindu traditional idea of purity and pollution creates boundaries among various castes also. The Dalits are not allowed to have basic rights. They are not allowed to acquire land or a *pakka* house. They are prevented from taking water from the village well, wearing ornaments made from silver or gold, riding on horse and wearing decent cloths. Moreover, they have to perform certain duties without remuneration or reward such as scavenging, carrying messages of death to relatives living in other villages. In addition, punishment for any mistake or offence, even when committed by an individual, is always meted out the community. In his book, *Untouchables or the children of India's Ghetto* (1951), Ambedkar describes the position of untouchables in the rural India. He describes that they are not allowed to earn a decent livelihood. They are not allowed to purchase land which meant they were supposed to remain as labourers. He painfully describes that the main means of livelihood for untouchables is begging for food from caste Hindus. (Coward: 62) This picture for Ambedkar represents the essence of village community in India. It represents a power structure where the Dalits are always at the margins without any rights and without any dignity.

For Ambedkar, “The Hindu village is the working plant of the Hindu social order. One can see there the Hindu social order in operation in full swing” (*BAWS* Vol. 5: 19). When the Bombay Legislative Council debated to enhance the powers for *panchas* through a Village Panchayats Bill, Ambedkar strongly opposed it. He insistently argued;

A population which is hidebound by caste; a population which is infected by ancient prejudices; a population which flouts equality of status and is dominated by notions of gradations in life; a population which thinks that some are high and some are low — can it be expected to have the right notions even to discharge bare justice? Sir, I deny that proposition, and I submit that it is not proper to expect us to submit our life, and our liberty, and our property to the hands of these *panchas*. (Aiyar 2014 web)

### **Rethinking the Indian Village:**

Though Gandhi and Ambedkar largely agreed on the fact that the village represents the traditional social order of India, the disagreement prevailed on the issue of its merits and relevance in the modern democratic society. They were on two different extremes while evaluating its place in the future of India. Surinder S Jodhka observes:

The national movement for independence was much more than just a struggle waged against foreign rulers. Not only did the national identity of modern India consolidated itself during these mobilizations, many of the regional and community identities were also shaped and sharpened during this period. Along with the rise of these identities, the newly emerged middle classes also spent a great deal of energy in generating new knowledge about their cultures and regions. (Jodhka: 3344)

This conception of village has to be seen in the broader perspective of building a nation-state. In the debates of nation-state the question of culture and sites of culture inhabits an important place. We can locate most of the spokespersons of the nation-state within the matrix of tradition, culture and modernity. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the reformers attempted to

synthesize local traditions with modernity that had come through western education as well as western political dominance. The political leaders had their own ideological agendas and visions for the future of their community and they also had their own ideas of what constituted a nation and what would constitute an ideal socio-cultural organisation in India. However, the basic issue before them was to define the nation as a single political and cultural entity. Thus, the struggle to establish one's own idea of India was at the base of social and political discourse. Gandhi wanted to revive Hindu culture with its reformed form in the village, whereas Ambedkar found no hope of reformation in the 'village republic' and he advocated against the very idea of the village that Gandhi used to glorify. The 'caste system' and 'village community' were the most important categories which generally make Indian culture different from the west. Gandhi's extensive travelling through Indian villages and Ambedkar's living in a village in his early life gave both of them first-hand experience of the Indian village. But Gandhi was looking at the village from an upper caste perspective, whereas Ambedkar from a lower caste position.

Ambedkar had a strong disagreement with Gandhi as far as social structure of the village is concerned. For him, the Indian village is an epitome of narrowness and casteism. What Gandhi wished to reform involved a long and continuous process. Ambedkar looked for another alternative to address the issue. He was against Gandhi's idea of the reform and revival of old village structure. Ambedkar's views on village life were the result of his first-hand experience as a Dalit. He represented the most downtrodden section of the society. His education and analytical ability gave him a full understanding of village life and its implications for the life of the Dalits. He was looking at the village from below, as a member of the downtrodden when Gandhi's vision was from above, a patronizing outlook. Inevitably they differed in their attitudes. Ambedkar looked more like a revolutionary and Gandhi a reformist.



Ambedkar, like Gandhi, also had his views on 'village'. Ambedkar looks at the Indian civilization as the Hindu civilization and the village is a specimen of that civilization. The social life of an Indian village shows how Hindu civilization interconnects different castes with graded untouchability. For Ambedkar, village does not include the untouchables; they are outsiders for an Indian village. Ambedkar believes that the Indian village is divided into two parts, the touchable and the untouchable. Ambedkar writes in his famous book, *The Untouchables*: "The Hindu society insists on segregation of the untouchables. The Hindu will not live in the quarters of the untouchables and will not allow untouchables to live inside Hindu quarters...The Hindu lives in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto" (Jodhka: 3350). The touchables, the upper caste Hindus are a dominant community, both economically and politically whereas the untouchables are a dependent community. The untouchables have to follow the rules set by the upper caste Hindus. The untouchable cannot enjoy same rights as the touchable. While discussing in the Constituent Assembly, he brought out many important issues related to the Dalit life in the village. The discussion was on what should be the basic unit of Indian civilization. On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1948, in the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar stood against the inclusion of Village Panchayat as the basic governing unit and he categorically conveyed his views, that "I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India...What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?" (Ambedkar: Speech in Constituent Assembly). His concern was clear he was looking at the village from a Dalit point of view, where he could not find any sign of equality or anything worthy of praise. Ananya Vajpeyi has rightly observed:

Gandhi could recognize the village, which he had romanticised as a kind of indigenous utopia, to be a socio-economic space of exploitation and oppression. Ambedkar meanwhile could acknowledge that the yearning for equality and recognition is not answered by a struggle for political rights and social justice

alone, but ultimately must assume the dimensions of a deeper quest for transcendent religious truth.  
(Vajpeyi: 2014 web)

Ambedkar was hesitant and vigilant about Gandhi's traditionalism. Ambedkar exposed the "swamp of caste prejudices that lay beneath the veneer of Gandhi's instinctive traditionalism" (Vajpeyi 2014). He could see beyond the surface the caste prejudices that lie within the traditional social structure of the village. Gandhi warns about dangers of urbanisation and erosion of capitalism. He was a staunch advocate of village life and wanted to reform the de-humanising aspects of caste and village structure by concentrated efforts. Gandhi was against modernity whereas Ambedkar was against the traditional casteist social structure of village. Gandhi believed that the modernity of urban life would lead to estrangement from an organic community and bring it near the de-humanising aspects of the technology and urbanisation.

Traditions in Indian social context are largely associated with the caste system and its observance. The caste occupations, social customs and taboos constitute the specific tradition of a group or community. Every caste shares some common social traditions along with its own unique traditions. The uniqueness determines the relationship within the caste and outside the caste. It is largely related to the caste occupations, social interactions, marriage norms and death rituals. What makes one group different from the other is a result of their unique traditions. For instance, the costumes, marriage songs, house design, death rituals and community dialect of the Rabari community in Gujarat are quite different than that of Patel community. Though they share common geographical space and religion their community traditions are by and large quite different. Each and every caste group has its own uniqueness that creates a kind of insulation and opening which determines its relationship with other communities.

