CHAPTER

3

VOICES OF PROTEST
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.

In the foreward to his book of poems ‘Bahishkrit Phoolo’, Neerav Patel politely warns his reader thus:

‘The word “Kavita” is very deceptive, and I don’t want to deceive you. My high-caste lady colleagues were in search of a new poem which they can sing in the cultural function of our Bank. They knew I too write poems. On their unending insistence, I had to willy-nilly give them some. Accustomed to know Git, Gazal depicting love, nature or God as poetry, they were not only disappointed but also annoyed: fie, I write this kind of poetry!

Yes, I write only this type of poetry. I am given only this as my lot, as my share of poetry. Of course, this poetry is also of flowers, but they are ‘Bahishkrit Phoolo’; they are rejected, abandoned, ‘untouchable’ flowers. Think when shall I be able to write: ‘umbare ubhi sambhalu re bol valam na!’ When would I get that social ease? I would like even to imagine: how nice if I had an alphabetic name like ‘ka’, ‘kha’ as are the names of roads in our capital city. No crest of caste on your head, no tail of jati on my back!

What does the dalit poet indicate at? First and foremost, he subtly admits that like all like other privileged poets he too would like to sing a love-song and thereby celebrate life and nature. But alas, he is not given the social ease, social circumstances – the necessary conditions of life that he can sing the songs of love and nature. And what is this social ease he is denied? He
has to live in a social order that denies him all the natural, fundamental, democratic and civil rights that should be available to each and every human being. Even right to live, let aside the right to live happily, and right to live with human identity and dignity is denied.

In the circumstances, what could a trapped bird do except singing songs of grievance and protest on the cruel behaviour of the man that has caged her and robbed her of her liberties to live and live happily as are other birds that are free? The same is true of dalit poet. What is that social order that has caged him, and his kith and kin? What is the order he bears grievance and protest against? Digging in the history and catching on the present, he zeroes in on the culprit called Hindu Religion that has imposed through its scriptures the Hindu Social Order – HSO. On further investigation, he finds that HSO is a name in disguise, the real name should be BSO – Brahminic Social Order – the order that has devised graded inequality in society, dividing it in ascending order of respect and privilege and descending order of hatred and deprivation. All the social evils like poverty, hunger, exploitation, oppression are the outcome of this social order – where Brahmin is at the top enjoying his hegemony and dalit at the bottom suffering his bondage and slavery.

It was none other than Dr. Ambedkar, the messiah of the dalits and mentor of the dalit poet who spoke3 to his Mahar community way back in 1936:

‘Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from entering a temple? Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from drinking water from a public well? Why do you remain in that religion
which prohibits you from getting a job? Why do you remain in that religion which insults you at every step? A religion in which man’s human behaviour with man is prohibited is not religion but a display of force. A religion in which the touch of human being is prohibited is not religion but a mockery. A religion that precludes some classes from education, forbids to accumulate any wealth and to bear arms, is not religion but a mockery of human beings. A religion that compels the ignorant to remain ignorant and the poor to be poor is not a religion but a punishment?

For the dalit poet, like that caged bird, no other song but the song of grievance and protest is all that he can sing of. And dalit poetry therefore essentially remains the poetry of protest, with voices ranging from mild to the most militant, from loudest outcry to the subtle nuances.

But it is difficult, and for some even impossible to renounce the religion they and their several generations were born and brought up with. Even Ambedkar in his earlier found it difficult and thought of reforming the religion and linked to call himself ‘Protestant Hindu’ as Martin Luther did by calling himself ‘Protestant Christian’. Having lost his indigenous culture and identity and again being rootless by eschewing the religion imposed on him, the dalit poets protest called for a painful journey : from Hindu to Protestant Hindu to Non-Hindu to Rational Human being. But that did develop his awareness – he learned in the process bitter truths of conversion, the conversion that brought him new stigmas of Neo – Buddhist, Neo – Christians rarely erasing his lowly social status or elevating to higher social status.
I am forced to be a poet⁴, is the title of a poem by Pravin Gadhvi. It’s a short poem and can be quoted in full:

‘I was born on the earth
thinking it heaven,
but what did I see on the earth?
Fiery flames of wars
fathomless oceans of blood,
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.’

