

Chapter II

Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Survey

From the first half of the twentieth century, the lower castes of Gujarat got the chance to acquire formal education. The Gaekwad regime of the Baroda State made education compulsory for the children of every caste throughout its province in 1906. Christian Missionaries also started several institutions in Gujarat in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century for the children of lower castes. After the independence in 1947, education became largely available for all in Gujarat. All these developments gave Dalits opportunity to access education. Many Dalits of Gujarat exploited these opportunities and eventually some of the first generation of educated Dalits began to express themselves in literary forms. They began to convey their thoughts and feelings particularly regarding their social conditions initially through journalistic articles, and later through poetry, short stories, novels, autobiographies etc.

However, Dalit literary expression, especially in the oral tradition in Gujarat region, has a long history and begins from the medieval times. This tradition is predominantly expressed in the form of religious poetry like *bhajans*, *padas*, folk-song etc. Both Dalit and non-Dalit bhakti poets addressed the issues of Dalits' social conditions but with spiritual a perspective. The non-Dalit Bhakti poets like Narshinh Mehta, Pritamdas, Premanand, Bhojabhaga, Akho etc. and Dalit Bhakti poets like Ratanbai, Orasiyo Meghval, Tejanand Swami, Trikam Saheb, Bhim Saheb, Dasi Jivan etc., while dealing with spiritual poetry, often address the Dalit social issues.

Gujarati Dalit poetry in the modern socio-political sense began in the first half of the twentieth century. The modern Dalit poetry can be said to begin as early as in 1930. The first Dalit poem, as claimed by Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Akadami, “Antar Vedana” [Pain within] was written by Manor Gangaram Gangera in 1929.

O! Mother in your lap, I am suffering,
Suffering by the name of Untouchable,
I worship Ram-Krishna; pray, do *havans* and recite Gita,
Serve the goddess cow, yet, my pain has not gone. (Jyotikar 1991: 138)

One reason for the beginning of Dalit literature in Maharashtra can be attributed to non-Brahmin movements which marked its strong presence there right from the second half of nineteenth century. Jotirao Phule and Savitribi Phule were at the forefront of such movements which advocated education for Dalits and women. Jotirao Phule was one of the most major voices in the late nineteenth century against Brahminism. Apart from Phule, 1890s saw the consolidation of Mahars, an Untouchable group in Maharashtra, as a group for demanding social and civic rights under the leadership of Gopal Baba Walangar. The next major name in Dalit movement is definitely that of Ambedkar who coined the term ‘Dalit’ for all those groups who were marginalized by the caste Hindus. In his long political and social career, Ambedkar started three magazines at different points in his life to address the issues related to Depressed Classes - *Mook Nayak* in 1920, *Bahishkrit Bharat* in 1927, and *The Janata* in 1930. Gandhi also, to spread the message of his anti-untouchability movement, started *Harijan* (February 1933) in English, *Harijan Bandhu* (March 1933) in Gujarati and *Harijan Sevak* (February 1946) in Hindi. These magazines created awareness among the various castes regarding the Dalit issues. This awareness was reflected in both Marathi and Gujarati literature of that time. Before

Independence, during the Gandhi era (1920-1948), many non-Dalit writers addressed the Dalit issues under the influence of Gandhi's anti-untouchability drive. In Gujarat, Zaverchand Meghani's *Yug Vandana* (1935), Sundaram's *Koyabhagat ni Kadavi Vani* [Bitter Verses of Koyabhagat] (1933), Umashankar Joshi's drama *Dhed na Dhed Bhangi* [Bhangis, the Untouchable of Untouchables] (1933), Pannalal Patel's novel *Manavi ni Bhavai* [A Drama of Human being] (1947) and Ishvar Petlikar's *Gramchitro* [Portraits from Village] (1950) are some of the examples which dealt with Dalit issues. For instance, Umashankar Joshi, a major Gujarati poet, while dealing with the issue of caste discrimination in his poem, "*Yugdrashta*" [The Prophet] writes:

Hungry, exploited, downtrodden, Dalit all hope for freedom,
Want my words to express the tragedy of these depressed masses.... (Chovatiya: 171)

And in another poem, "*Panchali*" he says:

Not the machine that produces the cloths,
But your labour that weave,
Though you all without clothes. (173)

He also addresses economic inequality in his poem "*Sonathali*" [The Golden Plate] as:

My palm is small,
Hungry –neglected are with empty hands,
Let their bellies be full,
For me it is the only gift. (167)

These writers addressed the issues related to the Dalit's social conditions with sympathy and compassion. They did not have 'lived experiences' but Gandhi's influence made them address the marginalized voices in their literary activities. They could not deal with the issue in all its subtlety and depth but few traces are available in their writing which spread the message of

human equality under the nationalist zeal. Their perspective was quite patronizing; they looked at Dalit issues from the upper caste perspectives with their leaning towards Gandhian ideology.

