CHAPTER

7

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The new literary genre called Gujarati Dalit Poetry that formally announced its birth in 1978 through its first ever magazine 'Akrosh' launched by Gujarat Dalit Panther, completes 25 years of its existence in 2003 and that is the initial period selected for this study. A quarter century in the life of a maiden literature is not at all a time for its rigorous evaluation and assessment, and particularly so when that literature happens to be the literature of the subaltern. It has to overcome its own historical limitations and get mature in due course. And that is why only an effort is made to understand it taking in account all its salient features in the course of the study beginning from chapter 1 to chapter 6. To provide convincing testimony, Gujarati dalit poems in English translation are quoted long and liberally in each chapter dealing the specific feature. Happily, there are a few translations available to facilitate the study: Burning from Both Ends and What Did I Do to be So Black And Blue by Neerav Patel, Ekalavyas With Thumbs by K. M. Sherrif, Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literature No 159, The Voice of The Last by Praveen Gadhvi, The Silver Lining by Rupalee Burke and Darshana Trivedi, Dalit poetry Special number of Skylark, Beyond the Beaten Track by Pradip N Khandwalla and Dr Ganpat Vankar's translations in the special number of poetry e-magazine Muse India.
It is worthwhile to take a quick recap of these six chapters and find out whether the study has sufficiently focused on those specific features of Gujarati dalit poetry, whether it has contributed to the understanding of the new genre, whether the study meets its goal of introducing it as the literary art employed as alternative means to achieve social justice.

As is amply demonstrated in the long narrative of chapter 1 through various devices (like quoting western scholar Sartre to Indian scholar Satchidanandan, poets to editors and refreshing the historical wrongs), Gujarati dalit poetry came into being as a historical necessity and against all odds. Denied even literacy for centuries, let aside higher education, the first educated generation that chose to become dalit poets had little to fall back on, except for indirect influence of Movement of Dalit literature in Maharashtra and Movement of Black literature in America. They were yet to dig out the literary heritage of their forefathers scattered in oral tradition. They were yet to learn to read between the lines the scriptures that blatantly sanctioned the oppression, exploitation, segregation --- as did Dr Ambedkar. They admitted that they were ill-equipped in the art of versification but they also felt the utmost urgency of expression.

The chapter elaborates on the historical and contemporary circumstances responsible for the genesis of the movement of dalit literature in Gujarat, and the dalit poetry being its forerunner. It recounts the various definitions put forth by both dalit and non-dalit writers and activists as well as tries to define dalit poetry through various objective and subjective parameters like,

*Content-*
Whether creating only dalit milieu with the help of caste specific sub-culture, local dialect, social and religious customs and rituals, model caste characters etc is sufficient or expression of protest against the dehumanizing Hindu Social Order, attack on the scriptures that stigmatized the dalits for ever, demand for social justice and human rights, assertion of human identity and dignity etc are pre-requisite?

**Ideology**-

Whether ideology is at all necessary for dalit poet, and if so what? Ambedkarist, Panther's, Marxist, Gandhian or any other liberal from Lohiaite to Jotibaite or RSS- brand *samarastawadi* Hinduism: all shades of practitioners are active in Gujarati dalit poetry.

**Commitment** -

Whether full commitment to the dalit cause is essential or any amateurish, careerist, professional wordsmith's verse on dalit topic can 'pass' as dalit poetry.