Traditions, particularly social and religious, have not altered their importance much throughout the history. They have retained their place in the modern era too. Ashis Nandy, while describing the conflict between tradition and modernity, in his book, *The Intimate Enemy* writes;

On the one side there are the modern cult figures who stress the spiritual India to exclude the materialist India from India. As they themselves become commodities in the western markets-place of spiritualism and instant salvation, as they become more and more dependent on major structure of the modern world, as they legitimize ancient thought through modern science, and as they adapt traditional knowledge for solving modern problems at the risk of trivializing both, these gurus reportedly rediscover for the Indians their true spiritual destiny! (2011: 83).

Nandy raises a valid question; ‘Person can be hypocrites. Can culture can be so?’ The coexistence of tradition and modernity has made the village a more complex entity. The encounter of tradition with modernity often creates certain contradictions, adjustments, and conflict also.

If it is looked at in the context of the post - independence India, the constant contact with the west, the globalization of the economy has not only westernized urban space in India but it has also influenced rural India significantly. The introduction of technology in production, communication and transportation has changed the face of the rural India. The use of modern technology has changed the structure of interdependency and impacted socio-economic traditions. This change has been quite uneven. The rural India is, now, somewhat modernized with its material amenities like roads, schools, *pucca* houses, vehicles, cell phones, internet etc. Technological changes have occupied a conspicuous place in the life of the people. However, what has been less influential is the change in the social structure and interpersonal relationships in rural communities. The resistance offered by the caste ridden society has been enormous and

adamant. Equality and liberty, the major markers of modernity, find it difficult to enter the social space.

When it comes to caste, the Indian village is a homogeneous entity. The village structure is largely same all over India, from Himachal to Tamil Nadu and from Gujarat to Bengal. The occupational and residential demarcation lines of the village social structure have not been blurred even after the advent of modern technology and education. The notion of ‘purity and pollution’ has not lost its significance yet. Considering continuity of caste based conflicts, it seems, the technological modernity has failed in bringing modernity into interpersonal relationships among castes. The caste traditions, as it seems, are still firmly grounded in rural India. Modernity, as it appears, has failed to get over the resistance offered by the caste system. It seems what constituted the village system in pre-colonial India has retained its social structure intact throughout the colonial time, and it has remained active in its relentless resistance to change in post-colonial India too. The western political system of democracy and the changes in the global economic structure, as it appears, have not had any impact on the social traditions of India. The social traditions have retained their position in spite of all the modernizing forces. Thus, the contradiction is that the worst of the Indian traditional social structure comfortably exists with the modern political and economic structure of the West. Indian traditions have been “neither pre-modern, nor anti- modern but only non-modern” (Nandy 2011).

It is a well-known fact that even today village society practices untouchability in its crudest form. The life of Dalits in rural areas is full of humiliation and suffering. The caste system in rural India is deep rooted and upper caste people feel proud in adhering to the caste norms. The recent studies and surveys have exposed the practice of untouchability which still exists in the rural India. While introducing an extensive survey on the practice of untouchability

in rural India, Harsh Mander says: “Our evidence decisively shows that while Dalits have mobilized socially and politically and have secured significant state support such as in the form of progressive legislation, most of them, not all, still continue to subsist in conditions of abject poverty and illiteracy, victimized by untouchability and atrocities across the country” (Shah *et al*: 16)

The recent studies on untouchability in rural India show shocking and disturbing conclusions. I.P. Desai, in his study of the rural Gujarat in 1971, reveals that 70 per cent of the Dalits are not allowed to access public water facilities, 90 per cent denied entry into temples and prohibited from entering upper caste houses. Even educated Dalit find it difficult to get accommodation in upper caste housing locality (A. R. Desai 1998: 180). The untouchability still exists in traditional forms as well as in new and ‘innovative’ forms. Many believe that with the modern socio-economic conditions the untouchability is the matter of past history; unfortunately it is not factually correct. However, the Gujarat Government sponsored study made by CEPT very casually addresses the issue. The report “Impact of Caste Discrimination and Distinctions on Equal Opportunities: A Study of Gujarat” (2013), seems to have been prepared with the intention to understate instances of untouchability in rural Gujarat. The authors of the report say, “The issues of discrimination leading to social differences are largely related to perceptions and past practices over centuries involving a historically determined context” (CEPT 2013). Here, the study obviously has tried to obfuscate the issue. As a matter of fact, untouchability is still an important factor in contemporary India, mainly in rural India; it haunts a Dalit in his/her day-to-day life. The ideology of purity and pollution, with the sanctions of the classical Sanskrit texts, is deep rooted in both rural as well as in urban contexts. By differentiating rural and urban life, Ambedkar aptly observed: “Even to this day a Pariah is not allowed to pass a Brahmin street in a

village, though nobody can prevent or prevents, his approaching or passing by a Brahmin's house in towns" (Ambedkar: 2008. 86). He further argues that the practice of untouchability and segregation has theological support. He says, "There is a support of Hindu scripture which justifies and codifies the separate settlement of the Dalits outside the village". (2008: 37). For instance Manu says,

X.51 But the dwelling of the Chandalas and the Shvapakas shall be outside the village, they must be made Apapratras and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys.

X. 52 Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead (they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments and they must always wander from place to place' (2008: 37)

Despite innumerable constitutional safeguards, laws and political rhetoric, Ambedkar's doubts remain true even after eight decades. In fact, political empowerment of villages has seriously threatened the already marginalized Dalits. However, rising awareness and aspirations for equality in social life has made the Dalits continue to question the fundamental principles of the caste system and its practices.

Whereas Gandhi often warned the masses for their increasing interest in the urbanisation, Ambedkar exhorted the Dalits to migrate en masse to urban areas. Gandhi believed that by escaping the village life, people would meet more troublesome life in the modern cities with its de-humanising technology. He insisted in saving the organic harmony of community by reforming it. He wanted to reform the caste system by abolishing its ugliest by-product, the untouchability and wanted to revive the village life in its ideal form, village swaraj. For Ambedkar, village swaraj was another form of maintaining the traditional caste order.

Gandhi wanted to save Hindu religion with its 'useful' caste system by abolishing untouchability. For him, a pure form of caste system is benign for the society. It has an organic power which can confront with all odds including the foreign powers. He says:

The vast organization of caste answered not only to the religious wants of the community but it answered to its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system and through it they dealt with any oppression from the ruling power or powers. It is not possible to deny the organizing ability of a nation that was capable of producing from the caste system its wonderful power of organization.  
(Gandhi: 1962: 68)

Gandhi wished to make the self-governing village the foundation of free India; Ambedkar, who was trained in the western liberal educational framework and who remained a life-long champion of constitutional democracy, sought solution for the Dalits outside the traditional structure of the Hindu civilization. For Ambedkar the village structure refused to accommodate the idea of liberty and equality which were the pre-requisite for citizenship and thus he countered the idea of village as the unit of political administration and established the individual at its center.

From the above discussion we see that caste has been the mirror through the Indian village was studied and still continues to be studied in Independent India. It is caste which has the marker of inequality and inhuman treatment of Dalits in rural India. For Gujarati Dalit poets, Gandhi's ideal village does not hold any promise for this village was as well as is non-existent. Neither had it ever existed in the history nor in the modern India. For these poets, village is an epitome of social inequality, a result of acute casteism. The benign village as romanticised by Gandhi is yet to emerge after hard social work and constant reformative inputs. It seems that Ambedkar and the Dalit poets could not wait and trust the reformative measures implemented in patronising form from the above. Ambedkar, an arch critic of tradition, advocated the urban life that could provide an immediate relief from the caste atrocities and inhumanities.

