CHAPTER 5

AESTHETICS OF DALIT POETRY
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What is so beautiful about dalit poetry, mainstream literary pundits ask irritatedly. For them, it is a contradiction in terms – aesthetics and dalit poetry? The abusing and offending, the stinking and sacrilegious, the vulgar and violent, the crude and casteist, the rotten and rude – these are the choicest epithets they scornfully use to characterize the revolutionary genre. Conditioned by the deep-rooted social prejudices and traditional idea of poetry, the reaction of the general reader can hardly be different. A dalit poet has recorded in the preface of his poetry collection a real-life incident: his high-caste lady-colleagues were in search of a new song that they can sing in their bank's Annual Day Cultural Function and win the prize. They knew that their colleague writes poems and therefore insisted to give them some. Embarrassed and hesitant, he gives them only to find that the ladies were not only disappointed but were also annoyed! They never knew that poetry would be anything but geet or gazal written in fine diction and could have love and beauty of nature or bhakti of a deity as its theme!

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, this most hackneyed expression is the only consolation in this kind of socio-cultural scenario. But the history of literature suggests that different socio-economic conditions give birth to diverse literatures and each is born with its distinct aesthetics. A true and genuine literature is always beautiful even if it is its lot to portray most ugly
reality of life, most evil nature of mankind. And it is the lot of the dalit poetry to depict the unwholesome part of life that deprives a section of people of their human dignity and human rights.

Even random examples from dalit poetry prove the pundits wrong. Like a Lily in the mud, the dalit poetry makes itself endearing, lovable, attractive, appealing, ennobling and beautiful – with its tragic, comic, satirical and subliminal tones, with its innovative use of both desi as well as cosmopolitan diction and idiom, with its benevolent ideology of human brotherhood, with its lofty ideals of liberty and equality and justice for all. Let us for instance take the poem 'Pimpamma Yellamma' as a beginning shot:

' i will quench the thirst of the thirsty,
 i will feed the hungry
 and i will shelter the homeless ...
 the bewildered girl
 in a skirt of leafy neem twigs
 takes the oath to yellamma
 amidst the smokes of burning camphor and coconuts,
 the entranced devdasis
 and the exorcising jogitis –
 all swaying
 and screaming
 and babbering.

 and she'll entertain the lingam dutifully –
first the pujari,
and the strongman
and the stranger
and on the next magh poornima
she'll return to the red-lit slums
in the all-embracing lap of pan-chewing gharwali.

the fiery deity perennially
plucks the public hair of little yellamas
to ease into the penetrating thrust
of lust and hunger
Jai ho pimpamma yellamma. '

The shocking impact of a new aesthetics is felt from the title itself: Pimpamma Yellamma. Why the poet chooses to juxtapose these two seemingly immatchable and certainly sacrilegious in tone and meaning? Yellamma is the name of a local deity, the incarnation of Mother Goddess and therefore venerable. But the adjective coined by the poet joining two words – Pimp and amma – is definitely what pundits charge as abusing, offending, vulgar and sacrilegious. But as the poem unfolds from one line to another and one stanza to another, the reader finds that the Yellamma who allows and encourages the prostitution of small dalit girls called poor devdasis is certainly not worthy to be called a 'Mother' or a 'Goddess' and therefore ‘Pimpamma yellamma’ is the apt title. The successful portrayal of the evil with the help of the local milieu and diction is the real aesthetic appeal of the poem. The poem opens with the customary oath an innocent dalit girl-child is supposed to take – that she will satisfy the thirst and hunger
and will offer shelter to whoever is needy. Apparently, what a noble cause! But in reality, she is made to satisfy the thirst and hunger of the sex – right from the priest to the headman to the strangers and to the red-light area vultures. And all these in the name of service to Goddess, service to humanity. The poet exposes naked the Goddess who in effect is no better than a pimp and therefore fully deserves the aesthetic wrath and condemnation of the poet as well as the reader. The poem ends with the sarcastic stone: *jai ho pimpamma yellamma*, that is long live the deity. But the reader is so agitated and full of anguish that he would instead wish her to be no more. Goddesses like these who are enemies of mankind need have no place in society and they must be banished to the barbarian age of the past. Modern man must evolve into a rational being and then only he can get rid of exploitative customs and rituals.

