GUJARATI DALIT POETRY (1978 - 2003) - A STUDY

SYNOPSIS

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SYNOPSIS

With the official census figure of 16% population of India identified as Scheduled Castes now known as Dalits, the fact that every 7th Indian is a Dalit suffering from serious discriminations and deprivations even after the independent country declaring liberty, equality, fraternity and social justice as lofty ideals in the preamble of its constitution is embarrassing. The polity and society, alas, is yet to get fully sensitized with the problem of a country-size population of the victims. The radical Movement of Dalit Literature that began in the early seventies of the last century from Maharashtra following the disillusion of the mainstream dalit politics and subsequently spread to other parts of India including Gujarat is but one such effort of sensitization and raising awareness.

Having indirectly influenced by the movements of Black Literature in America and Dalit Literature in Maharashtra, the militant organization Gujarat Dalit Panther began publishing Gujarati poems that manifested dalit consciousness in its mouthpiece ‘panther’ in nineteen seventies. Enthused by the electrifying effects in its cadres and readers, it launched the first ever dalit poetry magazine called ‘akrosh’ in 1978 and announced the advent of dalit literature in Gujarat. Its pioneering poets were Neerav Patel, Dalpat Chauhan, Praveen Gadhvi and Yogesh Dave. Although it was never by design, the poets happened to belong to diverse social groups: two of them belonged to savarna castes, the rest two to dalit castes. Again among the two savarna poets, one belonged to the top most Brahmin Varna and the other to the lowest Shudra and in the same parallel both the dalit poets belonged to two different dalit castes in the dalit hierarchy. This broad social combination from the very outset of the movement of dalit literature in Gujarat gave it a non-casteist identity, not bitter of individuals or castes per se but angry at the discriminatory social system that is evil.
This kind of literature had no precedent in Gujarati mainstream literature, even though there were some works by Gandhian writers like Zaverchand Meghani, Sundaram, Ra.Vi. Pathak, Umashankar Joshi, Karsandas Manek etc on the dalit theme. The difference between them was there to be seen by any reader in both ways of expression (i.e. forms and techniques) and content. But the major difference was of the dalitcentric perspective, its militant mood and protesting tone, its challenge to the unjust Hindu Social Order, its demand for change, its assertion of identity as human being enjoying human dignity and rights.

This new genre of literature is the expression of dalit aspirations for liberty, equality and fraternity. These are the fundamental human rights dalits are denied and they are employing for the first time a novel weapon of word, the unique word of dalit poetry to become the voice of dalit liberation movement.

My dissertation 'Gujarati Dalit Poetry (1978-2003) – A Study' has the humble aim of both introducing and understanding this new genre through its various aspects elaborated in the separate chapters taking into account the growth and development of 25 years of its existence beginning from 1978 to 2003. Having been actively associated with the Movement of Gujarati Dalit Literature as one of its pioneers, I have had the opportunity of personally knowing each poet and writer, and advantage of being familiar with their works, their style of writing dalit poetry, their ideological leanings and commitment to the dalit cause. This, I believe, would facilitate me in carrying out the study in more inclusive manner. Although there are a few English translations available, the large part of Dalit Poetry is in Gujarati. Here again, I believe, my modest ability of knowing English as a learnt language and knowledge of Gujarati as my mother tongue and the meager experience of being a dalit poet myself would help me present the study in good stead.

I have planned to divide the contents of the study in the following chapters:
1. Introduction

a) Historical and contemporary circumstances for the origin of Gujarati Dalit Poetry

b) Endeavors of defining dalit poetry through various parameters like

Content -- whether creating dalit only milieu is sufficient or expression of protest against the unjust Hindu Social Order, demand for social justice and human rights, assertion of human identity and dignity etc are pre-requisite?

Ideology -- whether ideology is necessary, and if so what? Ambedkarist, Marxist, Gandhian or any other liberal or RSS-brand samarastawadi Hinduism: all shades of practitioners are active in Gujarati dalit poetry.

Commitment – whether full commitment to dalit cause is essential or any amateurish, careerist, professional's verse on dalit topic can 'pass' as dalit poetry.

c) The place of dalit poetry in mainstream Gujarati dalit literature

i. the initial negation of the new genre on the basis of its nomenclature, its distinct tools of expression like use of coarse-desi-offending language/diction/dialect/idiom, its style and techniques, and militant tone, its radical ideologies and agenda, its challenge to the mainstream literary fads like modernism and post-modernism, its focus on social reality as against magical/psychological realism, community as its source of inspiration as against the 'individual' etc.

ii. Subsequent acceptance with reluctance. But also simultaneously start processes of co-option, the rebel poet is tried to pacify with the lure of recognition in the form of awards/prizes and syllabus placements. But the committed poet does not eschew his content, his ideology, and his style/technique/tone/tools.
2. **Growth and Development**

A brief introductory survey of works published during the first quarter century (i.e. 1978-2003) of its existence through magazines and books as well as that of the dalit literary activities and organizations that supported the movement for dalit literature. As per one survey, there are more than hundred poets writing Gujarati dalit poetry and more than 40 collections of poetry are already published.