On the other side, there are some writers who without showing ample understanding of the Dalit perspective, presented a stereotype of Dalits in their literary works. For example, Gijubhai Badheka, a famous educationalist and pioneer of Daxinamurti Education Movement, couldn't grasp the basics of Gandhi's teaching and he wrote many stories to educate children during 1920s. Most probably without realizing, he preached acute casteism in his stories. Most of his stories present Dalits in stereotyped characters. He often presents a Dalit as a 'bad man', a 'criminal', a 'dirty fellow' or a 'wicked person'. Badheka uses pejorative personal names and caste names for Dalit characters. It seems that he unlearned the teaching of Narsinh and Akho. Whatever it might be but it certainly shows deep rooted caste prejudices and Gandhi's teaching was somewhat incapable in wiping it out. Badheka writes:

After two hours doctor came out.

'Who is there?'

'*Saheb*, I am an *antyaaj*, my wife has a temperature so I have come to call you?'

'No, I am a Brahmin; I cannot come to your place'

'*Saheb!* Take bath after visiting, please'

'O! Fool, I will have to change my sacred thread, and if I come into your house I have to change my whole body'¹

These stories show the social picture of the time, intensity of caste biases and insensitivity on the part of Badheka.

The Gandhi era in Gujarati literature withered too soon after the death of Gandhi. Particularly in the modern era we hardly find poets dealing with the themes of poverty,

¹ Dalit activist, Martin Macwan, a Dalit activist brought out castiest narrations from the children stories by Badheka and presented a strong critique on it. See in *DalitShakti*, November, 2004, p5.

untouchability or social inequalities. The modern mainstream poets, it seems, are rather indifferent towards certain social issues. They, as Neerav Patel observes, “could never think why sections of people are not allowed to live as human beings, why large sections of people are unable to earn their daily bread, even after the drudgery” (2011: 27). It appears that to deal with such subjects like poverty, untouchability, or social exclusion is the responsibility of Dalit poets. In other words, the caste issue is seen by the mainstream literati as a problem only for the lower castes who are victims of it.

In 1930s, in Gujarat many educated Dalits started magazines in order to echo the issues of social concern. Journalism was the most preferred medium of expression for quite some time. Along with reporting of incidents, articles on social and political issues and discussion on Ambedkarite ideology, the Dalit magazines gave space to the literary expressions. In 1930, *Navyuvak*, a magazine was started by Lallubhai Dudhabhai Makwana in Ahmedabad. It was the first Dalit magazine which made Ambedkarite ideology available in the Gujarati language. But it was stopped in 1931 due to unfortunate death of its editor. During 1930s, *Dalit Gujarat* published from Vadodara by Nagjibhai Arya.² *Sudharak* (1931), a Dalit magazine was started by Mamaji Lalaji Solanki. Chimanlal Modi edited a magazine called *Dalit Unnati* in 1932.³ During 1930s, certain incidents of resistance and protest against the caste discrimination took place at various places. For instance, in Umata Village (1938), Por-Kubadthal (1937), and Vagosana (1938) Dalits offered stern resistance in the matter of access to the motor-bus travel. Later in January 1947, in Sardhav village near Gandhinagar, an extended Satyagraha took place on the

² Babaldas Chavada's poem was published in *Dalit Gujarat* in 1939. He also composed a poem called “Antyaj” and published in *Antyaj Bandhu* (on 02/04/1947) (Mangalam et al 2015)

³ The following Dalit magazines were started in 1930s- *Jagruti* (1931) by Madhavaji Parmar, *Vijay* (1933) by Kacharabhagat, *Harijan Samachar* (1934) by Khimaji Rathod, *Antyaj Patrika* (1937) by Mathurdas Vilora, and *Savadhan* (1938) by Durlabhji Pithwala, *Antyaj Sewak* (1938), *Bherubandh* (1938) *Adhikar* (1938), *Dalit Adhikar* (1938), *Arya Sandesh* (1939). (Mangalam et al 2015)

same issue. The temple entry agitations were also occurred at various places- Ahmedabad-Kalupur (1941), Dakor (1948), Nadiyad (1948). All these agitations and their reporting in the newspapers and in Dalit magazines created an atmosphere of excitement and awareness among the Dalits.

In 1940s and 1950s, many Dalit magazines and tabloids were also published. They were *Challenge* (1946) by Hirjibhai Patel, *Antayj Bandhu* (1946) by Mithabhai Parmar, *Jay Bhim* (1946) by S. G Rebela and Karashan Leuva, *Hathasal* (1948) by Sonam Makawana, *Samanata* (1951) by B. V. Parmar and Soleman Macwan, *Parimal*(1952) by Nagaji Arya, *Tankar* (1953) by Kemchand Chavada⁴ from Mehsana, *Tamana* (1956) by Jayantibhai Subodha, *Prayaschit* (1957) by Dahyabhai Nayak, *Mukti Sangram* (1958) Karshandas Parmar, *Mayavanshi* (1959) by Mansing Parmar, and L.G. Parmar started *Jyoti* in 1957 Though most of these magazine they gave space to early Dalit poetry.

After Dr Ambedkar's demise on 6 December, 1956 many educated people and mill workers paid tribute in poetry forms, Rameshchandra Parmar published *Anjali*, a collection of tributes in poetry containing 167 poems. Vishrambhai Solanki wrote:

Who said creator has gone,
Builder of Bharat has gone,
Our only guide of Dalits' lives,
Has gone...