## **The Category of the Village and Location of the Dalit Vas:**

The social structure of the village is by and large composed of the joint families. Every family is a unit of an exogamous division of a caste and several such units create an endogamous caste or a sub-caste. In addition, every family of a caste shares a settlement site or *mohalla* or a *vas*. In social, economic and religious affairs, the individual follows his/her family, caste and village norms. Generally, in Gujarat, the village is comprised of the population of three different religions; the Hindu, the Jain and the Muslim. The upper caste Hindus and Jains largely share same social norms and many a time, the same *mohalla*. Mostly, the Muslims are in a minority in the population of the village. One of the important factors of the Hindu community that influenced the Muslims is its caste system. The Muslims also follow the norms of 'purity and pollution' in their relation with Hindu lower castes. It is largely seen that the settlements of the lower caste families are located at the outskirts of the village, adjoining the first neighbourhood settlement of other backward castes and Muslims. The shrinking space of shared neighbourhood has created a wider rift between the lower castes and the upper castes. The Dalits face a larger spatial segregation from the upper caste Hindus. Achuyut Yagnik notes:

In the traditional layout of both village and cities, they (Dalits) always had separate colonies and this arrangement continues till today and one would scarcely find a Dalit residing in a Savarna housing complex. Even during the height of 'Hindu unity', no attempts were made, from either side, to breach this *Lakshman Rekha* (2005: 239)

The lower castes, the OBCs and the Muslims often share some socio-economic features like non-vegetarian food habit, agrarian economic dependence and some spiritual traditions. Therefore, their solidarity somewhat remained intact as the result of their inter-personal necessity in economic and social issues. Many lower caste Hindus regularly visit Sufi shrines, and



participate in Muslims festivals like *Taziya* and *Urs*. The social transactions between these communities are developed on the basis that they face by and large the same kind of discrimination from the upper castes. However, the some higher OBCs often feel more proximity with the Brahmin, Vaniya and Patidars than the lower castes. The caste solidarity between the lower castes and OBCs is the result of inter personal necessity in economic and social issues. Even in urban areas, like Ahmedabad, the lower castes Hindus and the Muslims traditionally live in the same or adjacent neighbourhood (Simpson: 2010). In Ahmedabad and other places, the textile mill workers consisted of mostly Dalits, OBCs and Muslims. For example, during the 1980s when the Gujarat Government declared the reservation for the OBCs, the upper castes opposed it violently but it was largely defended by the lower castes. Moreover, during the Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002, the OBCs and the lower castes played a significant role in protecting the Muslims in the rural Gujarat but in urban areas the scenario was quite different, they were used by the Hindu rightist organizations against Muslims. Thus, the relationship among them particularly in rural areas has remained quite cordial and interdependent.

### **Question of Authenticity and Praveen Gadhvi, a non-Dalit Poet:**

Praveen Gadhvi, a Gujarati poet who was born in OBC caste, a 'Gadhvi' family; has composed poems thematizing Dalit anguish and pain. His social status of lower OBC allowed him to experience, mingle and articulate Dalit life. His position, as it seems, is the sign emerging Dalit-Bahujan solidarity. Not all but some lower OBCs do face same treatment from the upper caste Hindus that bring them near to the Dalits. 'Gadhvi', a lower OBC community, traditionally live near the Dalit *mahollas* particularly in north Gujarat. His spatial and social proximity in the rural life must have allowed Gadhvi to engage with Dalit causes. He came into contact with the members of Dalit Panthers late in 1978. However, before that he had the opportunity to share the

pains of his Dalit friends while living very near the Dalit *maholla* in his childhood. He also experienced kindness and love from Dalit women who often gave him *gundas*, a kind of pulpy fruit which he tends to consider as a formative influence on his Dalit attitude. During the period of his study he used to live at Rajpur-Gomatipur in Ahmedabad, a largely Dalit populated area where he had the chance and choice to share pains and agony of Dalit community. Moreover, he belongs to Gadhvi caste, an OBC community which places him between the lower caste and the upper caste social conditions. He himself suffered a specific kind of untouchability. Their community had to suffer segregation and untouchability. Brahmins prohibited them to dine in the same row with the upper caste Hindu. (Vankar: 2003: 35-36). So, Praveen Gadhvi did not observe a kind of insularity which cut him off from the access of experiences which a Dalit underwent. He articulates a position which places him very close to the Dalit experience. He is more at home in expressing Dalit experience. The authenticity which he performs has come from his consciously holding the position and from the space that he has acquired in the Dalit community. His is 'a unique case', as Rupalee Burke puts it, "of choosing to de-caste and thereby welcoming downtrodden mobility in a very different sense" (Burke *et al* 2008: v).

By his conscious choice, he has engaged with Dalit socio-economic conditions in the process identifying himself with the Dalit cause. His poetry is considered by many in Gujarat as equal to those of Dalit poets who are born into lower caste families and who write drawing from their 'lived experiences.' Although he has written addressing the mainstream themes too, he is also accepted and honoured as a Dalit poet in Gujarat by the Dalit literary community as well. Through his poetry we can undoubtedly perceive his understanding of the issues related to the Dalits. His Dalit poetry volumes—(1985), *Bayonet* (1985), *Padachayo* [Shadow] (1996), *Tunir* (2000), *Dalit Vani* (2006), *The Voice of the Last* (2008), *Poet's Voice* (2013) emphatically

presents him as a Dalit poet. His volumes are also hailed as volumes of ‘Dalit poetry’, yet, his works pose the question of authenticity: how valid is it for a non-Dalit author to be characterized as a Dalit writer?

Traditional thinking suggests that it is the authenticity of those born in lower caste families that can alone give literary expression to Dalit conditions. Undoubtedly, the ‘lived experience’ is the foundation of Dalit literary output but, of course, there is a certain space and position from where a writer who is not born in a lower caste family can thematize the issue related to the Dalit community. The space and position which a non-Dalit writer acquires come from his conscious ‘embrace or an act of love’ and from the knowledge and empathetic understanding of the experience which a Dalit undergoes.

As we know, the term ‘Dalit’ is a more inclusive term than Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’. ‘Dalit’ has ‘a greater ability to reach out to the large sections of the people’ (Guru 2005: 67). Baburao Bangul also defines the term by suggesting its inclusiveness. He says, ‘the word ‘Dalit’ does not refer only to Buddhists and backward class people but to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed’ (Wankhade 1994: 317). Sharankumar Limbale defines it, ‘...it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included’ (Limbale 2010: 30).

Mohan Parmar, a well-known Dalit novelist and critic divides Gujarati Dalit writers into four distinct categories. The first category includes those writers who do not care for literary standards but ‘concentrate on the articulation of the fundamental problems of the Dalits. Their target is to initiate a social revolution’. The second category includes those writers ‘who are committed to Dalit consciousness, but who strive to preserve artistic levels in their works’. The

third category consists of those ‘who seem to be concerned with literature only and the literary worth of their works’. The forth category includes those non -Dalit writers who are ‘deeply moved by the agonies and torments that the Dalits pass through and are inspired to write about them’ (Parmar in Burke *et al* 87-88). In Gujarati literature, many non-Dalit poets have been dealing with Dalit issues in their works since a long time, even before Independence. The special issue of *Aakrosh*, the poetry journal of the Dalit Panthers, is often considered as the beginning of Dalit poetry in Gujarati. It published significant number of poems composed by Dalit as well as non-Dalit poets. Moreover, the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit poetry, *Dalit Kavita* was published in 1981, edited by Ganpat Parmar, a Dalit writer and Manishi Jani, a Brahmin poet; which contains one hundred thirty nine poems by sixty nine poets, both Dalit and non-Dalit. While inviting poems from various poets for *Dalit Kavita*, the editors circulated an invitation letter. The letter clearly mentions: “We do not consider *narrow* caste criteria for Dalit poetry, but we believe that the poetry which gives voice to the people who are socially, economically and culturally oppressed, and tries to establish their dignity is Dalit poetry for us”(Jani and Parmar 1981: 183; emphasis mine). For them ‘Dalithood’ is not the basic condition for composing a Dalit poem. It means they do not consider ‘lived experiences’ as an inevitable criterion.