3. **Voices of Protest**

   a) Aware of the historical wrongs, dalit poet disapproves and objects to the Hindu Social Order that sanctions discrimination / injustice / oppression /exploitation 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 the Hindu hierarchy and mentality. He desires to put in place egalitarian humanism devoid of discrimination and exploitation.

   b) Dalit poet also disapproves the Capitalist Economic Order that creates haves and have-nots as also the Communist Political Order that denies man his civil liberties, human rights and human dignity.

4. **Aesthetics of Dalit Poetry**

What is so beautiful about dalit poetry, mainstream literary pundits ask repeatedly. For them it is a contradiction in terms – aesthetics and 'dalit' Literature? The abusing, offending, vulgar, stinking, rotten, coarse, violent, casteist and sacrilegious – these are their choicest epithets they use to point at. But even random examples of dalit poetry prove otherwise. Like a lily in the mud, dalit poetry makes itself endearing, attractive, appealing and beautiful. With its tragic, comic and satirical tones, with its innovative use of both desi and refined diction/idiom, with its
beautiful ideology of universal human brotherhood, with its lofty ideals of freedom and equality. The aesthetic idea of the dalit poet is summed up in these two examples: he says the beauty of the sword is not in its beautiful golden handle or the ornate sheath but in the sharpness of its blade and its power to strike. Strike at that what is unjust; and therefore ugly and repellent. The other example they give: any work of literature, howsoever perfect in form and technique and rendered beautiful by the creative talent and skill of the writer, that supports exploitation, discrimination of man by man can never qualify as an aesthetic piece. Hitler's biography 'Mien Kamph' for example.

The dalit aesthetics is rightly inspired by the blend of both the trinities, indigenous and alien: the modern trinity of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' and the Indian ' Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram'.

5. Constructing Dalit Identity

Dalits are indigenous and original inhabitants of this land and have glorious past that is what history says. Despite the fact, they are made to feel alien and exotic, rootless, without sense of belonging, dispossessed, robbed of culture.

The people who had no identity of their own for centuries, the struggle for identity becomes central in the spheres of both thought and action.

Dalit poetry strives to regain the lost status by constructing new dalit identity. Where dalit is the man who does not believe in discrimination and exploitation, the man who believes in fraternity and equality. Dalit identity is but other name of human identity.

6. Forms and Techniques of Dalit Poetry

Dalit poetry is mostly written in free verse, for it cannot afford its all-important message getting lost or diluted in metrical barriers of any
kind. But there are poets who are practicing all conventional and modern forms like marcia, bhavaigaan, reportage, geet, gazal, sonnet, haiku et al. Any form will do, they believe, as long as they are able to convey their thoughts and feelings in a poetic fashion. He believes his content will decide the form and techniques, they may find or invent for the right expression. Even the spiritual poet Aurobindo endorses the dalit poet's viewpoint that 'exclusive standards are out of place in poetry; there is room for all kinds and all methods.' (Ref. Letters on Poetry, literature and Art, p15)

Pre-occupied with singular mission of exposing injustice and seeking justice for his suffering brethren, the dalit poet employs varied techniques and forms to put his voice through.

7. Conclusion

Poetry is taken as so mystical, abstract and divine 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 a 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 purposes, such as exemplified in the lullaby of Shivaji's mother or in the mother yearning for the 'support in her old age'. 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 the enemies and the nature's fury. The mantra poetry had its practical purpose of getting inspiration and consolation from that 'magic word' in those days of little scientific knowledge available to man. 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. Even the love poetry helps serve the end of attracting the sexes both physically and spiritually and enjoy the intimacy and thereby enjoy the life itself. One need not be ashamed of the poetic means that help man live and live happily.

Dalit poetry is one such form of applied poetry. Its practical purpose is to protest against and put an end to 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. The noble aim of the dalit poetry is no different than the ideals enshrined in the constitution of our country. Gujarati dalit poetry is therefore going to enrich the Gujarati literature as a whole.

( Neerav Patel )