Jivarambhai Maheriya paid tribute:

O! God of Dalits, How I offer you tribute?
We have held our hearts; you have abolished our many pains,
Our request to you from our hearts,

⁴ Khemchand Chavada joined the congress party and was elected as an MP from Patan Lok Shabha seat for three terms in 1971, 1977 and in 1989. He stopped his magazine after joining the politics.

Please resurrect again, come back to reduce our suffering. (Mangalam *et al* 2015:05)

Ambedkar's conversion into Buddhism and his death created a new wave in Dalit magazine productions and literary activities. L.G. Parmar started *Jyoti* in 1957. Himmatsinh Vaghela's poetry was published in *Jyoti*.

Not fighting with sword, fighting with the newspaper,

Want to remove this cloud of inhumanity,

Touchables can die but not untouchability,

Want to abolish, the ghost of untouchability. (Mangalam *et al* 2015:04)

Moreover, Laxanandji's bhajans and songs on Ambedkar were published in a booklet called *B. R. Sangit Suman* in January 1957. Most of these bhajans and songs had been in oral tradition since 1942 but they were documented to pay tribute to Ambedkar.⁵

Along with a host of magazines in 1960s and 1970s,⁶ three important and path breaking magazines were started— *Garud* (1973) by Dalpat Shrimali, *Dalit Panther* (1975) by Naranbhai Vora, and *Kalo Suraj* (1979) by Dalpat Chauhan. Dalit poetry, as a conscious political writing emerged only after 1973 through these magazines.

On 14 April, 1978, on the occasion of Dr B. R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, *Aakrosh*, a poetry journal by the Dalit Panther, Gujarat, published a special issue of Dalit poetry. The issue of *Aakrosh* is often considered as a significant moment that marks the rise of a new

⁵ Laxanand. *B.R. Sangit Suman*. Ed. Narsinhbhai Sonara. Ahmedabad: Self-published, 1957. Print.

⁶ In 1960s and 1970s, many magazines were published – *Rohit Vikash* (1962) by Nathalal Parmar, , *Jagruti* (1962) by Kalidas Paraghi, *Antarnad* (1962) by Dahyabhai Nayak, *Deshbandhu* (1963) by Dhanjibhai Jogadiya, *Jay Harijan* (1965) Jivaraj Charniya, *Hamari Manavata* (1970) by Parmanad Khuman, *Smanata* (1972) Samantbhai Vinzuda, *Jang* (1973) by Dr. Logha and Revandas Mecwan, *Sewa Deep* (1974) by Rupsinh Tejabhai, Mashalachi (1975) by Dolatbhai Parmar, , *Matruchhaya* (1979) by Khemchandbhai Salanki, *Rastra Azad* (1979) by Baijurav Dhamel, *Muktinayak* (1980) by Sunit Sutariya and R. P. Parmar. (in Mangalam *et al* 2015)

consciousness in Dalit poetry in Gujarati. It was edited by Neerav Patel, Praveen Gadhvi, Dalpat Chauhan and Yogesh Dave.⁷ Neerav Patel notes:

The AKROSH poets were a group of young college-going friends and shared the honest angst and urge to give voice to the plight of the dalits- the dalits who were denied human rights and human dignity for all these years.⁸

Aakrosh published the most blistering poems like Neerav Patel's "*Jetalpur Hatyakand*" [Jetalpur Massacre: A Report], Manishi Jani's "Dost Shakra" [Friend, Sakara], Dalpat Chauhan's "*Gam Talav ane Hu*" [Village Pond and I] etc. Yogesh Dave's poem, "*Sha mate Hu Janmyo?*" [Why was I born?] appeared in in the first issue of *Aakrosh*. He writes:

I am afraid of every word that comes from your mouth,
At last I say, I am afraid of you,
You are more cruel than any tormentor,
That why am asking,
Why I was born? (Dave in *Aakrosh*, Summer 1978:17)

Aakrosh came to an end after three issues because of constant interference of the government machinery. In the first issue of *Kalo Suraj* (1979), Neerav Patel's poem "Marathwada University" and Praveen Gadhvi's "*Achhut Bhagvan, Achhut Krishna*" [Untouchable God, Untouchable Krishna] were published along with other Dalit poems. In the same issue Madhukar Chaudhari's fiery poem, "*Safed Ghuvado ne*" [To the White Owls] was published. He writes:

Where are you O! White owls of Gandhi era?
Why are you not coming carrying your *khadi* bags?
Why are you not coming to visit us in our dirty *chalis*?

⁷ Out of four editors of *Aakrosh*, two were non-Dalits, (Praveen Gadhvi (OBC) and Yogesh Dave (Brahmin), while two other were Dalits from two different sub-castes. (Neerav Patel (Chamar), Dalpat Chauhan (Vankar).

⁸ See in Patel, Neerav. "Introduction." Ed. D. S. Mishra. *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Standard Publishers, 2011. p11.

Why are you not teaching us your anti-untouchability lessons? (Chaudhari 1979: 05)

The poem presents the bitter criticism of so-called Gandhians who had left their social work and indulged in party politics. They made Dalits just pawns in their political games. Chaudhari presents the changed scenario where Dalits began to scrutinize the anti-untouchability drive led by political leaders. In addition, the recent literary magazines, *Hayati* (1997), a Dalit Sahitya Academy's official publication, edited by Harish Mangalam, *Dalit Adhikar* (2002) edited by Prakash Maheriya and *Dalit Chetna* (2006) edited by Manoj Parmar, provided ample space to Dalit literary voices.