On the other hand, Eleanor Zelliot raises a question, ‘Can only Dalits write Dalit Literature?’ and answers it by saying, “Those in the Dalit School would say: Only Dalits can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes’ (Zelliot1992: 18). Pathik Parmar, a renowned Gujarati Dalit critic opines, while admitting noticeable contribution by the writers who are not born in lower caste families to the Gujarati Dalit literature, that there is a clear difference of intensity and in the use of dialect-language between those who have access of ‘lived experiences’ and those who do not have.

(Parmar: 2010: 88). In a symposium on ‘Translating Gujarati Dalit Writing’ at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda held on 19th March, 2011, Neerav Patel, a Gujarati Dalit poet, emphatically asserted that whatsoever their affinity with Dalit masses, or concern with Dalit cause, the non-Dalit writers do not and cannot present ‘the experience’ that a Dalit undergoes. On the other hand, Sharankumar Limbale introduces a set of criteria to judge Dalit writing. He writes: “Dalit writers assert that their literature conveys the life that they have lived, experienced and seen” (Limbale: 2010: 32). Certainly a non-Dalit poet does not have to live and experience the Dalit life but he may have a will and emotional faculties that provide a chance and choice to see and feel what is being lived and experienced by a Dalit. So, the empathy that comes into play with the faculties of sight and emotion create a unique experience in a non-Dalit writer. This might differ from the experience of the Dalit in degree but has the potential to find its output in literary expression.

As I have mentioned earlier many poets of the Gandhian era of Gujarati literature wrote about Dalit issues. Although these poets did not have ‘lived experiences’ of Dalits they did not write about the subject. They firmly raised their voices against many social evils including untouchability. They often looked at the oppressed with sympathy and wrote against the injustices that the downtrodden underwent since ages. It is needless to say that they were chiefly inspired by Gandhi and that most of them belonged to upper caste Hindu families.

Sundaram, a poet of the Gandhi Era was influenced by Gandhiji’s idealism often conveys the theme of untouchability with indignation against the upper caste Hindu. For instance, his poem, “An Untouchable Lady”, portrays a customary incident in which an untouchable lady brings down the ‘*chundadi*’, a kind of shroud, from the bier of an upper caste Hindu’s wife and wears it in the marriage ceremony of her son:

The wife of a seth is covered with colourful Chundadi after she dies,  
The untouchable woman puts on the same shroud when her son marries.

(Sundaram: 1967: 33)

His poem, “Three Neighbours”, deals with the theme of social inequalities and segregation:

The pride of the village is the mansion of the seth;  
And Ram’s marble temple glitters till late.  
Hidden in a corner,  
A squalid smelly corner,  
The palace of Markorbai stands.

(Sundaram: 1998: 01)

Zaverchand Meghani, a staunch disciple of Mahatma Gandhi expresses his righteous anger against untouchability in his poem, “Chhelli Salam” [Last Salute] in this manner:

We slew, burnt, buried under the earth,  
Drove them into forest by calling them demons,  
Built, for the living, a hell away from us,  
(thus we) kept them forever servile brutes.

(Meghani: 1972: 84)

However, Meghani asks a pertinent question to himself in the Preface to *Aektaro*. Interestingly, he named the Preface ‘Atmnirikshan (Introspection)’. He asks, “Whatever I am writing, am I experiencing within myself? Does a poet or artist write only from his own experiences? My answer is ‘no’.” He further explains that his poems related to the agony of the downtrodden are not the result of his own experiences but they are just saplings he has implanted them in his own land. The creator is not the experiencer but he has imagined the sufferings and agonies of the others. A poet cannot make claims as an authentic experiencer always (Meghani 1957: 11-12).

In Gujarat, after the anti-reservation movement in 1981 and 1985, there sprung a host of new Dalit poets. They highlighted the issue in a new and unique way taking inspiration from the teaching of Ambedkar and Marathi Dalit Literature. The earlier approach, particularly during the Gandhi era (1920-1970!) to this issue was reformatory and humanitarian. But the new generation of poets took a different stance in their works and they exhibited aggression and a kind of rebellion against injustices suffered by the Dalits. Many non-Dalit poets, mostly after the anti-reservation agitations and riots in the 1980s, took a different position from the poets of the Gandhi Era. They projected 'something of the other's experience' into themselves and began to compose poetry quite different in tone and articulations although they "do not in any sense have a lived experience of the suffering of the other" (Sarukkai: 2007: 4044). They stand with the oppressed and mingle their voice with them. It is their experience which they have acquired after empathetic relations with Dalit masses and choose to de-caste themselves and have consciously engaged with Dalit's socio-economic conditions in the process of identifying themselves with Dalit causes. Gadhvi belongs to this group of non-Dalit poets.

Sundar Sarukkai classifies experience into two types, "one arising from being in situations not of our making' from which one cannot escape and the other 'arising from situations we consciously put ourselves in" (Sarukkai: 2007: 4046). Gadhvi highlights the latter kind of experience which provides him a kind of authenticity to deal with Dalit themes. By his conscious choice, he has engaged with Dalit socio-economic conditions in the process of identifying himself with the Dalit cause. He himself says:

Although I am not a Dalit by caste but feel their pain as my pain, since my childhood and I write poems and stories. (...) I hope reader would appreciate my labour of love. (2010: 05)

He also acknowledges his affinity with the downtrodden in one of his autobiographical poems:

sky-high screams of atrocities on the downtrodden,

Endless deserts of starvation,

Inexhaustible streams of hot tears...

Seeing all these

I am forced to be a poet. (Gadhvi 2008: 53)

Joseph Macwan, a Sahitya Akadami Award winner Dalit novelist, hails Gadhvi's endeavor and says that 'his every word shows his commitment and compels us to search within' (qtd. in Vankar: 2003: 35). One can clearly perceive Dalit sensibilities in his poems.

Gadhvi mainly deals with three themes— Dalit's life in rural, their predicament and their response/resistance. Gadhvi, in his poem "The Broken Tea Cup", while describing a scene of village life, attempts to present the Dalit life in the village. His poem allows reader to peep into the Dalit life in the village. The incidents in the poem moves round a common village dweller, particularly a sweeper and the broken tea cup. The broken tea cup is rather a factual symbol of treatment that a sweeper of the village comes across. The protagonist in the poem does not offer any resistance. He appears as a mute and utterly downtrodden who has internalised inhumanities as his destiny. The poet also does not present any critique. However, the presentation of a phenomenon of everyday treatment towards the Dalit is a kind of resistance in a hegemonic society. Gadhvi writes:

This broken teacup is hidden under the roof of a village hotel.

It can be unearthed in a police raid.

It is never washed.

It is never rinsed.

Thousands of customers come and go.