The aesthetics of the dalit poetry gets established here in this poem, for it successfully conveys the indictment and condemnation of the godly evil and makes a poignant appeal on the reader to help stop such barbarous socio-religious practices. The poem would be called aesthetically poor, if it had failed to portray the evil as evil, superstition as superstition, exploitation as exploitation.

It is pertinent to note that even ugly or evil needs to be created beautifully so that it can exert aesthetic impact on the reader. The reader who is the real target of the poet, and to whom he wants to transform into a sensitive and sensible agent for social change. Actual reality may be ugly but the picture or poem that is a work of art must never be drawn or written in a hap-hazard, shabby, ugly or unbeautiful manner. The dalit poet employs his full
creativity and mastery of poetic means to achieve that aesthetic property in his creation. It is not for nothing that M F Hussain's studio is decorated with a Rajasthani cobbler's handicraft we know as paon ki jooti.

Aesthetics of dalit poetry is realized through the amalgamation of its unfamiliar content, its special means and mode of expression and humanist ideology. They work together to yield aesthetic value to the works of dalit poetry. Yes, there is but only one major theme – the social evil called casteism to work on for dalit poetry. The major themes traditionally identified with poetry like love, beauty of nature, adoration of divinity may occur in dalit poetry only with their reference to deprivation, oppression, distortion, exploitation. For they are rarely allowed to enjoy and celebrate the luxuries of life called love and beauty of nature and spirituality. They are denied such fundamental human and natural rights, even though they belong to the same species called Homo sapiens!

But even through deprivation, the dalit poet is able to arouse aesthetic feeling. If a stone calling itself God or Goddess is slapped, the act is called sacrilegious. But if a living human being is molested, the act is adventurous! The poem Jasumati, my black jasmine even if quoted in a couple of stanzas must bring out the aesthetic sense of the dalit poet:

' whenever you come with broom
and dust-bins in the streets
you cease to be the black jasmine
grown upon the dark dung-hill
outside the boundaries of our village.
the red sun blossoms upon your face,
upon your bosom
and in your heart.
vultures wearing sacred threads take rounds
of ganges and you,
when you stoop to sweep
the black-berries under your nylon blouse
peep to the sunny embrace of the earth.
you, jasumati, suddenly become jasmine
again for a moment :
the dried paste of honey upon your black lips
begins to moisten.
had it been midnight
the fireflies would have kissed them
in search of juicy buds –
your cups dripping brews !
instantly you become feast for the zooming vultures.
a nasty joke,
a quick and sudden hug
a slap upon your heavy buttocks.
you are cornered like an easy prey.
they enjoy the delicious
most touchable flesh of an untouchable girl.
you moan and become mother –
mother of a bastard.
they button up the trousers
and take a plunge in the ganges.
they defile you, dear jasumati
like a crow defiles with his dirty bill.

A beauty is molested, the chastity of a young dalit girl is violated and the dalit lover is helpless. And the act is committed by none other than the holy men wearing sacred threads. And they get holier buttoning up their trousers and taking dip in the sin-cleanser called gangajal. And the act is not considered sacrilegious!

This is the beauty of the dalit poetry: the dalit lover is helpless but the dalit poet is not. He disrobes the culture-clad vultures for all to see that they are no holy men. They are the violators of human chastity. They are shameless hypocrites preaching untouchability in public and feasting on untouchable flesh in private. Their sermons on morality in the holy precincts of temples are but sham and hoax.

One more thing to be noted: the poet it seems tries to establish counter aesthetics of the subaltern, that is the concept of the mainstream versus the concept of the dalit. 'Black is beautiful' may be the assertion borrowed from the black poetry movement of America but the poet here successfully creates the black beauty of the dalit girl. The popular notion of 'Fair is lovely' is not only challenged but defeated when the reader compares quite unconsciously the heroine of 'Jasumati, my black jasmine' with that of 'My Fair Lady'.

Yes, one can easily call this poem a love-poem. And yet it is not love-poetry but dalit-poetry. It has a tragic tinge; it has a lover describing the
beauty of his beloved in quite romantic-poetic diction. But it has a dalit couple denied their right to love each other! Their private paradise is debauched by the predators. The reader gets the message; the reader gets his aesthetic fulfillment. And that is the effect of the aesthetics of dalit poetry.