The poem is so simple and direct that it doesn’t need paraphrasing. The earth that the poet supposed must be a place of paradise is nothing but atrocities and starvation and violence and miseries and he must lend his voice of protest to this state of affairs. What else can a dalit poet do than protest and demand for his ‘Paradise Lost’? How can he sing songs of romance and the beauty of nature in this spoilt world?

What we call little luxuries of life, if they are denied to man, the poet declares in a disgusting protest that ‘the earth is only a meaningless, revolving planet’ in that case:
‘Earth our Home’

For one who has a house for shelter,  
the earth seems home.  
For one who has a slice of bread,  
the earth seems sweet.  
For one who has a shawl to wrap,  
the earth seems warm.  
For one who has a sweetheart in embrace,  
the earth seems charming.  
For one who has a glass of wine to drink,  
the earth seems like a dream.  
For one who has none of these,  
the earth is only a meaningless revolving planet.’

Both these little poems, composed without any poetic pretensions, urge the reader to mark the poets protest, albeit in his own way. He protests against the small little things that are signs of living not made available to each man inhabiting the Earth, the planet of our common inheritance.

The question is why man is denied the means of living ? Who deprives him of these small little things that make up ‘life’ ? It is no secret, the answers are all evident. The protesting poet turns to awakening those that are still snoring :
‘Waiting for sunrise’

*It is indeed very difficult to wait for sunrise.*  
when there is deep darkness in the forests,  
and the whole sky is cloudy,  
one has to climb the mountain alone.  
*One has to awaken the sea sleeping after a heavy drink in the cloudy night.*  
*One has to shake the sleeping trees.*  
*One has to kindle the birds in every nest.*  
*One has to fondle the flowers of bloom.*  
*Then there will be some light.*  
The stars like armed guards will become visible  
*One has to imbibe the suffering of the birth of the sun.*  
The birth of Sun is not so easy to enlighten the whole universe.  
*One has to speak few words to the tormented mother earth.*  
*One has to endure.*  
*It is very difficult to wait for sunrise.’*

The poet is very right: the birth of the Sun that can illuminate the entire universe is not an easy thing, and particularly when the darkness is too heavy. The metaphorical message for the dalits can hardly be missed in this poem. To dispel the ignorance, all oppressed are required to get awakened and chant that Ambedkarite *mantra*: educate, agitate and organize. The birth of Sun is not an easy thing all dalits are required to work for it.
But there are poets who protest in altogether a different way. They catch hold of the culprit as if in a combat, as if thirsty of his blood and preparing to slit open his stomach to know how much dalit blood he has sucked. Who else but Mann, the most inhuman and barborous law-giver can become the first target? Jayant Parmar yells:

“One day”
in front of my house
on the neem tree
I will hang you
naked.
O Manu!
I will split open your veins
to see
how much blood of my elders
you have drunk!

There are ways and ways to register one’s protest. It was Dr.Ambedkar, the activist who symbolically burned the ‘Manusmriti’, the book of codes prescribing punishment and exploitation of the dalits and here is the poet more angry than the same Ambedkar protesting so violently!

With a cool reasoning, Raju Solanki: protests against the injustice and exploitation and hate in a monologue:
'You can call me a dirty scavenger
to my face.
I will never get mad at you.
For I know well, how empty words are.
I will only pity you –
As I pity the poor buffalo knocking its head
against the stone wall.
It is as clear as daylight to me:
The thorny weeds of hate
you have grown in the garden of your mind
will be swept away by the floods of Time.
But on the day of reckoning,
when hate, injustice and exploitation
are wiped out from the face of the earth,
you too will have to go.
That is what trouble me.'