Nobody is its customer.  
He comes sweeping the whole village with his broom at the fag  
End of the market.  
He himself cleans the broken teacup.  
Then he wipes it with the ragged tail of his dirty turban,  
And asks for tea.  
Piping hot tea flows from the kettle.  
The broken cup goes back to the roof of the hotel after the tea is drunk.  
Then,  
It is washed by Khoda next morning.  
Khoda the scavenger is its priest.  
The broken teacup is the deity of Khoda.  
This broken teacup is untouchable since centuries. (Burke *et al* 28)

The poem indeed expresses a darker side of the village life, a gloomy spectacle. The protagonist in the poem is a sweeper, a representative of the Dalit community in general and the *Valmiki* community in particular. In Gujarat, and in the large part of India, the *Bhangis*, the sweeper community or the *Valmikis* as they are often called, are regarded as too low in the rank of all Dalits. It was a custom till the early twentieth century that if a member of the *valmiki* community walked along a road or a street s/he had to give a warning by calling out ‘*agha rejo, mai-bap*’ (Keep distance, mother-father) to protect the caste Hindus from her/his touch or shadow. They were also compelled to wear specific costumes. The *valmikis* are traditionally associated with the sweeping occupations. Due to their occupation of removing night soil, tanning; and eating carrion meat, they are regarded impure and polluted. The *valmikis* are mostly economically dependent upon the member of the higher castes. They usually survive on leftover and stale food given by the upper caste members in compensation of sweeping or removing dead animals.

Sometimes, on the occasions of festivals and marriages, they are given alms, fresh food and minor gifts. In the poem, Gadhvi, by mentioning the tea cup, he unearths the symbolic value of tea cup attached with *Valmiki*s in particular and Dalits in general; the broken tea cup is a symbol of acute untouchability. Everywhere in rural Gujarat, the village hotel owners keep a broken earthen cup for their Dalit customers. It is kept unwashed in a corner or in a hole in the wall or in the roof. Human irony is that the sweeper, who cleans streets, roads and dirty toilets, is not allowed to clean the cup which he often uses. After drinking tea, he has to keep it unwashed and the next day he can wash and drink tea in it. Gadhvi opens up multiple issues in the poem. The name of the sweeper is Khoda, which means a disabled or handicapped person. The intensity of untouchability, the inhuman treatment, and helplessness revealed in the poem are the ugly markers of the rural society and they keep the Dalit 'disabled' for his basic human rights. There are thousands of Khodas who everyday face such inhuman treatment. According to a study, 98 per cent of the Dalit respondents in Gujarat said that non-Dalits keep separate utensils at home, at hotels and at farms to serve them food or tea. Touching a Bhanghi is more than being polluted for the caste Hindu. It is like something spiritual degradation for them, like falling from the high pedestal of spiritual being, a spiritual sin. In 1921, while addressing in Kapadvanj village of Gujarat, Gandhi took up the issues of *Bhangis*, he said:

The white keeps us at a distance for reasons of hygiene, fearing that their bodies will be polluted. They do not believe that their soul will be polluted. But we have got into the belief that, if we touch an Antyaj, our soul will be polluted and God will punish us! (CWMG vol.20: 62)

Untouchability is a deeper issue; it is more related to religious beliefs than social norms. A dirty or shabby person of the upper caste is not considered untouchable. Dalit rights activist Martin Macwan of Navsarjan Trust says: "In every step of untouchability, the same concept is being

applied - that of purity. Gujarat has only tried to dignify an indignity by calling these separate utensils as 'Ram patra' (*TOI* 8 December 2009). Macwan conducted an awareness drive in the rural areas of central Gujarat to inculcate the message of Dr Ambedkar among the Dalits by giving a slogan, 'Rampatar chhodo, Bhim Patar apanavo' (Give up the *Ram Patar*, and accept the *Bhim Patar*). We need to look at "The Broken Teacup" in the light of this social reality of Dalit life. The poem presents a gloomy spectacle of village life that does not match with the glorified version of the village life.

Gandhi's views, in regard to marriage and dinning, changed in the course of time. His teaching of the 1920s and early '30s that prohibition or at least self-imposed restriction against intermarriage was essential to a rapid evolution of the soul was changed in 1940s. In 1940, he publically approved of the inter-caste marriage between a high caste Hindu boy and a Dali girl. Mr. Radhamadhab Mitra who married a Dalit girl overcoming the caste norms was greeted by Gandhi as: "I congratulate Shri Radhamadhab on his courage in breaking through the rock of caste superstition. I hope his example will be copied by other young men. May the union prove happy" (*CWMG* Vol.78: 334). Gadhvi's condition for reconciliation includes the intimate relationship through marriages between the lower caste and upper castes children. Thus, the inter-dinning and inter-marriages among different castes may blur the social divide between the upper castes and lower castes. Gadhvi also ask for equal treatment when he demands to have alternate turn to pull the dead cattle. In many villages, to cart away dead cattle is only confined to the lower caste. It is considered a polluted occupation but demanding involvement from the upper caste, Gadhvi wants caste Hindus to experience the humiliations that Dalits undergo every day.

Rejecting Gandhi's utopian village and embracing Ambedkar's call to the Untouchables to migrate to urban areas, Gadhvi, in his poem, "Leaving the Village" writes:

We will never cross the river now; we were crossing it daily while  
going to plough our farms.

We were living in this village as a Banyan tree grown on the village outskirts.....

The cyclone could not have uprooted us,

But they had sharp and burnished axes.

By the time of the sun set, they cut off our legs rooted in the earth.

Small farms on riverbank, thatched huts,

Some greenish yellow coloured clothes purchased from a village

Fun-fair,

Some bowls and platters,

Those robbers snatched and burnt everything. (Gadhvi 2008: 20)

It is always painful to leave an ancestral village even it is willingly; but it is rather traumatic when one is compelled to leave it. By mentioning old Banayan tree, the poet suggests the deep rooted existence of Dalits in the village. With their little amenities they had been living, but it is not possible now to stay any longer. Mostly after the Independence, Dalits have realised caste discrimination as unacceptable and have begun to look it as a crime. They have showed their apprehension about it in one or other way. The initial expressions to such apprehension resulted in conflict and clash. The protection of laws has given them strength to struggle for their right but their economic dependence on the caste Hindus often restrain them to stretch beyond the point. However, in many villages, the encounter with the casteist forces reach the level of physical clashes, and it was obviously not possible for them to confront the economically and politically sound hostile forces. Eventually, to save themselves from the daily clashes they have to migrate to the urban areas. The hostility of nature is somewhat not as brutal as the human

created calamity which has the capacity to uproot them from their village. The Dalits have been facing such conditions everywhere in India. Yasavant Manohar, a Marathi Dalit poet also writes;

See this row of sunsets in the cracks of my eyes

Tell me how to live if at each moment one dies,

In the decisive darkness I seek for words, brother. (Manohar in Dangle 14)

The concern of Pathik Parmar's poem, "Holy Terror", resonates with Gadhvi's poem. It describes the life of Dalits in a village called Gokul. The poem, as it seems, endorses Ambedkar's views of village life. He writes;

O! little village Gokul!

Kaniyo lives a different life.

On cattle thrive the villagers.

Kaniyo with labour toils.

Peacocks cry, white pigeons fly,

All about the village.

Dog barks, crow flutters;

And Kaniyo's house surround.

White rivers of frothy milk

In the village gushingly flow.

Kaniyo's frail house of mud

In the depths blood is drowned.