In 1981, Gujarat witnessed brutal caste riots. The anti-reservation riots broke out in Gujarat following the strike by the students of B. J. Medical College. The medical students were agitating against the reservation at the post graduate level study in the medical faculty. The anti-reservationists, mostly the upper caste and neo-middle class Hindus agitated violently. I. P Desai notes: "The most important allies of the anti-reservationists were however the land-owning agricultural classes and castes who took the lead in perpetrating atrocities and creating terror among the SC not only in rural areas but also in urban areas" (1981: 821). Thousands of Dalits were affected by the riots, many lost their relatives and property. The role of media and the so-called intelligentsia disillusioned the Dalits. The angry and frustrated educated Dalits began to express their reaction in the literary forms. As a result, the first anthology of Dalit poetry, *Dalit Kavita* was published in 1981, containing one hundred thirty nine poems written by sixty nine poets, both Dalit and non-Dalit. It was edited by a Dalit writer and a non-Dalit poet-activist- Ganpat Parmar and Manishi Jani respectively. For instance, Mangal Rathod's poem, "Amdavad", published in *Dalit Kavita*, expressed his anguish regarding the anti-reservation riots. He writes,

They have tied a strip on Gandhi's eyes,
And those who could see slightly became blind,
They pushed cotton-balls in Gandhi's ears,
And those who could listen a little became deaf. (Jani *et al* 1981:94)

Dalpat Chauhan's "Untouchable" says:

O! god of hate
I search till day
On which part of my body
Are written the *richas* of untouchability (Jani *et al* 1981: 27)

Educated Dalits, allying with Dalit sympathizers and genuine activists, began to offer resistance to the upper caste forces. Activists like Girish Patel, Manishi Jani, Indukumar Jani, Achyut Yagnik etc. constantly supported the Dalits cause and argued against the hegemonic forces in favour of the marginalized. Girish Patel to counter the 'merit and efficiency' argument of the ant-reservationist wrote a letter to the editor of *Times of India*. He wrote:

The medical profession in Gujarat has been monopolized by the Patels and Banias. The profession is not only lucrative but also politically influential. A District Medical Officer, for example, wields a lot power and influence, especially with reference to crime. This is why the leading doctors and consultants, and their associations the Gujarat Medical Association have supported the agitation against reservation (TOI, 23 January, 1981).

Patel and many other activists throughout their career supported Dalit interests and raised their voice whenever it was necessary. Indukumar Jani's magazine *Naya Marg* gives ample space to the Dalit issues and often publishes Dalit poetry. Moreover, Dalit poets began to judge the upper caste Hindus from two different perspectives: one, they judged the behavior of upper caste Hindus from the Gandhian perspective and critiqued them for not following the Gandhian path of

equality and emancipation; two, they used the Ambedkarite perspective to launch an overall critique of upper caste Hindus.

In 1984, *Visfot*, a collection of Dalit poetry was published by Chandu Maheriya and Balkrishna Anand. Some 64 poems by 14 Dalit poets were published in this anthology. While introducing it, Dipak Mehta wrote, “Dalit literature is a literature of rejection. It rejects Hindu social order and Hindu religious norms. It also rejects *Shastras*, rebirth theory and worshiping of Gods-Goddesses. It also rejects upper caste’s literary canons and values” (1984: 12-13). Mehta hails Dalit poetry by calling it “an expression of lived experiences” (12). Jayanti Makwana’s poem “I would like to-” published in *Visfot* expresses the utter state of frustration. The poet says,

I would like to leave the unfortunate country,
Want to go to somewhere....
Want to leave this country,
Want to go to non-existent... eternity... (Maheriya *et al* 1984:10)

Chandu Meheriya edited *Asmita* [Identity], a collection of Dalit poetry, in the same year. The Dalit poets began to publish personal and edited collections of poetry in 1980s. They were Sahil Parmar’s *Vyatha Pachchisi* [Twenty Five Years of Pain] (1984), Dalpat Chauhan’s *To Pachi* [Then after] (1983), Shankar Painter’s *Bungiyo Vage* [Drum Beating] (ed. Harish Manglam) (1984). Sahil Parmar’s “*Gorbha*” [The Brahmin] appeared in *Vyatha Pachchisi* deals with the evils of brahminism.

The darkness is running like blood in Gorbha (Brahmin),
He has an old relation with the darkness,
How can he leave it?
Darkness is within and outside too,
Above and below too,

The whole darkness is Gorbha. (Sahil Parmar 2004: 136)

Sahil Parmar's criticism of the Brahminic ideology has been influenced by Ambedkar's thought. He and many other poets, in the matter of religious interpretations, think in the line of Ambedkarite teachings.

