CHAPTER

4

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It has become a common knowledge now that human beings belong to a biological species called 'Homo sapiens' and that is our primary, original and real identity. But as the history of humankind advances from primitive to present times, we find the same single species split into multiple identities or to be more appropriate, into sub-identities. Identities based on clan, caste, colour, race, gender, nation, religion, ideology, profession, language, politics, history, geography and economics and on and on and on ….

Although our purpose is primary literary, we need to briefly understand why and how these sub-identities evolve or come into being. Adam is called Adam and Eve is Eve just to distinguish each other. These personal identities are common to all human beings and they are there to serve their practical purpose. With millions of human beings, the diversity in personal identities is bound to occur and it is welcome enrichment towards human culture. But the problem arises when these seemingly innocent and innocuous personal identities get loaded with cultural or political intonations suggestive of inferiority or superiority or backwardness or forwardness. For example, a tribal named Ngugi is looked down upon juxtaposed with the Englishman Nelson as our Gujarati Mohandas is with McMohan of England! Perhaps that is why Gujarati Dalit poet Neerav Patel\(^1\) expresses his desire to
be known in algebraic sign like $N^p$ or in alphabetic signs like 'Ka' or 'Kha' with no clue to clan or caste or creed or nationality.

One more example: the first conscious pair of Homo sapiens, again Adam and Eve as per prevalent mythology must have been born somewhere on this planet called earth, including of course in what is now called Africa. Would it be possible for them to call themselves Africans or Blacks or even Man and Woman, particularly when the globe was yet to be partitioned into continents or nations and no gender or colour consciousness was developed in those days? There shouldn't be any problem if one more pair is born in a place now called China with yellow skin colour, the other with America with red skin colour, the other in England with white skin colour, the other in India with brown skin colour and still other yet to be born with rainbow colour in some not yet discovered island. We may easily welcome them as diversity in identities. But the problem arises, for example, when the African Adam is hated by English Adam just because he has a different skin colour, American Adam occupies by invasion Chinese Adam's place of residence and all Adam exploit all Eves just because they belong to a different gender – forgetting in all cases their primary identity of belonging to a common species called Homo sapiens which ethically requires fraternity and fellowship.

A shepherd dyes the wool of his herd so that he can identify his sheep from the others in the event of theft of his property. A Brahmin wears his janoi or put a mark on his forehead so that he can protect his identity from the pagans and pariahs thereby perpetuate his Varnashram dharma of segregation.
Whether identities are assumed by the people themselves or given by imposed upon them by others, all of them are evolved or come into being to serve some personal interest, or group interest or class-interest. No surprise the net result of them all is division of mankind – generating social evils like domination, subordination, discrimination, segregation, exclusion, oppression, exploitation of one group or class of people by the. Perhaps that is why some poets cherish the dream of becoming ideal ’Global Citizen’ or ’Vishva Manav’ obliterating all identities but one and that of human being. This is nothing but rediscovering and returning to our original identity, albeit cultured and civilised modern-day Homo sapiens.

In our land, there is a long history of subjugation of people by devising for them different identities like Asura, Rakshasa, Danava, Naga, Dasyn, Dasa, Chandal, Achhut, Antyaj, Harijan et al. Their original indigenous identity is defiled and destroyed. They are treated as lesser human beings or even beasts denying them all human dignity and human rights.

Here is the role for Dalit poetry. It is seriously engaged in its mission of constructing for them a new identity called ’Dalit Identity’ wherewith everybody can enjoy full human rights and live with full human dignity. Transcending its literal meaning of downtrodden people, broken people, vanquished people; dalit has now a new definition. The one who fights against discrimination and promoted equality is Dalit. The one who fights against bondage and slavery and promotes liberty is Dalit. The one who
fights against the apartheid, segregation, untouchability and promotes fraternity is Dalit. The one who promotes truth and justice is dalit. The Upnishad story comes to mind when one Satyakam Jabal reaches a guru's ashram and requests to take him as his disciple. As was the custom of the day, the guru asked him to reveal his identity. Not knowing the answer he returned to his mother Jabala and asked:

‘Mother ! I desire to live the life of a student of sacred knowledge. Of what family, pray, am I?

Then she said to him: ‘I do not know this, my dear – of what family you are. In my youth, when I went about a great deal serving as a maid, I got you. So I do not know of what family you are. However, I am Jabala by name; you are Satyakama by name. So you may speak of yourself as Satyakama Jabala’.

Then he went to Haridrumata Gautama and said, ‘I will live the life of a student of sacred knowledge. I will become a pupil of yours, sir’.