Not know for blind optimism, Raju’s coolness in this poem surprises me. Calling himself ultra – lefist activist – poet, his employing the lines like ‘will be swept away by the floods of Time’ and ‘on the day of reckoning’ sounds mysterious. His protesting voice turns into prophecy and reminds the dalits of the ‘Omnipotent Time’ and ‘The Day of Judgement’. Radical poet engaged in superstitious myths doesn’t make a good dalit poet!
Protesting against the unjust social order in general is one thing and protesting against its myriad manifestations in particular is quite another. Gujarati dalit poetry, since its beginning, has a peculiarity of reacting to such particular incidents – be it political, social or religious. Neerav patel is a typical example of this kind of protest poetry. Right from the communal riots of 1969 to the murder of a dalit youth named Shakrabsai of Jetalpur to anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985 to the murder of 4 dalit Christians at Golana to Marathwada riots to Godhra riots to as recent as Khairlanjee and Patan rape case – he has protested with a poem. His protest poetry has earned him his first stint of brief imprisonment. But he writes on taking on the state, orthodox society, its mainstream establishment.

The poem ‘Marathwada University’ is not all that provocative. Neerav protests in a much sober tone:

‘and there started stinking in the news
the burning lawn in the marathwada university campus.
the green vidya sapling grown in the lawn
were uprooted and thrown into the air.
the encircling smoke reached the marathwada,
like the pestered bees.
the sparks of the winged flames
flew onto the grass-roofs of the poor,
like the glow-worms.
every hut became a bon-fire,
and baking the dark, innocent faces of children
started shooting like a bunch of crackers
and burst the bellies pitiably.
the trees broke upon the ground,
mud-houses were razed.
each ghetto became a small nagasaki.

people say,
it all happened with the ominous name of ambedkar.
he had made them smell the roots of knowledge.
he ate that slice of encyclopedic – liver
stealthily from sahadevas.

to commemorate his academic genius
his name was to be branded upon the tomb
of marathawada university like the cross.
The cunning statesman, then
ignited the pleasing atmosphere of the class-rooms.
the uniform resolution of the state became threadbare.
like the crafty fox hidden behind the fence
they basked in the heat at the burning flesh.

o, why do you run away with the fails between your legs,
dropping the stones
into the pure and silent waters of the university ?
why do you disappear with the cruel laugh
disturbing the academy of the students ?
the students – like the blue swans and white lilies !
i remember the ancient ashramas
of nalanda and taxashila –
where the state was the disciple
and the scepter was the symbol of obedience
at the feet of the gurn.

is it the gymkhana of the marathas ?
is it the battle-field of the diplomats ?
no, it is the cradle of the golden future of India.
and each student is the angel
leading to the light in the time of anarchy.
it is said
ambedkar is the name of missionary of humanity.
he fed them with light –
the people being tortured in humiliation.
lo, you killed the tree of knowledge and light
and celebrated the jubiled of marathawada university !

a legend prevails in dalits –
there twinkles an anonymous star
between the assembly of saptarishis !
ambedkar is the name of that omniscient rishi.’

The poem, quite long and verbose, has quite a different way of lodging protest. Protesting not to provoke and incite but to persuade and empathise. But Neerav is not always so. It is his singular lot to protest against the dalits themselves. Dalits are not a homogenous community, it has its own social
hierarchy quite parallel to the one in the Hindu social order and modeled after that. Dominant dalit castes like Vankar, Chamar and Garoda maintain untouchability with the Bhangis, now called Valmikis. Vankar with their clean traditional profession as weavers think they are the superior – most and with their early urbanization, politicisation, conversion to Christianity have been able to corner lien share of the benefits accruing out of reservation system like white collar jobs, political posts, education etc. Some with their unclean tradition occupations like tanning, of hides, sweeping, scavenging, carrying dead animals, burning dead bodies in the cremation grounds have been treated as lower caste dalits. They are yet to get the benefits of state largesse.