If Kaniyo and his handcart

With a dead bovine arrive,

With much excitement is lit up,

The neighbourhood in his vas. (Burke *et al* 39)

Gokul in Hindu mythology is an ideal village where everybody lives a happy and peaceful agrarian life. Gokul, the word itself symbolises the rural life with its natural serenity, human dignity, and material comforts. However, in the village Gokul here, it seems, everything is in

order with its peacocks, white pigeons and milk. What disturbs the whole picture is Kaniyo, a barking dog and a fluttering crow. By juxtaposing beautiful and ugly, milk and blood, pigeon and crow; the poet attempted to reveal the whole, not partial truths which often appears beautiful. The two extremes run simultaneously in the rural social life. The 'river of milk' and 'stream of blood', dignity and distress exist in an Indian village life. Kaniyo, a Dalit lives in a mud house surrounded by dogs and crows. The image of pulling a dead animal in a handcart towards the Dalit *vas* presents the sharp contrast with the flowing river of milk. Though the name of the village is Gokul and protagonist is Kaniyo, he is an outcaste and has to live with limited resources at the outskirts of the village. The picture which Parmar draws here is 'microcosm' different from the Gandhian picture. It is a representation of the Dalit's life in rural India. What seems serene and placid to some is in reality violent and oppressive.

This poem can also be read as a stinging critique of Gandhi's labelling untouchables as 'Harijans'. This poem clearly shows that changing the label does not bring about any change in the social, political, economic or cultural life of untouchables. In fact, it does not bring about even an iota of dignity to the untouchables, which Gandhi thought that the mere nomenclature will bring. Gandhi, whose first name of Mohandas (a name which is also used to refer to the Hindu god Krishna or Kanhaiya), can become a Mahatma because he belonged to caste Hindu group, but untouchable Kaniyo (yet another name to refer to the same Hindu god Krishna) fails to get any respect simply because he was an untouchable. So, whether the label is untouchable or Harijan, the people of this community are forever denied the dignity of being human. Moreover, the mythological character, Lord Krishna, called Kanhaiyo is associated with cows grazing, but untouchable Kaniyo deals with the dead cows. The contrast is suggestive of a parallel that runs through the Hindu social order.

In another poem, “I am Suffocating”, Patik Parmar captures the pathetic picture of a Dalit’s life in a village and he asks a set of critical questions:

I am born at the outskirts of a village  
That’s why I am kicked and tossed everywhere.  
What do I talk about my life?  
I am groaning because of hunger and pain.  
Nothingness constantly captures my kitchen,  
With a hand only gently touch my belly.  
How long have I to walk with bowed head?  
I hide myself behind the eyelashes. (Mangalam *et al* 221)

Apart from untouchability, poverty is an integral part of the Dalit life in the rural India. Dalits have to generally rely on their traditional occupations and are not allowed to change their occupations. What they earn from their daily sweeping and scavenging is only stale and leftover food. In the modern era, many have changed their occupations, but rural Dalits are still engaged with their traditional occupations. Poverty leads to lack of education and deficiency in health. It becomes a vicious circle for the Dalits. The poet’s question, ‘How long I have to walk with bowed head?’ reveals the present social state of the community. Life has become hell for them due to utter poverty and acute exclusion. The prevailing untouchability is largely responsible for all evils they are suffering in their life. The poem echoes the condition of Dalits that they are not allowed equal access to the various social and economic resources. Though Parmar’s experience is subjective and based on rural Gujarat, it is pertinent to the whole of rural India.

Jayanti Parmar, a Gujarati Dalit poet, invokes Gandhi and recalls his promise to reborn as a Dalit. In his poem, “Rebirth”, he says:

You had prophesied  
That if you were re-born  
It would be in a harijan home.  
Therefore  
I am searching for Bapu,  
I fail to decide  
Is that you whose land was snatched?  
Is that you who was mauled?  
Is that you who had to return  
Empty-handed from the well  
And later be boycotted?  
Speak Bapu where are you?  
Jazmair, Mithaghoda, Ranmalpur,  
Belcchi, Bihar or Andhra,  
Where do you reside?  
In which Dalit house born? (Burke *et al* 78)

Gandhi, while taking about untouchability and stirring morality of the caste Hindu, once said:

I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra, but as an Atishudra. (*Young India*, 4 May 1921, p.144)

Referring Gandhi's statement; the poet uncovers the present situation in the society. Gandhi wanted to purge himself and society as a whole by stirring the moral cord. As a staunch defender of caste system, he took the position to reform and to revive the caste system in its 'purest form' by removing untouchability. His approach was that of self-purification, by invoking moral duty he demanded equal treatment with all human beings. As a matter of fact, he hardly succeeded in his efforts; untouchability has survived and atrocities prevail even so many years after the



independence. What Gandhi demanded from the Caste Hindu people has not been delivered yet. The rural India still witnesses incidents of atrocities like snatching land, beating, sexual harassment, denial of basic facilities, exclusion from social space etc. Jazimai, Mithaghoda, and Ramalpur, mentioned in the poem, are the villages of Gujarat region where heinous incidents of atrocity occurred after independence. In Ranmalpur, when Dalits attempted to use the public well to fetch water in 1974, the caste Hindu attacked them; their houses were looted; and burnt. In that atrocious incident; two Dalits lost their lives, many got brutal injuries and lost houses. (Manubhai Parmar 1975) The poem at the same time becomes a repository of memory other brutal incidents that occurred in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, setting up a link, a pattern and an alternative history of independent India. The poet expresses his anxiety; he thinks that somewhere in such incidents Gandhi would have been hurt. His satiric tone and apprehension is evident in the questions he poses: “Speak Bapu where are you?”, “Where do you reside?” and “In which Dalit house are you born?” Gandhi’s preaching of non-violence and for removal of untouchability has weakened too early and the caste Hindus have been reacting following the caste norms. The poet’s search for Gandhi is a search for the ideals that Gandhi wanted to see in the rural society, the ideals of equality and freedom.

In village, Dalits become easy targets of caste violence and are deprived of safety and security; this leads them to migrate to urban areas. Dalits migrated to the urban areas to save themselves from humiliations and in search of identity. They want to be free from ignorance, caste oppression and poverty. Village cultures have not been receptive to the modern concept of equality and liberty but on the contrary it offers fierce resistance to such values. It is rightly observed by a group of researchers, after studying rural India that “the routine practice of humiliating persons born into particular castes, and social sanction to that practice has gained,

potentially affects every aspect of social life, mental and material” (Shah *et al* 62). After studying the practice of untouchability in 1589 villages in Gujarat, Navsarjan, a leading Dalit NGO observes that “the results of the study clearly indicate that the constitutional abolition and laws, which criminalize the practice of untouchability, are insufficient to end untouchability” (Navsarjan 2009: 33). Gandhi’s endeavors start where the law falls short and when implementation is biased. Gandhi invokes the basic human morality to reform the caste driven society.

### **Caste and the Question of Reconciliation:**

Dalit literature, as a part of protest movement spreads awareness among Dalits and makes caste Hindu rethink about their attitude towards Dalit. As a part of this, Praveen Gadhvi seeks to open a channel or dialogue with the caste Hindus. In a radical departure from the theme of confrontation, he invokes the terms of dialogue. In the poem, “Farewell to Arms”, he puts forward a formula of reconciliation. He directly asks the caste-Hindus to de-hegemonize their positions and share the experiences of being Dalit:

Let us put aside arms and hold a round table conference.

We have no nation, to be proud of.

We have no farm to till, no house to shelter.

You did not leave even a blade of grass for us since times of Aryvart.

We are ready to forgive all. Are you ready to remove the walls from the village?

We are ready to dissolve like sugar in milk.