He was asked: ‘Of what family, pray, are you, my dear’?

Then he said: ‘I do not know sir, of what family I am. I asked my mother. She answered me: ”In my youth, when I went about a great deal serving as a maid, I got you. So I do not know this, of what family you are. However, I am Jabala by name: you are Satyakama by name”. So I am Satyakama Jabala, sir’.

*Chandogya upnishad, 4.4.1-5*
The Gujarati poem 'Kaliyo' must be the apt beginning to understand how disgustingly the identity of an untouchable commodity is hated by the caste – Hindus:

'poor Kaliyo,
how shall he know
that we cannot show our strength?
barking ferociously
and running at a lightning speed
he pounced upon Motiya
like a panther,
sturdy as he was with beef-eating!
he caught Motiya by neck
and bit a whole mouthful.
Motiya's bowl of milk was split in soil,
the beads in his belt were lying scattered in sand,
his long tongue was out of his gasping mouth,
his mouth was foaming
and foam-bubbles were bursting.

whole village assembled:
that bloody son of bitch,
dhed's rotten Kaliyo.
he bit our beloved Motiya!
come on everybody –
even their dogs have become arrogant!
and all were chasing Kaliya
Kanbis, Kolis, Patels and Darbars
with spears and sticks and bamboos and dhariyas
as if at war with
poor Kaliya!
but Kaliyo was brave
and was running faster and faster
running along the bank of the river.
they were stumbling and falling
and licking the dust
but Kaliyo was Kaliyo
running and running
like the black buck!

and as the saying goes
the crest-fallen crowd at last
turned towards the dhedwada (dalit ghetto),
started beating the roof-tops of the harijan huts,
beating the neem trees in the chawk
beating the deity Shikotari's small mud-temple
beating Mani, Rami, Dhulio, Parmo ....

crying and entreating with folded hands
They were begging for pardon:
how shall Kaliyo know
that we cannot show our strength!
he is a poor dog
and you are human being.'

It may not have caught the linguistic beauty in translation, but the message delivered in metaphor cannot be missed. The chilling satire employed as a typical tone can hardly go unnoticed. The poetry begins from the beginning itself: the real names like Kaliyo and Motiyo for dogs are suggestive of two different identities – one for the lowly and other for the high-breed. Kaliyo, as his name suggests is black and Motiyo, as his name suggests, a diamondlike high-born. One belongs to the lowly Harijans, brought up on the leftovers of bones and beef. Whereas Motiyo belongs to the High caste Hindus, fed on milk and decorated with beaded belt. The reader can contrast the identities, one formed in struggle and the other in leisure and luxury. Kaliya has the humble identity, as was with Karna in comparison to Arjun when he declares: ' tadayattam tu kule janamam, madayattam tu paurusham ' (you have the lineage, but I have my strength).

Kaliyo almost kills the Motiyo and how can the high-caste people digest this defeat and humiliation? The assertion of identity of this lowly beast and these lowly people was inbearable. All run for revenge but Kaliyo is Kaliyo, difficult to catch. The crest-fallen crowd turns to the Harijan basti and their deities. The poem ends with the entreaty: Kaliyo is a dog, and he doesn't know the law of caste-hierarchy. But you are human being. You should know better that dog is a dog and man is a man! The poem is loaded with multiple meanings but the simple paraphrasing could yield at least this much: Dalit identity is rarely tolerated, rarely respected, their assertion is an eye-
sore, they must live as second-class citizen or else they will be annihilated as is done recurrent incidents of atrocities throughout the country.

Kaliyo is a symbol of strength and resistance. He doesn't suffer from any inferiority complex like Dalits. He can fight for his rights with any other dog because he has not lost his identity even though lives among the untouchables and branded as 'their dog'. Whereas Dalits have lost their sense of identity due to the centuries of suppression. They are yet meek and mild and shun resistance even against the abject oppression.

Dalit poet comes to his rescue and reminds him that you are as good as anybody. Come out of your victim hood and get ready for fight and sacrifice. Only then you can regain your lost identity. Dalpat Chauhan\(^3\) is furious at the creator himself who gave his people empty stomach and closed fist:

'I understand you are the creator,  
You gave empty stomach  
and closed fist to man.  
And that is your gift to man.  
But I didn't understand those two!  
I forget the fist  
in the struggle to feed my belly.  
The fist that inspires, the fist that empowers ...  
And when I remembered at last,  
I raised it to strike  
Strike at you
At your barbarism
At...'