The second anti-reservation riots occurred in 1985. The riot erupted over the decision of the Gujarat government to increase the reservation quota of the OBCs from 10% to 28%. The government included few more castes in the OBC category. The upper castes began to agitate against the decision. The students of the Morbi Engineering College began the protest and demonstrations. The agitations spread all over Gujarat and later they turned into the violent communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. Many Dalit poets published their collections of poetry reacting to the anti-reservation riots such as: Praveen Gadhvi's *Bayonet* (1985), Sarup Dhruv's *Salagati Havao* [Burning Winds] (1986) Rameshchandra Parmar's *Shramik Kavita* [Poetry of Labourers] (1986), Raju Solanki's *Mashal* [Torch] (1987), Shankar Painter's *Dateda na Devta* [God of Sickle] (1989), Vinodchandra Boricha's *Partibaddh* [Committed] (1991). The Dalit poetry of 1980s largely dealt with the anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985. For instance, Shankar Painter's "*Ratan ne Rang*" addresses the violent incidents that happened in Jotana village during the anti-reservation riots and advises all poor to remain united. He writes:

Bravo Ratanbai bravo! , bravo her mother!

Bravo youth of Jotana! The world has been amazed!

Dalits, tribals, and OBCs of every village,

All have tired of caste exploitation.

Maintain peace and unity, all poor are brothers.... (Painter 2010:73)

Dalit poetry dealt with multiple themes in 1980s and 1990s. It addressed issues of migration, education, reservation, discrimination, government policy, social exclusion, Dalit's sub-caste consciousness, atrocities, human rights etc. The Mandal Commission recommendation in 1990 opened up a debate on caste and reservation nationwide. Dalits were compelled to defend the reservation policy. During the 1990s, many collection of Dalit poetry emerged due to Ambedkar's birth centenary year in 1991. Moreover, the Government of India awarded the Bharat Ratna to Ambedkar in 1990. The Maharashtra Government published volumes of *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* in 1980s and 1990s. (In Gujarati, these volumes were made available in 1998) In this context, Styandarayana and Tharu, the editors of *No Alphabet Insight* (2011) note:

The return of Ambedkar renewed the debate on caste, gave rise to critical reassessment of the national movement and returned to the question of dalit emancipation. Babasaheb emerged as a more outstanding national figure than many of his contemporaries, including Gandhi. (2011: 7-8)

The Dalit poetry collections in 1990s, along with paying tribute to Dr Ambedkar, presented their strong affinity with Ambedkar's teaching. They offered resistance against the casteist and communal forces. Here is the list of several poetry collections which were published in 1990s, and in the first decade of the twenty first century: Kishan Sosa's *Anasrihit Surya* (1991), Sahil Parmar's *Ek Rakabi Futi* [Breaking of a Saucer] (1991), Pagal Baba's *Prabuddh Bhim Gungan* [Tribute to Learned Bhim] (1991), Vishram Solanki's *Bhim Bharat* (1993), Chandraben Shrimali's edited Manish Parmar's poems, *Goranbho* (1994), A. K. Dodiya's *Suryonmukh* [Against the Sun] (1999), Dalpat Chauhan's *Kya Chhe Suraj?* [Where is the Sun?] (2000), B. N. Vankar's *Overbridge* (2001), Arvind Vegda's *Pageru* [Foot Steps] (2003), Pathik Parmar's *Bahiskrut* [Ostracized] (2003), Sahil Parmar's *Mathaman*

[*Efforts*](2004), Neerav Patel's *Bahiskrut Phoolo* [Ostracized Flowers] (2005), Bhiku Vegda's *Aap no Paras Aap* [You are Your Judge] (2006), Praveen Gadhvi's *Dalit Vani* [Dalit Poetry] (2006), Neerav Patel's *Gujarati Dalit Kavita* (edited) (2009), Arvind Vegda's *Zebra Crossing* (2013).

The Dalit poetry, after the anti-reservation riots in 1981; and the caste and communal riots in 1985, 1992 and 2002, addresses the issue of communalism, along with the issues of social exclusion and discrimination. Many Dalit poets also addressed the communal issues which became widespread in 1990s especially after the Ramjanmbhoomi- Babri mosque issue. For instance, B. N. Vankar's *Overbridge* (2001) deals with themes like identity, suffering, existence, revenge and communalism. The poems, in the collection cover mythological characters like Valmiki, Eklvya, Shambuk, Bhakti poets like Kabir and Raidas and modern political leaders like Gandhi and Ambedkar. They also talk about urban settlements and rural areas. B. N. Vankar like many other Dalit poets wants to change the society; his aspiration is to create a just society as he says in his poem "*Ame Lakhishu*" [We will write] :

Now,
We will write Ramayana,
Shambuk will sing,
Ram will not leave Sita....
Now,
New songs will be composed,
Equality and harmony will prevail,
And a man will not discriminate another man.
We are in search of Buddha. (Vankar: 2001: 80)

Pathik Parmar, a Dalit poet and critic, identifies some recent events that have shaped the Dalit consciousness and moulded the Dalit literature in general. According to him, the communal riots in 1969, and the *Navnirman* agitations in 1974 critically shaped the political outlook of the Dalits. The involvement of poor and Dalits in the *Navnirman* Agitations has made them understand the socio-political implications of empirical narrations. During the agitations, these narrations of hunger and oppression created an atmosphere against the insensitivity of the government. In 1974-75, the Emergency phase, added more in shaping the awareness about liberty and freedom in social and political sphere. The Emergency phase, as Parmar observed, made Dalits politically aware in Gujarat. The educated Dalits got chance to work with the upper caste activists to fight against the oppressive regime. These phases, as it seems, provided them inspiration to fight against the unjust social order in an organized manner. The production of literary magazines, poetry anthologies and establishment of Dalit Panther's unit can be seen as outcome of this phase. (Pathik Parmar: 2010)