Will you bear should your Draupadi select our son Galia as her husband?

And will your Arjun accept our daughter Raili?

Let us have turns to pull the dead cattle.

We are ready to eat your leftover food; will you eat leftover food at our marriage ceremony?

Here, Gadhvi uses a two-pronged strategy. One is to present the hand for reconciliation and invitation for a dialogue and the other is that he also presents the outline which this reconciliation should result into. But the poem is also an exercise in stinging satire. Gadhvi is undoubtedly sure that the reconciliatory approach he uses will be firmly rejected by the caste Hindus that is why he provocatively poses the formula of inter-marriage and at the same time also hints that the formula is going to be rejected. The poem is extremely courageous in its tone to ask the caste Hindu to come on table, which is a round table symbolizing equality for all and at the same time invoking the confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar. It is only on a round table meet that dialogue and discussion could be possible and where a Dalit Ambedkar gets the same position as caste Hindu Gandhi.

The reconciliatory tone can also be taken to mean that Dalits want to use all kinds of avenues available for their struggle against caste hierarchy. 'Dalit consciousness' came to the fore in different forms and shades. The line, 'Let us put aside arms and hold a round table conference' is suggestive of a reconciling or negotiating mood. But the question which can be posed to Gadhvi is when did Dalits raise their voice with arms? Dalit have not shown any substantial militant approach against caste discrimination, injustice or atrocities. Phule, Ambedkar and Kashiram attempted to mobilise the masses, but they never preached militancy. The cry in the poem here is for equal share and equal treatment. But the aspiration for reconciliation soon gives away to the tone of despair. It is a moment full of pathos. The poet understands it clearly that his offer of reconciliation and dialogue will be firmly rejected and his efforts of breaking the caste will turn into a futile exercise. This despair is evident when Gadhvi says that Dalits were not entitled to hold land which ultimately kept them landless labours and deprived them of basic amenities. Ambedkar also wrote on this issue: "In an agriculture country,

agriculture can be main source of living. But this source of earning a living is generally not open to the Untouchables” (Rodrigues 328). The economic conditions and deprivation is the result of socio-economic exclusion that Dalits are destined. It resulted into the deep rooted feeling among Dalits that the nation is not ours. Gadhvi raises two more issues following Ambedkar in *Annihilation of Caste*, inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages which have been discussed throughout the Dalit movement. Inter-caste dining and Inter-caste marriages were not possible in the rigid caste systems. By demanding inclusiveness in both inter-dining and inter-marriage, Gadhvi questions the basic norms of the caste systems. Inter-dining especially of a ceremonial kind is an affirmation of inclusiveness. It suggests recognition of the equal worth of castes who share the meal together. The ban on inter-dining with other caste is, therefore, a powerful means of keeping exclusiveness of the particular caste. In Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi enforced inter-dining with Untouchables in 1915, but he took a different position in 1920s. He said:

Hinduism reached the highest limit of self-restraint. It is undoubtedly a religion of renunciation of the flesh so that the spirit may be set free.... Prohibition against inter-dining and inter-marriage is essential to a rapid evolution of the soul. But this self-denial is no test of *varna*. A Brahmin may remain a Brahmin, though he may dine with his Sudra brother, if he has not left off his duty of service of knowledge.... A Hindu who refuses to dine with another from a sense of superiority misrepresents his dharma. (*CWMG* vol.21: 247)

In the traditional caste system, marriage has to be between equals. Marriage is an important institution that shows intimate relationship between two families and castes. The best way, hence, to expect inter-caste marriages is to heighten equality between castes. Ambedkar also said in this context:

The real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling... becomes paramount, the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by caste will not vanish.... (*BAWS* Vol. 1: 67)

Gandhi also publically approved the inter-caste marriages. He wrote in a letter in 1945,

If the marriage is in the same community do not ask for my blessings, however deserving the girl may be. I send my blessings if she is from another community. (*CWMG* Vol.80: 90)

Gadhvi invokes the memory of this Gandhi and mourns the fact that Gandhi's ideals did not bring any change in the status of Dalits. For Gadhvi, Gandhi was a saviour who was wronged by the people. Gadhvi reminds us of Gandhi's wish to be reborn as an Ati-Shudra. Gandhi's love and compassion made him merge with the Dalit masses and desired to be reborn as a Dalit. However, Gadhvi advises him not to be reborn because he may be frightened by the ways Dalit are treated even after a long period of democracy and constitutional shield. Gadhvi, in his poem, "Never Be Mistaken, Mahatma", also warns Gandhi, that the people have already thrown away his ideas and reversed them.

Never be mistaken to be reborn in this country, Mahatma.

They don't have regard for you.

They mock your sayings seated under the very shadow of your statue.

They bath you with liquor.

They burn the pages of the Indian Constitution before your eyes.

They mark on your forehead with the boiling blood of our young

Dalit

sons.

.....

They think that independence means their progress only.

They only want that they and their offsprings can become doctors and engineers.

.....

Mahatma, this ancient country of hymns of the Upanishads has

become the country of wolves.

Thumping the butts of guns they say that they are the only owners  
of this vast country.

They discard us as foreigners.

Those scoundrels want to snatch like a jungle cat half the portion

of bread which you had given us. (Gadhvi 2008: 57)

This poem obviously invokes Gandhi's wish to be reborn as an untouchable in his next life. Gadhvi clearly indicates that Gandhi would not have been able to endure the terrible plight of untouchables even after so many years of independence. Gandhi too would find it difficult to bear the condition of the country in general and of untouchables in particular; Gadhvi says that Gandhian ideals have been thrown away and the country is in such a state that Gandhi would not have even recognized it. Gadhvi says that Gandhi is being humiliated in the present day India. He expresses rage against the killings of Dalits by caste Hindus and is horrified at the fact that the blood of those Dalits is used as an offering to Gandhi. The mockery and humiliation of Gandhi is complete. In a strange way, the poem seems to reincarnate Gandhi as an untouchable person who is doubly humiliated: one by killing those whom Gandhi termed as "Children of God" and the other by desecrating the very text which offered any semblance of dignity to the Dalits, that is, the Constitution of the country. Moreover, the caste Hindus – whose heart Gandhi wished to change – are doing all they can do to perpetuate the caste hierarchy and discrimination not only in religious life but also in social and economic life.

Dalit writing in Gujarat is different from those in other states of India in the fact that whereas in most of the other states, Dalit writers took a radically strong position against Gandhi and his ideas and reject those ideas, in Gujarat, it has been very hard and sometimes impossible for Dalit writers to distance themselves from Gandhi's model of self-purification. The Dalit

movement in Gujarat, it seems from Dalit literature, has not been able to discard itself from the liberal reformist model of Gandhi.

Praveen Gadhvi expresses his gratitude towards Gandhi in his poem, “Gandhi”. He says:

No one, except you, Gandhi, had come to my hut at Champaranya  
Among flies, hunger and stench of the tannery, not even Rama,  
Krishna and Buddha.  
You are the first chapter of my unwritten history.  
You left the garden parties of Prof. Gokhale, well furnished  
Sprawling drawing  
rooms of Jinnah and glittering cities of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras.  
(Gadhvi 2008: 60)

Gadhvi and many other Dalit poets respect Gandhi’s model and do not engage with it in any critical manner. Many Gujarati Dalit writers show equal respect to Gandhi and Ambedkar. For them the Gandhi-Ambedkar dispute and clash does not have a profound thematic value. However, Gadhvi regrets that Gandhi has not been accepted by anyone in totality. Gadhvi writes in his poem, “Nobody Owned Gandhi”:

Somebody believed him Hindu,  
Somebody believed him Moslem.  
Somebody believed him a fundamentalist,  
Somebody believed him a revolutionary.  
Somebody believed him a puritan,  
Somebody believed him a reformer.  
Somebody believed him a supporter of caste system,  
Somebody believed him an untouchable.  
Somebody believed him dead.  
Somebody believed him alive.