All examples of genuine poetry and their practitioners however, appear to come to the consensus in defining dalit poetry – that which is committed to the cause of dalit emancipation, that which doesn't exist on the cosmetic complexion but on solid dalit content and that which is written on the basis of the ideology that seeks to abolish both caste and class exploitation and believes in liberty, equality and fraternity is dalit poetry. The dalit poet need not necessarily be born as one in the so-called *untouchable* castes, anybody who subscribes to the above consensus can qualify as dalit poet, without regard to his/her caste or creed or colour or nationality or gender.
Chapter 2 makes a brief introductory survey of works of poetry published during the first quarter (1978-2003) of its existence through magazines and books, and thereby records growth and development of Gujarati dalit poetry. Here also two trends are reflected in enlisting the poetic output as dalit poetry: one that includes all verse written by poets who are born dalit without taking in consideration the content or ideology or commitment or by non-dalits written on economic hardship of poor. Even purely romantic poetry or abstract poetry that has little to do with dalit cause or problem gets listed just because it is written by a poet born in dalit community. Prof Yashwant Vaghela lists 108 collections as dalit poetry! Whereas another dalit journalist Chandu Maheriya lists 48. There are more than hundred poets represented in various dalit poetry anthologies. Among them are a few woman poets too – Chandraben Shrimali, Usha Makwana, Priyanka Kalpit, Meena Kamle etc. These are the tangible indicators of growth of Gujarati dalit poetry. It appears the genre of dalit poetry is on its way to firmly establish its separate and distinct identity in the body of Gujarati literature. As regards its spread, the dalit poets come from all parts of Gujarat and there are poets like Bipin Gohil and Lalit Patel and Vinodchandra Boricha living in Bombay and writing Gujarati dalit poetry.

Growth is a quantitative term, but development is a qualitative term, And Gujarati dalit poetry proves its development by the recognition it has earned. There was time no mainstream magazine will publish it, whereas now is the time the mainstream not only publishes special numbers but also award prizes to dalit poetry collections and gives pride of place in textbooks. Neerav Patel's poetry collection 'Bahishkrit Phoolo' was felicitated by
the prestigious literary organization Gujarati Sahitya Parishad. It is also very surprising that rightist RSS mouthpiece Organiser profusely praised Gujarati dalit poetry translated as 'Burning from Both Ends' collection. It is being recognized nationally and internationally. Ramnika Gupta brought out a book in Hindi titled Gujarati Sahityamen Dalit Kalam and Barbara Joshi included Gujarati dalit poetry in her English book Untouchable Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement from London.

Voices of protest take the 3rd chapter. Aware of the historical wrongs, the dalit poet disapproves the Hindu Social Order that perpetuates discrimination, injustice, exploitation and oppression on the basis of caste. The HSO is practiced on the strength of Hindu scriptures; consequently he condemns all that is Hindu –its gods, its religion, its entire establishment that supports, propagates and perpetuates the Hindu hierarchy and mentality. The anti-establishment stance of dalit poetry is its hallmark, whether in politics, administration, police, judiciary, social or cultural life of the mainstream. He desires to put in place egalitarian humanism devoid of discrimination.

Dalit poet also disapproves the Capitalist Economic Order that creates haves and have-nots as also the Communist Political Order that in practice undermines civil liberties, freedom of expression, human rights and human dignity. The present- day dalit poet has come to understand the ill-effects of New Economic Order based on the concepts of LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) and the protest poetry being published in magazines is reflective of this dismal reality.
Dalits are indigenous and original inhabitant of this land and have glorious past and civilization, that is what history says. Despite that, they are made to feel alien and exotic, rootless, dispossessed, robbed of their culture. They were once a nature-loving rational people but now are Hinduised to the extent that they have started worshipping Hindu gods that made them untouchable, harijan, Chandal, pariah. Dalit poetry strives to regain the lost status by constructing new dalit identity where dalit means the man who believes in fraternity, equality, liberty and who condemns discrimination, segregation, oppression, exploitation. Chapter 4 tries to prove by example the lofty idea of global citizen, vishwamanav. In search of the new identity the Dalit poet even desires to call himself in some algebraic term like \( N^p \) so that there can be no clue to one's caste or creed or nationality.

Form for him is of secondary importance. He believes content will invent its own form and techniques for effective expression. Although occasionally he does use all traditional and modern forms of poetry, his preferred form is free verse. He doesn't have to compromise or dilute, and surrender to the dictates of prosody. He is fully free to give justice to his all-important content, the all-important message, all-important mission.