Vulgar, what is vulgar in this poem? The black-berries under the nylon blouse or the black lips moistened with honey? Or the nasty joke, sudden hug, slap on the buttock, feasting the flesh of the untouchable girl, buttoning up the trousers, dipping in the Ganges? The former is the lover's depiction of his beloved's beauty and the later are the acts of the paragon of culture. The reader should be able to decide whether the poem is vulgar or the deeds of the oppressors. The dalit poet is never shy of pronouncing his verdict on what is beautiful and what is vulgar, what is good and what is evil, what is moral and what is immoral. That is the clarity of his ideas, that is the decency of his emotions.

Aesthetic evaluation of a poem involves a big exercise: right from the selection of its content by the poet to its execution via proper form and imagery woven through words, idioms, figures of speech as also the ideological approach. The same exercise for the genre of Gujarati dalit poetry could be huge and therefore we might restrict ourselves to a few more representative samples.

It seems Gujarati dalit poet initially was not very conscious of the idea of aesthetics, for his priority on his own declaration was the urgency of expression.4
The word suffocating for century was impatient for the poetic journey. He expressed his inadequate resourcefulness, particularly in the field of craft and technical skill. But his passion turned into genuine poetry and thus quite effortlessly his poetry displays aesthetic ability. He had a crude common sense: the sword that is strong enough to strike and sharp enough to cut the target into two is beautiful and not the one that has a blunt blade but has a well-carved, gilded handle. And that helped develop his aesthetic sense. He sharpened his poetic talent so that he can strike, and strike at the very root of the evil.

Sahil Parmar, the poet that emerged in the first phase of Gujarati dalit poetry is a very angry young man but is gifted with a fine sensibility. When he strikes, he strikes hard and severe but when he loves, he loves with all sincerely and honesty. Let us listen to him in this short poem titled 'Spring of my language'

'You came
and my rough, rocky and dirty words
become soft, clean and clear.
Savarna,
You came being spring of my language'

This little poem is a candid confession of a dalit poet, an acknowledgement only a dalit poet could make perhaps. Savarna, as the literal meaning suggests is a girl belonging to high caste and her lover obviously belongs to a culture that has been rendered rough, rocky and dirty due to the cultural deprivation and social segregation. Savarna, since she loves the dalit hero
poem clearly is purged of all social prejudices and devoid of the negative traits of her high caste culture has become a paragon of virtues. Her chaste and soft and cultured liaison has worked wonders on the untidy and uncouth dalit hero. He experiences the season of spring in his desi diction. The diction which was maligned and marred by the oppressive experience of social life has turned tender and romantic and the lover experiences the fragrance and softness of the springtime through the changed tone and tenor of his language.

The aesthetics of dalit poetry can be vouched even through this tiny little poem. Here also the mainstream literary pundit is proved wrong when he charges the dalit poetry as casteist and hence unbeautiful. The aesthetic value is invested in the poem by the dalit poet's appreciation of the positive features of Savarna culture. He is unspiteful and therefore candidly acknowledges the wonderful effect wrought by the beloved's cultured association.

But at the same time, the same dalit poet strikes on the ugliness of life with all the ruthlessness at his command. He may also occasionally employ more subtle and serene tone to achieve different kind of aesthetic feeling. 'Shame on you' \(^6\) is a mild reproach to the mainstream poet who is obvious of the miseries of the unprivileged people:

\[ 'we\text{ walked, plodded on weary feat,}\]

\[ Bravo poet, you rode higher than the cloud. \]

\[ Talked cleverly about deeds – \]

\[ good and bad, \]
heaven and hell,
lover's meetings, kisses and embraces.
Isn't that your means of livelihood?
Farewell songs you sang,
fed opium to numb oppressive tyranny.
Innumerable factions
your eyes failed to see!
Failed to mourn for men
Being trampled, butchered!
wrote Ramayana for the Kraunch bird
enchanting webs of lies you spun.
Had you sung a little of our anguish,
O poet...
In heat we walked, scorchingly, no feet,
Shame on you poet!
Higher than the cloud you rode.'