In this scenario, it is quite difficult to protest against the discrimination and segregation practiced by the dominant dalit castes. But the dalit poet is equally ruthless and coudemus ‘the holier than thou’ attitude prevalent amongst the dalits themselves. Neerav Patel’s long poem ‘Man main bhala ke mera bhai’ has provoked great controversy having hurt the dominant dalit castes. Calling a spade a spade and not a shovel, the poem attacks the dalit hierarchy, dominant dalit castes hegemony, its emerging neo- Brahmins alias dalit elites, disproportimate shale of constitutional benefits accorded to dalits, its hypocrisy, political opportunism, is share in Hindu revivalism , its betrayed to Ambedkarism et al. The poet has chosen a very special dialect – a mixture of desi Gujarati wish that of crude Hindi. A Kabirian strategy to make fun of the victims who themselves turn into perpetrators of casteism. Although difficult to translate in English, some stanzas must be quoted to get the ‘feel’ of the protesting dalit poetry:
'Ma, am I noble or my brother'\textsuperscript{10}

Ma, Maheriya has become too big  
Ma, Sutariya has become too arrogant  
Ma, Valmikiya has become too impudent

He has become minister  
and doesn’t allow me to become mayor even

He has become doctor  
And doesn’t allow me to become compounder even  
He has become officer  
and doesn’t allow me to become peon even

He is in the Mahajan,  
He is in the Congress  
He is in the Janata  
He is in the Bhartiya Janata

He is in the poetry  
He is in the history  
Panther is his  
Elephant is also his

Scholarship for him  
Subsidy for him
My begging bowl is empty
Is he my brother or enemy of last birth?

What kind of justice is this, ma?
You are out and out dishonest and partial
I did not get the share from my Baba’s will
as if I am your step – son!

He doesn’t treat me as brother at all –
He has formed his own bhajan mandali,
He has formed his own mahila mandali
He has constructed his own housing society
He has launched his own industrial society

He thinks himself a highcaste seth-sahukar
He doesn’t allow me to stay in his neighbourhood

What an injustice, ma?
You gave him spinning wheel
and me a jarring tambourine
you gave him an all-knowing almanac
and me a hoarse bamboo flute
You gave him tanning pit
and me a pigsty
Speak ma, am I noble or my brother?

You, you and you and you...
You are bloody ‘dhed’ and you are bloody ‘chamar’
You are bloody ‘Garoda’ and you are bloody ‘Olgana’
I am tired of your squabbles
you have drowned the name your Baba
you have discredited my womb.

You all forgot
That only yesterday you were all having a spittoon
tied at your neck
and a broom lied at your back?
Forgot you were all eating carrion –
and now you have become lions?
Forgot you were holding the horns
and you were holding the legs
and we all were dragging the carcass
and enjoying the feast?

Those were our bad days.
Someone took a spade
and someone took an axe
and someone took a spinning rod
and someone took a broom

You forgot how we were harassed those days?
and even today we are insulted equally bad.
We are still for them
Children of devdasis – children of the temple prostitutes.

Doesn’t matter if you call yourself Neerav Patel
Doesn’t make difference if you call yourself Gautam Chakravarty

How shall tell you
You are all born to my womb –
all real brothers
Forgot so quickly
Your Baba’s Advice?
Educate, organize and agitate?
Wolves are just waiting for you.
they will send you in Jungle once again.
Read your Baba’s will again
And never ask me
‘ma, am I noble or my brother’
or else I will shout in the streets:
you are bloody ‘dhed’ and you are bloody ‘chamar’.

‘Baba’ here is none else but Dr.Ambedkar, and his children are none else but all dalits. The poetic parable is to forge the unity of all dalits treating one another as real brothers. Their emancipation is collective and not individual. The fraternity and the solidarity are the only weapons against the oppressors. Although the poem has this noble message, the dominant caste dalits furious of the poet and he is almost ostacised for washing the dirty linen in public.
But that is the price a genuine poet has to pay. The protest poetry will one
day make them wiser and saner.