The wrath of the Dalit poet is justified, it is in the name of God and religion that Dalit is robbed of his human identity. He must demolish the myth called God who is blind to the plight of the poor and persecuted. And trust on his own strength to regain the identity of a human being. Dalit identity is maligned by the agents of God who said they were the chosen few born of his head and dalits were the hated lot born of his loins. They were born as untouchable castes because of the sins of the previous births. All due to your bad Karma! How difficult it is for the Dalit poet to dismantle these myths made in the name of God! But it becomes his duty to strike at God, as Dalpat Chauhan does quite furiously.

But in a quite sarcastic way, another Dalit poet defends his Dalit identity. Shamat Parmar\(^4\) thanks God for making him a Dalit:

'I am proud of myself
I am extremely grateful
to God for making me a Dalit.

If God had made me a Brahmin
( according to the Varnashrama )
I would have deceived the people
by my appearance
and false chanting of shlokas,
frightened them in the name of religion,
feeding on delicious food at ceremonies on good and bad occasions.
If God had made me a Vaishya I would be making profit by dishonesty and hoarding. By creating artificial shortage and intellectual theft. By distributing I would gain, by selling I would gain (the partition of India)

If God had made me a Kshatriya, the king of a small kingdom would I be enjoying wine and women.
.... Thank God that he made me a Shudra and liberated me from all these sins.

I am proud of myself. '

This is the new consciousness and new spirit. Who says their identities are better than us? The poet says they are cheaters, debauchers, dishonest, devoid of any human values. Why should they be considered superior to Dalits who are hardworking, honest, living on their own labour, believers in human dignity and human fraternity? Dalit identity is certainly the best and the poet is proud of being a Dalit.
Poet after poet exposes the identity created by the Varna system. Neerav Patel carries out dissection of a mummy and let us witness what does he find in the 'Postmortem':

they failed to find any musk from his navel.
his skin was dissected layer by layer
but did not yield a single sheet of gold.
Oh, his skin was simply made of flesh and fibres!
from his big belly
they could not discover the previous gems –
(he was supposed to have eaten throughout his life.)
not a page of holy scriptures was found from his coiled brain.
and neither could they collect a drop of proverbial
'suryavanshi' bravery form his large liver.
nor did they find the nectar earned by his holy deeds
from his poisonous heart.
he was cut to pieces
but they did not find his 6th sense.
yes, from his chest was found a pretty heart of wolf.
from the tips of his fingers were found the roots of claws.
from his crystal-clear denture
were found trident teeth.
from his beautiful eyes were found the crocodile's tears
and from his orthodox veins was found frozen alcohol.
Yes, that was the post mortem
of a mummy of an 'aryakumar'. 
Dalits are employed for any dirty job, from scavenging to dragging dead cattle to crematorium duties to post-mortem rooms. The thought of writing must have come to the poet's mind while listening to some dalit attendant's story. The myth of Arya superiority is fully exposed for all to see: and what is this great man made of? Forget about his greatness, he is not even a simple ordinary human being. He is a beastly animal with a wolf's heart, with trident teeth, with close on his fingers, with alcohol running in his veins. This is the real identity of the Aryans, the invaders, the usurpers, the oppressors. Because of them, they are the enemies of human beings. They are the enemies of human values. Don't think that they are cultured and refined and scholarly. Dalit identity is far better than theirs. No need to copy them, imitate them. You will lose your own cultural identity, the culture that believes in equality, liberty, fraternity, justice and truth.

No, you don't crave for the Savarna identity, it is barbarously cruel – one more poet exhorts his dalit brethren. Parbat Parmar⁶, the dalit poet consoles Narayan Dhoole of Maharashtra whose eyes have been gorged out by the goons of Savarna landlord. A few lines from the long poem:

'How dare you open your eyes before the villagers?
It's a grave crime
to open your eyes
or flutter your wings
Have't you read any history or 'puran'
before you dared plough your field?
Have't you heard the pandemonium
if one Phoole flowers
or one Ambedkar sprouts?
If one Chokhamela takes birth
earthquake strikes in the Savarnaland
The echoes reverberate
in the tanning-pit of Rohidas
and in the tank of Chavdar.
Your eyes perhaps heard them
or your eyes saw that finger
piercing the darkness.
And you opened your eyes
brother Narayan Dhoole?'

The pointing finger of the statue of Ambedkar has become an eye-opener symbol. The messiah who fought for the dalit identity has become the source of inspiration for the dalit poets as well as the suffering fighters like Narayan Dhooles.