He was only human by birth.  
He never became the deity of anybody.  
Somebody believed him of somebody else's,  
Somebody believed him of nobody  
He was so unfortunate.  
Nobody owned him. (Gadhvi 2008: 70)

Gadhvi, for a moment, touches the core issue of Gandhi's dual identity, an untouchable and a *Sanatani* Hindu but he does not spare a line for its critical evaluation. Gadhvi acknowledges both Gandhi and Ambedkar in the same breath. He may be looking at both as complementary to each other. In his poem, "Why so?" Gadhvi says:

Why Gandhi was wearing loin cloth  
Whereas Ambedkar was in suit?  
Gandhi wanted to show the world,  
How untouchables and  
Oppressed of India were  
And Ambedkar wanted to show  
How untouchable and  
Oppressed should be in  
future! (Gadhvi 2012: 75)

In Gujarat, the Dalit social leadership and literary activity have been largely overshadowed by the Gandhian way of looking at the Dalit question. The softness in the attitude is quite visible in Gujarati Dalit poetry in general and Gadhvi's poetry in particular. He writes;

He had no spite with anybody,  
But he had staunch spite  
Against atrocities, exploitation,  
Injustice and untouchability.

.....



.....  
He never sat on a throne  
But he ruled paramountly  
On the hearts of oppressed subalterns.  
He was not a prophet  
He was only  
Gandhi. (Gadhvi 2013: 40-41)

Gadhvi often glorifies Gandhi and failed to evaluate his model critically. The Gandhian model could not succeed as it was expected. The practice of self-purification that Gandhi preached did not bring results. The religious approach had its own limitations but was accepted by a large section of Dalit mass. Later, it was looked at with critical and sceptical eyes by the new generation of Dalits. Even Gadhvi says in his poem “Sparks on Gandhi”:

Why do the apples fall on the ground?  
We had to wait for Newton to realize the reason.  
The moon is hanging in the sky  
Mankind has waited for Einstein to comprehend.  
The same blood flows in each  
And every human being  
How many more  
Buddhas, Kabirs, Ambedkars and Gandhis  
Will have to reborn  
To teach this simple truth? (Gadhvi 2008:64)

The question is not as simple as it sounds. It is complex and large. The deep-rooted savageness among the caste Hindus cannot be easily removed. The helplessness was shared by every reformer from Buddha to Ambedkar. The caste Hindus has not been responding to the genuine demands of the oppressed and untouchables. Ambedkar rightly complains in his famous essay, *Annihilation of Caste*. He writes:

Not only has the Hindu made no effort for the humanitarian cause of civilizing the savages but the higher-caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to the cultural level of the higher castes. (Rodrigues: 271)

Gandhi and his committed cadre worked with missionary spirit but largely failed to convince the caste Hindus for social justice everywhere, from Vaikkam to Ahmedabad. Gandhi encouraged moral introspection and interdependency; and Ambedkar criticized Brahmins and burnt scriptures but stone-hearted caste Hindus responded to them with indifference. The ultimate remedy, as both Gandhi and Ambedkar trusted, was a sound Constitution. Gadhvi beautifully summarizes the two different approaches and their complementarity in his poem, “Gandhi and Ambedkar”. He writes:

Gandhi walked from this end.  
Ambedkar walked from that end.  
They reached the  
Same cross-road of constitution.  
Gandhi walked on truth  
And non-violence path.  
Ambedkar walked on  
Truth and struggle path.  
Gandhi wished equality everywhere.  
Ambedkar wished oneness of hearts.  
Gandhi fought for salt  
Ambedkar fought for water.  
Gandhi wished self- rule  
Ambedkar wished self-respect.  
Gandhi worked hard for lighting the hearts,  
Ambedkar worked hard for firing the hearts. (Gadhvi 2012: 86)

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar chose the different paths to achieve the same goal, says the poet. By and large their perception of the question was different and their ways were unique. However, nobody can question their concern and commitment but they are not above scrutiny of the modern Dalits. Gadhvi endorses their ways and reconciled with the outcome. D. R. Nagaraj also mentions complementarity of the two. He writes in his essay “Self-purification versus Self-respect”:

There is sufficient evidence to prove that Ambedkar and Gandhiji had transformed each other. The latter extended the very scope and definition of, the Harijan cause. It was no more a question of mere untouchability. It had become a larger holistic understanding of the untouchables. Because of the confrontation, both of them had changed their emphasis.... (Nagaraj 2013: 382)

Gadhvi invokes both economic and social status of the Dalits and offers a vision which combines both Gandhi and Marx. He writes:

Please forgive me,  
.....  
Mahatma Marx, Comrade Gandhi,  
I want freedom of speech with stomach stuffed to the full.  
I am human, let me be only human.  
Don't mould me in your socio-economic utopias.  
I want socialism when I am hungry.  
I want America when I am stuffed bellied.  
Why do you entice me like a dog?  
Either a slice of bread or freedom of speech, but  
I want both, because I am human. (Gadhvi 2008: 62)

Gadhvi wants freedom of speech and stomach full. He combines economy and social equality and freedom. He voices a strong urge of a Dalit heart. Economy without freedom and freedom

without economy is insignificant. The poet subtly marks the inadequacies in the Gandhian model. The only economic upliftment of the Dalit does not provide social equality. The poor and landless peasants of the upper caste Hindu do not have to face social stigma but a Dalit inevitably has to face. A landless and poor Dalit is doubly oppressed. Thus, it is important to have both stuffed belly and social equality for the Dalits.

Looking at Gadhvi's poems which mourn the loss of Gandhi and his values, it can be argued that Gadhvi adopts a multi-pronged approach to look at the Dalit question vis-à-vis the caste Hindus. Gadhvi refuses to take either/or position, that is, he does not take either a Gandhian position or an Ambedkarite position. Rather, he advocates both and endorses both. Gadhvi, identifying himself with Dalit issues, reconciles himself with the synthesis of Gandhian and Ambedkarite approaches. His position somewhat differs from the indigenous Dalit poets' approach as they prefer the Ambedkarite ideas to deal with the issues of caste system. In his approach, Gadhvi falls directly in line of Ram Manohar Lohia and D. R. Nagaraj, both of whom too advocates using both Ambedkar and Gandhi to look at Dalit identity. Lohia agreed with Gandhi that caste hierarchy is corroding the very soul of Hindu society but disagreed with him that caste order is inherently good except for untouchability. Agreeing with Ambedkar, Lohia rooted for the annihilation of caste and for state intervention in this regard. He looked up to the state to actively seek to undermine the caste structure and to provide full support for the uplift of the Dalits (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2013: 26). Gadhvi realises that no one position is enough to uplift the Dalits. Exhorting the high caste Hindus to rethink their caste privileges (Gandhian approach) on one hand and making a strong case for assertion for the Dalits' rights (Ambedkarite approach) on the other hand marks the style of both Lohia and Nagaraj. Gadhvi falls in the same

school of thought. Indeed, both self-purification of the high caste Hindus and self-respect on the part of the Dalits is important for Dalit emancipation.