With this noteworthy digression, the dalit protest poetry must return to its
original villain: Dharma. And ‘Dharma’ is the title of Arvind Vegda’s
poem of protest:

This darkness is stifling
Shrieking and wailing among
charred human bones
the hypocritical shrutis
continue to torment the darkness
in the name of the sun.

Bundles of unfulfilled desires
Caught in the darkness of flames
to anoint stone idols whirling
in the beads of Manuvian chaplets
continue to lash with whips.

For centuries someone’s Khandav forest
has been blazing.

The crepitant fire emits darkness
and torments half–burnt Takshakas.

Numerous thumbs continue to be severed
and yet, to enkindle the bushfire
raging in the multi-hued airgrette
of wish-fairies at one’s command,
the sun, remains to be pierced.

What a paradox! The Aryan Sun is revered in all the Shlokas including the famous chant of Gayatri Mantra as the destroyer of darkness and creator of light. The same sun emits darkness and torments the half-burnt Takshaks. Takshakas are nagas, the original inhabitant of India before the Aryans came to conquer the land. The dharma for the poet, the protestor is to pierce the Sun. The sun, the tormentor; the sun, the fire-emitter.

The dalit poetess is not far behind. Her protest transforms in all out revolt. Priyanka Kalpit mutters to herself: enough is enough.

‘cold-blooded Murder’

A tumultuous was with caste and
self wages within me.
So many arteries are
Severed in the massacre,
fountains of blood ensue.
The face is smashed
And distorted.
On an island of blood I sit
and watch steadily
murders done in cold blood.
Inside me is turbulence
and suddenly
I hear myself mutter
“Enough, that is enough’.

Even in the days of fashionable feminism, caste is the bigger reality for a dalit poetess. One is reminded of the Black American writer Gloria Nyler who was asked: to what are you committed? And her answer was: I am committed in three ways – class, sex and race. But it I have to take side, I will go with my black brethren for I am more oppressed because of my race, my colour. And that’s absolutely true for the dalit poetess. Caste in India is the bigger reality. It’s a bigger tormentor than any other.

There are many more voices of protest in Gujarati dalit poetry but it is onerous to record them all. And here is the challenge for the dalit poet: how not to be onerous, repetitive, stale and stagnant? How to be imaginative, innovative and resourceful in making the protest more poetic? And thereby more appealing and effective? Both craft and creativity need to be sharpened if the dalit poetry desires to kill the caste. A very recent example comes to mind. It was second anniversary of the 9/11 and American poets had gathered to pay homage to the victims and protest against terrorism at the Ground Zero site. A young poet stood up and lit the candle. And began reciting his first line:

‘Let us observe 2 minutes silence for the souls departed’.
And the listeners really stood up. And observed 2 minutes silence. Then followed another line:
‘Let us observe 2 minutes silence for the American soldiers killed fighting terrorism in Iraq.’

And the listeners against stood up. And observed silence. Then followed the third line:

‘Let us observe 2 minutes silence for the innocent Afghan people killed by our troops fighting Taliban there.’

And the listeners stood up once again. And observed silence. Needless to say, the poet enumerated one by one the terror acts committed by the Americans themselves – from the extermination of the Red Indians to the lynching of Black Americans to the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the Vietnam war to the Palestine to the present day atrocities. The poet extended the protest to terrorism in a broad philosophic way and succeeded in making them feel guilty of the crimes committed by themselves. An example to see for ourselves what protest poetry can achieve.

Protest literature has history in becoming instrumental for changing laws and abolishing many a social evils. ‘Uncle Toms Cabin’ was a piece of literature that helped abolish system of slavery from America. ‘Oliver Twist’ was a piece of literature that helped abolish child labour from England. Dalit poetry is part of protest literature and it must aim at killing the caste and restore for the dalits human dignity. Our constitutional goals are no different: equality, fraternity and liberty for all.
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