During the 1980s, Gujarat witnessed the anti-reservation and communal riots; and political instability. Dalits were at the center of all these developments. During the anti-reservation riots (1981), they were the subjects of violence; in the political instability, they were reasons. The increase in reservation quota led to these developments. With communal riots in 1985, a shift can be seen in Dalit's notion of morality. Dalits had to locate themselves in relation to the emerging Hindutva ideology; many among the Dalits remained indifferent but the whole event disturbed their class alliance with the poor and co-worker Muslims. The brutal communal incidents compelled them to take positions, and by and large, Dalit literature in general raised its voice against violence and unbridled Hindutva forces. Thus, the events of communal violence (1985, 1992 and 2002), for a while, kept the Dalit literature away from its specific goal of

addressing caste issues and forced the Dalit writers to address contemporary communal conflagrations. For instance, Dalpat Chauhan, in his poetry collection, *Where is the Sun?* (2000) divides his poems in various groups like “Suffering”, “Our Existence”, “Memory”, “On the bank of Ahmedabad”, and “Let us find out the Sun”. These divisions or thematic patterns express the wide range of Dalit poetry. Chauhan deals with the issue of communalism in his poem, “To Ahmedabad”

(To Ahmedabad)
My city,
You are a cart of corpses,
The corpses move ahead,
Towards *Smashan* and *Kabrastan*
The chimneys’ ash is red,
Dry and dirty Sabar,
There is no water for *Snan* or *Vazu* for mourners. (2000: 61)

Chauhan artistically interweaves the themes of violence, insensitivity and economic struggle in this poem. The frequent communal riots in Ahmedabad and the closure of textile mills created many problems for the marginalized communities particularly Dalits and Muslims. Arvind Vegda’s poem, “Cross”, published in his poetry collection *Pageru* [Foot Steps] (2003), exposes the politics behind the violence.

They hang us on the Cross,
And they themselves shout slogans,
“Your sacrifice will not be forgotten”,
And offering flowers on our corpses...
And again they prepare a new Cross. (Arvind Vegda: 46)

Moreover, feminist discourse also finds its space in Gujarati Dalit poetry, especially in the poems of Dalit women poets. In the first decade of the twenty first century, the Dalit poetesses, Chandraben Shrimali and Priyanka Kalpit⁹ published their poetry collections. Shrimali is a social activist and ex-M.L.A. She expresses the doubly marginalized state of Dalit women in her poetry. Her poetry collections, *Ovarna* [Take Away the Pains of Others] (2000) and *Mijaj* [Mood] (2001), and *Valonu* [The Grinder] (2008) deal with Dalit woman's aspirations and their issues. She demands a specific allotment of reservation quota for Dalit women and longs for liberation of women in general. She says:

A woman is not merely a bedmate;
 Salvation will be yours,
 the day you look upon her as a human being....
 If you don't pay heed.
 You'll continue to lay frozen
 in the Safe Deposit Vault of the sperm bank. (in Mangalam et al 2009:223)

Priyanka Kalpit's poetry collection, *Ghasarko* [The Scratch] (2011) also addresses caste and woman issues.

Along with these mainstream communal events in Gujarat, the frequent day-to-day incidents of atrocity on Dalits by the caste Hindus have kept Dalits on constant vigil. The Ranmalpur killing (1975) and Jetalpur murder (1980) created solidarity among the Dalits and their collective protest for justice and shaped the Dalit consciousness significantly. Moreover, the Dalit migrations like Biliya (1981), Bhojapura (1984) Sambarda (1989) etc., and the demonstrations and protests that followed against the perpetrators and government authority also developed leadership, political consciousness, and organizational skill among the Dalit poet-

⁹ She was awarded the Savitribai Phule Dalit Mahila Award for her contribution in art/literature (2012-13) by the Government of Gujarat.

activists.¹⁰ The incidents of atrocity have not ceased to happen, unfortunately, Dalit literature bears witness the continuation of such incidents in present day Gujarat.

Dalit literature has also a parallel voice which puts lot of emphasis on self-reflectivity. Dalit writers are conscious of the fact that Dalit writing is not taking into account the inequality and violence within the Dalit community. Dalit writing tends to present the Dalits as a homogenized category devoid of any internal contradiction. We don't find any significant voice from the *bhangi* or *vaghari* community in Dalit poetry. Neerav Patel expresses his concern about Sanskritisation among Dalits, he says:

It is everybody's knowledge that dalit is not a homogenous community; it is divided in deferent castes and sub-castes, one above the other and one below the other with the notion of superior or inferior status. There is no unity or fraternity among them; they are equally loyal to their caste as are Hindu castes. They practice segregation and untouchability. They have their own separate housing societies, their own separate caste councils, separate bhajan mandalis, mahila mandalis. Admission to their ghetto is restricted and reserved for their caste. (2011: 19)

Raisaheb Kasbe, a Marathi Dalit literary critic draws attention towards such absence and says: "We have also to be aware that our frustration, our pangs and our favour are not uniform. We falter while trying to understand the flux of life and making a search for words which are meaningful."¹¹ Poets like Neerav Patel also address the theme of self-reflection and sub-caste consciousness in their poetry.