The great poet of Ramayana is rebuked by the dalit poet, what a courage? And that courageous expression makes the poem ponderable. The poet that was so moved by the love-lorn Kraunch bird on separation of her mate writes a whole epic poem celebrated as Ramayana. But the same poet is completely unmindful of the pain inflicted upon indigenous tribal people of the land called 'Aryavarta' by the lord Rama and his gang of local stooges. He failed to give justice to the original inhabitant's right to their own land, right to live as per their own cultural traditions and heritage. He is no more than a bard trumpeting his king's 'heroic' deeds nakedly partisanly. He is
not a real, genuine poet – poet of compassion and brotherhood as is the credo of dalit poet. It is for the sensitive reader to read between the lines of dalit poetry and feel the pathos expressed in satire. Aesthetic evaluation of a dalit poem thus requires deeper consciousness and larger sympathies.

In the number of poems quoted above, we get aesthetic pleasure derived through both content and craft. Dalit poet conjures of a phrase and it evokes both message and aesthetic appeal. The phrases 'pimpamma yellamma', 'multiplying melancholies', 'they let loose the world', 'Dr Bhaga Manga, MS and Dr Mhera Mohan FRCS', 'the magic paper', 'the black sun', 'waiting in the wilderness', 'a collegian Shabari', 'a loom is broken', 'journalistic apathy', 'a man of no consequence', 'sons of soil', 'I will hang him', 'Hey Brahma', 'enrage me not', 'soliloquy of untouchable Shakuntala', 'Don't enter the temple', 'from broom to mouth', 'dousing the fire in the heart', 'Do not touch me' and many more are but the titles of poems loaded with melancholy, satire, ridicule, anguish, sense of injustice, contemplation. The reader will be immediately attracted or repulsed by the initial sense and sounds they convey: how would he digest the most unconvincing match of the name like Bhaga Manga with that of the prestigious medical degrees like FRCS or MS? The social reality doesn't allow a poet to imagine such combination, neither would it allow the reader to take it as a poetic license and ignore. Yes, the names ring illiteracy and ignorance and therefore they are mint to do menial, unskilled jobs and certainly they can never be taken as respectable medical professionals. It is intriguing why the poet has chosen this phrase? It is precisely to lend aesthetic value to the poem by juxtaposing the paradoxical terms. They are doctors nonetheless, mending the sanitary
system of the gluttonous city. They are man-hole divers and gutter-specialist dalits.

'with bamboo baskets on head
and hoes in hand,

dr Bhaga Manga, MS
and dr Mhera Mohan FRCS

lifted open the lid of an overflowing man-hole
and slipped into the nether land.
without any gloves or gumboot,

apron or oxygen-cylinder,

first-aid-box or thirst-aid-box,

scalpel or stethoscope,

they prove more brilliant and competent
than B J Medico boys,

expert in art
and skilled in science.

the real Schwitzerian tribe –
acting upon every letter of Hippocrates
very simple docs, indeed!

the municipality supplies

a pair of blue shorts of khaddar
and a half-sleeve, ash-coloured shirt,

just like the harijan-volunteers of yester-years.

hogs graze upon the earth
or lick excreta

and dr Bhaga Manga
and dr Mhera Mohan
dEEP dOWN tHE eARTH
mud-ball playfully !'

This is a long stanza from the longer poem. It is the craft of the dalit poet to lure his seemingly biased reader to go through his poem and know for himself how tragic is the life of the dalit scavengers! The aesthetic ability of the queerly connected words wrought into the title of the poem is here to be felt and experienced.

It remains to be seen how dalit ideology and dalit ideal can become instrumental in creating aesthetic appeal in dalit poetry. The sheer humanism is all a dalit poet aspires for. The mere brotherhood is all a dalit poet desires for. One of the pioneering dalit poets and very mature voice, Pravin Gadhvi declares 'Farewell to arms' in these lines:

'Let us say farewell to arms,
Hold a round-table conference.
No country have we,
No field to plough, no home to stay.
From the age of Aryavart till today,
Not a blade of grass have you left for us.
Yet we are prepared to forget everything.
Are you ready to pull down walls you've built?
Like sugar in the milk are we willing to merge.
Would you endure if your Draupadi
Garlands are Galiya in Swayamvar?
Come, let us take turns in disposing the dead cattle.
Do you agree?
...
Let us say farewell to arms,
Plough the country's rich soil together,
Will you give us our share of the harvest?