Frustrated by the social scenario at home, the imagination of the poet travels far and wide in search of new identity. The veteran dalit poet Babaldas Chavda finds Goddess Bharti trembling in shame before the Statue of Liberty standing erect on the shore of the Atlantic and the Goddess of Justice standing upright on the shore of the Pacific:

'With a coronet on her head
and a burning torch in hand
the Goddess of Liberty
stands alone, erect and dignified
on the shore of the Atlantic
roaring like a lion.

With eyes closed
and scales in hands evenly balanced
the Goddess of Justice
stands upright
on the shore of the Pacific
announcing: no prejudice, no injustice.

With eyes aghast,
clad in the Varnashrami robe
trembles in shame Goddess Bharti
taking in her lap
Indian ocean,
Bay of Bengal
and Arabian Sea.

Not treating her children equally is the crime Goddess Bharti has committed. She has disowned and disinherited the dalits. She has branded them as bastards, the children of Devdasis, the Harijans. She has discredited them as untouchables. After depriving her own children of human dignity and human rights, how can she face the Goddesses of Liberty and Justice? Alas, the dalit poet has to borrow the lofty ideals of justice and liberty from the other shores to create new identity?
But even with all these lofty ideals and noble intentions, the formation of dalit identity is a distant dream. It is being threatened both from within and outside. Dalit is not a homogenous community, it is made of several castes. Each caste is a separate entity with its defined place in the internal hierarchy. Hierarchy with its ascending and descending order of social status. Each caste is an endogamous group. Even untouchability is observed with the lowest of the low, the scavenging caste. This results into lot of heart-burning and bitterness as also jealousy and rivalry. Each caste has a grievance against the one that is above. Each caste has an ill-will against the one that is below. In the days immediately after independence, the Harijan identity worked like an umbrella identity. For the Savarnas, all scheduled castes were Harijans. (The caste identity among the dalits was there but was mute and subdued and acted covertly.) The dalit identity is yet to achieve this umbrella status. It is sad, in these days of political opportunism and new-found awareness, the caste identities are getting stronger. The dalit identity has remained a hollow slogan. The dalit poet is aware of this threat that disintegrates the formation of dalit identity. He time and again warns of this danger of internal casteism. Neerav Patel’s poetic attack in his controversial poem titled ‘Ma Main Bhala Ke Mera Bhai’ on this divisive development is often remembered. The poet tauntingly reminds each caste among dalits that none is superior to the other, it is only the circumstances that have made the difference. It was time all the indigenous victims and vulnerable used to eat carrion on the compulsion of the alien conquerors. And now with the wind of changes blowing in the post-independence times, some have come up to afford the slaughtered beef and yet some are able to
eat the superior flesh of chicken and pomphrets. And some are still lagging far behind not getting access to the opportunities of urbanisation, industrialisation, sanskritisation, conversion, politicisation, education etc. The high-castes among dalits retort that it is the high-caste Hindu legacy that they are imitating. It is an irony of the situation and a sad fact that they are arrogating their caste superiority among the low-status dalits and at the same time complain about their inferior social status in the caste Hindu hierarchy. This destroys the amity and unity of the dalits and weakens the struggle to their professed goal of human identity.

In his poem 'This Time' A K Dodia implies at the same fissure:

'Internal atmosphere is fouled today
who is guilty, whose name shall I give
The ways to happiness have all been
gheraoed by the whirlwinds today

Forgetting internal casteism
this is the time to draw near each other
This time is the time to open the eyes
to see the obstacles coming in the way of unity

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Man's quest for identity, both personal and social is inevitable. He needs to be reckoned, he needs to be identified, he needs to be distinguished, he needs to be fulfilled. And this he may feel only if he has his identity, identity
of his own. And to that extent, every individual must be granted his identity, and that identity should be honoured by one and all and must never be violated. It is mutual respect of give-and-take. And that guarantees human dignity for each and everyone. Man being a social animal, his social identity which is but other name of his membership of belonging to a society should also be granted and protected and no social exclusion is acceptable. The construction of dalit identity is complementary to this understanding. It also rules out any segregation, any ostracization, and any kind of social exclusion. It wants to guarantee all men and women membership to the human society without any discrimination or prejudice.

The ultimate aim of dalit poetry, therefore, is to construct this new identity on the basis of universal society of brotherhood.
Work Cited:

1. Patel Neerav, *Bahishkrut Phoolo*, Ahmedabad, 2005, see preface
4. Parmar Shamat, *The Silver Lining*, Dalit Sahitya Academy, Ahmedabad, 2000, p.73, tr. by Rupalee Burke