Defining Dalit Literature: The Gujarati Debate

¹⁰ Dalit poets, Chandu Maheriya and Shankar Painter, actively participated and led the protest of the Sambarda migration in 1989. (The Sambarda migration issue is discussed in the third chapter)

¹¹ Kasbe, Raisaheb. "Some Issues before Dalit Literature". Ed. Arjun Dangle. *Poisoned Bread*. Bombay: Orient Longman, 2011. p296.

Gujarati Dalit writers define Gujarati Dalit literature to demarcate its border and scope. Once, Yashvant Shukla, a renowned Gujarati writer happened to advise Harish Mangalam, in a literary conference, to change the name ‘Dalit Literature’ because it conveys the caste. Mangalam argued against this and affirmed that if terms like ‘Jain’ literature’ or ‘Parsi’ literature have a legitimate place within the purview of Gujarati literature, ‘Dalit’ literature too can claim such a space. Mangalam defines Dalit literature as “Devoid of casteism, Dalit literature is a literature of all oppressed, aimed at their emancipation”¹². Joseph Macwan considers Gujarati Dalit literature to be different from mainstream literature. According to him Dalit literature follows Ambedkar’s thoughts and his movement and is committed to the uprooting of social evils (Parmar 2010: 6). Dalpat Chauhan defines it as:

That which expresses suffering of dalits, that which guides their aspirations, and that which has rejection of god, revolt, unity and equality of man, new awareness is dalit literature. (Patel 2011:04)

Chauhan’s opinion has traces of Buddhism, particularly in his “rejection of god”. Chandu Maheriya, a journalist and activist, defines Dalit literature as;

Dalit literature is not the subject of a hobby, art or aesthetic pleasure. It is a movement and in a broad sense it is a part of Dalit politics. It is a tool in Dalits’ struggle for self-respect and pride. (Parmar 2010: 6)

Maheriya’s definition epitomizes several aspects of Dalit literature as visualized by the Gujarati Dalits. He relates Dalit literature with the Dalit movement and Dalit political aspirations; and he also indicates a different aesthetics that moves the Dalit poets. In a way, Dalit literature has to perform multiple functions. For Dalit poets, their raw material is their personal empirical resources; they are indeed in plenty in respect of time and space. A Dalit poet assumes the role of

¹² Mangalam, Harish. *Ekvachan (Singular)*. Ahmedabad: Dalit Sahitya Akadami, 2003.p49. (translation mine)

a story-teller, not to amuse or entertain but to stir the sensibility. Her/his mission is focused and bears some specific responsibilities. Moreover, s/he is in a hurry to impact her/his empirical world as s/he wishes change as soon as possible. For her/him, mainstream notion of art and artistic values hold a secondary position, her/his aesthetics is structured by the urgency to describe and reflect upon the life worlds and aspirations of Dalits. Her/his aesthetics lies in the positive effect of her/his poetry; not in the transformation of physical world into an imaginative world.

Most of Gujarati Dalit poets do not focus on a specific aesthetics; for them poetry constitutes a social responsibility. For them, poetry is just a medium to express their issues, to offer resistance, to protest, to make their community aware and to make the oppressors realize their unjust attitude. They are not writing on the basis of an aesthetics related to beauty. Their aim is not to create music out of words but to be loud and vocal enough to be listened by the caste Hindus. Neerav Patel writes, in the context of unskilled endeavours in composing poetry, that

With little knowledge of language and much less of poetics-aesthetics, they have plunged into this creative medium to sing their song of grievance and anguish and tell their story of opposition and exploitation. They were afraid they might hurt someone with their raw and crude and direct speech... (2011: 10-11)

Gujarati Dalit poets attempt all major forms of verse for this purpose. Though their themes are different from the mainstream poets, more or less, they employ the same forms. Dalit poets use forms like free-verses, sonnet, *bhajan*, song, *gazel*, *haiku*, ballad etc. to convey their message. It is seen that most Dalit poets generally rely on free-verse. But some poets employ song, sonnet or *gazel* to express themselves. Poets like Dalapat Chauhan, Praveen Gadhvi, Harish Mangalam, Sahil Parmar, Kishan Sosa, Neerav Patel, Arvind Vegada, Madhukant Kalpit have been

composing poetry in established forms. Poets like Shankar Painter and Bharat Vala employ folk-song, folk rhythm and tone and they sometime attempt revisions of popular folk-songs to serve their purpose. Bipin Gohil expresses his anger towards Manu, the mythical law-giver, in free verse. He says:

I sing
To the man who has
All but faded away from the walls of time.
To the man whose dim outlines
Manu's monstrous brushes
Have tried to swamp out of centuries.... (Mishra 2011:85)

Moreover, poets like Shankar Painter and Umesh Solanki use the popular media such as CD recording of Dalit songs, performance of poetry recitation with music, blog writing on Dalit poems, video recording etc. to create new forms and modes of distribution.