The dalit poet is against violence, he condemns caste-riots and caste wars. He believes in peaceful co-existence and harmonious social relations. He believes in social and economic justice. He believes in the collective labour as well as reaping the harvest collectively and sharing proportionately. This is no bargain, but rightful demand for justice and equality and freedom. No disguise, no masquerade – sheer honesty and sheer goodwill as brethren. This is the ideal and ideology of a dalit poet. He doesn't invoke any isms, be it Ambedkarism or Marxism or any other. He doesn't much think of the ways and means, except for the simpleton's amicable give-and-take. He is concerned about the end. And that end is human happiness, human dignity for all. This message of humanism is the aesthetic attraction of the dalit poetry.

Dalit woman is the worst victim of the evil called caste system: the dalit woman is just taken as a play-thing, play with her as if it is the personal property, cheat her, rape her, kill her. But the dalit poetess still pleads for sanity. She doesn't become vengeful or vindictive. She doesn't ever dream of becoming a suicide bomber or a terrorist like the Tamil tigress. Instead,
she still hopes for the better sense to prevail. Chandrabahen Shrimali, otherwise a fiery spokesperson of the dalit cause has penned this poem of human ideal of universal brotherhood:

'Paradise, at a stone's throw distance'

With a sincere heart
And without expectation,
When man will love man
The hell will no more be in sight,
The paradise will just be at a stone's throw away.
But the paradise will turn into heaven
If man remembers
That there is a man called dalit
Waiting to be loved.'

The dalit poet is often accused of using foul language, that his tone exudes venomous sarcasm, that his ideology is sacrilegious, his muse is loud and verbose and onerous. That he is vengeful and casteist. The diction is unfigurative and coarse and even vulgar. These are the epithets the mainstream critic uses while making aesthetic evaluation of dalit poetry. But the dalit poet has different notion of aesthetic beauty: he believes for example, in the beauty of the arrow that is sharp enough to pierce the evil. The beautifully carved handle of the sword that is blunt is of no use to the dalit poet, for he is required to strike, and strike hard. He has to destruct the ugly and unjust to construct afresh. The anti-human social system that robs
man of his dignity must be purged and overhauled. If his angry poetry takes the form of acidic ink, one can hardly blame him for the 'sin'. Victor Hugo says if there is darkness, sins will be committed. Guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.

The aesthetics of dalit poetry is different than the mainstream aesthetics. The mainstream believes a work of art is beautiful if it has the symmetry of form, if it has the flowery language, if it has the rhymes and rhythm, if it has ambiguity and absurdity. It first thinks of the form to experiment on and then find some flimsy content called diction. But for dalit poet, his benevolent content, his message of brotherhood is the foremost aesthetic appeal.

The other example dalit poets give is much more ponderable for the understanding the concept of dalit aesthetics: any work of literature, howsoever perfect in form and technique and executed with all the creative talent and skill of the writer but supports the exploitation, discrimination of man by man can never qualify as an aesthetic creation. Hitler's biography 'Mien Kamph' justifying holocaust of the Jews, or Manu justifying oppression of the Shudras and women, some Ku Klux Klan white writer justifying racial superiority of the whites over any other black or brown or yellow race, some czarist writer justifying terror and exploitation, some pseudo-communist writer advocating curtailment of fundamental human rights and human dignity --- are all ab initio unaesthetic works. For they violate the fundamental principles of aesthetics, laid down in the beautiful trinities of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram as well as the 'Liberty, Fraternity and Equality'.
1. 'Bahiskrit Phoolo', Neerav Patel, Swaman Foundation for Dalit Literature, Ahmedabad, 2006, see preface
2. 'What did I do to be so black and blue', Neerav Patel, Dalit Panther, Ahmedabad, p.7
3. Ibid. p.39
4. 'Akrosh', Dalit Panther, Ahmedabad, 1974, see preface.
5. 'Mathaman', Sahil Parmar, Gandhinagar, 2004, p.22
6. 'The Silver Lining' ed Roopalee Burke, Darshana Trivedi, Dalit Sahitya Academy, Chandkheda, 2000, p.51
8. 'The Voice of the Last', Praveen Gadhvi, Yash Publication, Delhi 2008, p.17
9. 'Valonum', Chandrabahen Shrimali, Gandhinagar 2007, p.3