With this brief round-up, the dissertation 'Gujarati Dalit Poetry (1978 - 2003) – A Study’ may be concluded with following observations:

In the maiden journey of just 25 years period, the Gujarati dalit poetry has firmly established itself as a novel literary genre. It has pumped in a breeze of fresh air in the otherwise stagnant pool of Gujarati mainstream literature.
and thus enriched it with a new form of poetic expression. It is not merely a genre or a form that is added to the poor repertoire of Gujarati literature, but a whole new idea of protest poetry is initiated for the first time. The bhaktiyug started by Adikavi Narsimh Mehta is still not concluded and the Gujarati poet is busy composing his Krishnagan with new dot.com diction. The Gujarati poetry which seeks traits of post-modernism in geet and gazal of Krishnabhakti is in fact yet to enter in modernism, let aside post-modernism. In this sterile scenario, the advent of dalit poetry brings with it diversity both of form and content.

It looks like a miracle that the people whose word was suffocating for centuries, who were denied education for all these years, have suddenly found their word and have learned to wield it as a weapon so efficiently in so short a time!

But the dalit poet is well aware of his limitations. He knows he is yet to master the craft of poetry-making and if the vehicle of his message is deficient, he will not reach his destination. His content is getting onerous and repetitive and therefore boring. He has to explore for the diverse themes, there are host of them in urban and rural dalit ghettos suffering from ignorance, superstition, poverty, unemployment, atrocities, new forms of discriminations and deprivation and exploitation, the problems of social mobility of the dalit elites and the 'creamy layer', rape and sexual exploitation of dalit women, rise of the rightist politics and the opportunist dalits, religious revivalism, the rise of internal casteism of the dalits, linkages with larger struggles ….And yes, there are little joys of life like
love and friendship and romance and leisure and community life that are
denied …

It is a great opportunity to be a dalit poet. The poet who is harbinger of the
human values. As Dr Mishra, the guiding professor to this thesis hopes, it
will be India that will take the lead in propagating the movement of
fraternity in the world, as is done by the west for the rest of the twin in the
lofty trinity. May it be the task of the Indian dalit poet to be the pioneer of
universal brotherhood.

The role of the dalit poet is well-defined. He may call himself Kali or Kalki,
the new incarnation to drive out evil from society. He has a mission to
fulfill. He is a fighter and struggler. The genre of dalit poetry is unique in the
sense that it fearlessly speaks for the voiceless, taking by horn the mighty
and the monstrous that trample upon the human rights. Its emancipatory
mission is no less divine than the mission of poetry itself. Sa vacha ya
vimuktaye.

Poetry is taken as so mystical, abstract and divines a form of expression that
one would hardly like to think about its practical applications. All poetry is
an application in one sense or the other and we get it put to several uses if
we take pains to find out – applied to fulfill man's internal and external
necessities. The illiterate mother sings a lullaby to soothe her child to sound
sleep. The poet-cum-composer-cum singer mama's musical rendering and
the rhythm works magic on the child but the lullaby also serves to satisfy the
mother's urge to express her love, hopes and aspirations. To put it in more
plain terms, the poetry of the mother-poet is put to use to serve a specific purpose: the mundane purpose of putting the child to sound sleep as well as the inner purpose exemplified in the lullaby of Shivaji's mother. In the same way, one finds poetry composed as prayers of richas is nothing but an expression of evocation to the celestial elements to come to man's rescue and help against nature's fury. It had its practical purpose in those days of little scientific knowledge. Similarly, the poetry of shauryageet or patriotic songs or national anthems composed by the ancient bards or modern poets is used to proclaim the sovereignty, identity, dignity and freedom of a specific class of people called nation. The poetry of dirges and elegies has its specific application so obvious to deny the purpose.

Dalit poetry is a form of such applied poetry. Its practical purpose is to protest against the social evil called casteism that makes man the victim of oppression, exploitation, discrimination, segregation. Its inner purpose is to promote fraternity, harmony, peaceful coexistence, equality, liberty, justice, human dignity and human rights for all.

Its future lies in fulfillment of this historical role and any regression or digression will defeat its purpose. The dalit poet, it is hoped, would certainly use the potent weapon of word, the word that was barred to him for all these years, for the betterment of humankind.