The rise of translations of Dalit writing has come to be a significant new mode of dissemination. While introducing an anthology of translated Dalit poems, *Silver Lining* (2000), its translators and editors, Rupalee Burke and Darshan Trivedi clarify their intention as:

As compared to Bengali, Marathi and Kanada literature, Gujarati literature remains little known outside the state... Marathi Dalit literature flourished because of extensive translations by Marathi writers... The need of the moment is to give non-Gujarati readers a taste of Gujarati Dalit literature. The chief aim of this anthology is to enable Gujarati Dalit literature to carve a niche for itself in Indian literature. It is also hoped that through this humble effort, Gujarati Dalit literature will gain national and inter-national recognition.
(02)

Translation activity is an attempt to reach to a larger horizon; to move from regional to national and international fora. The major part of Dalit literature is created in the regional

languages. Many translations have been undertaken to reach a larger audience. Moreover, English language brings the international readership and awareness about Dalit issues worldwide. These translations create solidarity among Dalits of different regions as their writings travel through a common language. Though there is lot of commonality in Dalits experiences across region, the translations may open up some specificity of experience and expressions. For instance, the Dalit poetry of Andhra Pradesh is vocal about its sub-caste discrimination among Dalit castes while Gujarati Dalit poetry remains somewhat silent on such issues.

To strengthen the Dalit movement, it is also necessary for Dalit voice to acquire presence at Pan-Indian literary stage and for this; translations into English play an important role. In Gujarat, the first translated work appeared in 1999. K. M. Sheriff translated some selected Dalit poems and published in a collection, *Eklavyas with Thumbs*. Later, the Dalit Sahitya Akadami also published two volumes of translated works- *The Silver Lining* (2000) and *Tongues of Fire* (2000), Dalit poems and short stories respectively, translated by Rupalee Burke and Darshna Trivedi. Joseph Macwan's award winner novel, *Angaliyat* (1986) was translated by Rita Kothari as *The Step Child* (2004). Harish Mangalam and M. B. Gaijan have edited and translated an anthology of Gujarati Dalit literature, *Pristine Land* in 2008. Praveen Gadhvi translated his poems himself and published *The Voice of the Last* (2008). He also translated his short-stories and published in two collections, *Black Pain* (2011) and *The City of Dust and Lust* (2011). M. S. Mishra published *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature* (2011) containing some selections from Dalit poems, novels, dramas and autobiographies, along with a scholarly introduction by Neerav Patel. Neerav Patel also published his Gujarati Dalit poetry collection, *Bahishkrit Phoolo* [Ostracized Flowers] in English as *Severed Tongue Speaks Out* (2013). Atul Parmar has

translated Praveen Gadhvi's poems and published as *Poet's Voice* (2013). He has also translated Chandraben Shrimali's short stories *Gujarati Dalit Short Stories* (2014).

Gujarati Dalit poetry has tended to be revolutionary. It is significantly different from so-called mainstream poetry. Gujarati Dalit poets have questioned and rejected the established socio-religious traditions. They want to follow the tradition propounded by Buddha, Kabir, Jotirao Phule, Gandhi and Ambedkar. The raw material, on which Gujarati Dalit poets have worked, happens to be their lived experiences in the world. This world is unique because it is structured by social segregation, humiliation and brutality which Dalits face at the hands of caste Hindus. To be at the receiving ends of acute untouchability is an experience which no other class of people have faced. These experiences, when expressed in a poem, endow it with a radical charge which is hard to find in mainstream poetry. Gujarati Dalit poets, like other Dalit writers are conscious of social responsibilities towards their class and caste. The anger and anguish which they express in their poetry has its roots in history, a history of oppression and humiliation. Gujarati Dalit poets not only address the present but also unearth the past. They have suffered inhuman treatment since ages. Gujarati Dalit poetry is therefore the poetry of a caste not of an individual. It is the expression of a downtrodden and oppressed community.

In short, Gujarati Dalit poetry, during its journey of four decades has passed through many phases. It has addressed several incidents of political and social turmoil. Dalit poetry has been recognized as a forceful voice by the mainstream Gujarati critics like Suman Shah, Raghuvir Chaudhari, Chandrakant Topiwala etc. Many Dalit poets have won prestigious awards, and Gujarati Dalit literature has entered into the syllabi of schools and colleges. Professional publishers now also think it profitable to publish Dalit literature. The growth has brought some frictions also. Dalit literary movement has got split into several "camps", with their respective

ideological leaning and patronage. The militant tone of 1970s and 1980s, as it seems, has settled down and has acquired a kind of ‘maturity’ in articulation, although Gujarati Dalit poetry has not deviated itself from its goals— annihilation of caste, equality, liberty and fraternity that Dr Ambedkar longed for. The last word may go to Mulk Raj Anand as he says while introducing *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* (1992: xvi):

But they (Dalit poets) are emergent, in our time renewal, from the old decayed society, from the dead-past surviving as Brahmanical ritual or Islamic taboo and blind faith in the big bearded God sitting on the top of the sky, into the light is [sic] Buddha’s eyes. And they have the force and vivacity of deep agonies against the rejection of themselves, and a hundred million Untouchables, in their pulsing hearts, behind the words!