Chapter-V
Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Study from the Perspectives of Identity Quest

Social scientists insist that in this world there had always been an elite section which is to be differentiated from the rank and file. It is said that the elite is a small number of individuals who in each sphere of activity have succeeded at higher level in the professional hierarchy. According to these scientists, each society can be divided into two strataums-lower and higher. The people belonging to the higher stratum are at the top and they govern and exploit the people belonging to the lower stratum. In other words, it can be said that the elite is an organized minority which holds domination over unorganized society. The same idea of elitism is reflected in George Orwell’s Animal Farm wherein original commandments are broken to suit to the requirements of the elite. For example, the seventh commandment ‘All animal are equal’ is distorted towards the end of the novel into ‘All animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others’. It propagates the principle of elitism and inequality and thus bringing imbalance in the society. This disparity does not ensure a healthy atmosphere in the society. The unprivileged or underprivileged class who are the victims of social, economic and cultural exploitation will try to create a revolution for getting the justice. They will surely do their best efforts to gain their identities.

Since time immemorial, the Indian society is divided in a caste hierarchy on the top of which sit Brahmins, at the second position are Kshatriyas, the third the Vaishyas. The Shudras come at the fourth rank. According the caste system in the Hindu society, the main job or duty of these low caste people is to serve the upper class people. They are prohibited from acquiring education, doing any sort of business. Several restrictions have been put on them and thus crushing their social and political identities. Dalit literature is a protest and a reaction against this caste system and its principles. It is a reaction against this age-old tradition of discrimination, exploitation, ruthlessness and deprivation.

Caste system which promotes inhumane tradition and imbalance in the society is all-time evil prevailing in the Hindu society. Due to this evil, the downtrodden have suffered life-long miseries and infinite hardships. This helpless segment of India has been made to
lead dehumanized and degraded life. The people of this class have been denied the fundamental rights by this rigid caste system of Hinduism. The frustration, suppression and anguished felt by this marginalized section of the society constitute the dialogic of Gujarati Dalit literature. The lowly jobs like scavenging that they have been forced to perform deny them a dignified identity in the Hindu society. Their identities have been culturally and religiously degraded. Gujarati Dalit poetry has emerged as poetry of resistance against dehumanizing and marginalizing forces of society which tend to suppress their identity. It depicts their strengths which have helped them survive centuries of exploitation. It is path-breaking in the sense that it gives voices to the silent section of the society. It is the presentation of their story written with a view to recreating their identities. Containing a Dalit backdrop, Gujarati Dalit poetry portrays on the one hand the joys and sorrows, the tragic hopes and aspirations, the life values and outlook of their community; on the other hand it also records the growing awareness of their pitiable state and the anger, pride and assertion of their identity. In short, all Gujarati Dalit poetry is a saga of resistance against the hegemonic forces of Brahmanic literature which pretends to be omniscient and all-encompassing while presenting a narrow, biased view of reality.

In the beginning, the protest for their respectable identity was subterranean and verbal. In the fourteenth century, Ramanand spread the Bhakti Cult. He had disciples of all castes including Dalits from all regions including Gujarat. The non-Brahmanical spiritual leaders like Kabir, Ramdas articulated their messages through folk languages and tried to rebuild the cultural identity structuring them on the scaffold of equality and fraternity. Saint Namdev, Chokhamela and Tukaram were also a part of the same tradition. Eknath says that God helped all human beings irrespective of caste and creed. According to him, there are many non-Brahmin saints of India with whom the God worked:

“God baked pots with Gora,
Drove cattle with Chokha
Cut grass with Savata Mali
Wove garments with Kabir
Colored hide with Ravidas
Sold meat with butcher Sajana  
Melt gold with Narhari  
Carried cow-dung with Janbai  
And became Mahar messenger of Damaji”

(Ranade, 33)

Here is the list of non-Brahmin saints with whom the Almighty stayed and worked irrespective of their castes. Eknath belonged to the Brahmin caste but he ate with Mahars and sang Bhajans with them. The tradition of Dalit discourse gave birth to an intellectual tradition. Kabir gave it a new freshness and energy and thus disturbed the whole society comprising the Hindus and Muslims. Kabir considered himself neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. He cultivated his own sect which bothered neither about Hindu’s Rama nor Muslim’s Allah. He criticized the concept of hell and heaven and condemned Brahmins and their tradition. Saint Raidas also belongs to the same age and has the same favor against the Brahmanical tradition and culture. This age of Dalit saints is the age of spiritual rebellion. The struggles of the downtrodden communities were composed and sung by them. Their quest for human identity was earnestly presented by them in their Bhajans. These saints rejected all those spiritual values which discriminated between man and man. They believed not only in social equality but economic equality as well. They challenged this very concept of Varna-Vyavastha which crushed the social, religious, cultural identities of downtrodden mass. They emerged as revolutionary thinkers when they stressed that a Brahmin is not by birth nor by sacred thread ceremony, only that man is Brahmin who has Brahma in him. They talked of human dignity and this is the central point around which the modern Dalit discourse revolves. They raised their voice against the fact that the untouchables were deprived of the Vedas because of their caste. They condemned the following commandments made by Manu which suppress the social and religious identities of the untouchables:

“…thy will not have knowledge, thy will not have properties, thy will not have arms to protect yourself, they will not have human dignity. If a Shudra listens to a recitation of Vedas, his ears will be filled in with molten lead or lac. If he recites Vedic rechas, his
tongue shall be cut off. He who teaches law of living to a Shudra and he who teaches him religious observance, he indeed together with that Shudra sinks into the darkness of hell. Declared untouchable, he would live in crematorium, clothe himself with the shroud of the corpses, and feed himself of the leftovers. To avoid further pollution, he will carry a spittoon around his neck and tie behind his back a broom to sweep away marks of his own footprints.”

(Manu)

One can notice the social discrimination and consequent exploitation of the Dalit in these commandments. The revolt against these cruel commandments which promoted suppression and humiliation began in Gujarat also by several saintly figures in medieval period. There were a number of Dalit saint poets like Dasi Jivan, Trikam Saheb, Bhim Saheb, and non-Dalit saints like Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, Man Bhatt, Devayat Pandit and many others. These spiritual figures were deeply moved by the Bhakti cult of medieval period. They sang Bhajans to spread the messages of human equality and harmonious living. They advocated equality before God. Saint poet Narsinh Mehta was the one who suffered social boycott by his Nagar Brahmin caste for going to the untouchable bastis and singing Bhajans. He preached equality of all human beings and discarded discrimination and untouchability.

However, the stream of Dalit consciousness pioneered by Narsinh Mehta, Dasi Jeevan, Gangasati, Devayat Pandit, Mirabai could not dry away completely. It perhaps went underground or it is also possible that the predominantly Brahmin historians and critics deliberately ignored it or took no notice of it. So far as Narsinh Mehta and Dasi Jeevan are concerned, they could not be ignored, because they were not characters playing their receptive roles in history; they were history-makers. By the nineteenth century, The British had established their hold on India and under the influence of Christian missionaries, the light of education started touching the lives of the untouchables. In this period of Indian renaissance, we find Dalit writers expressing themselves in almost all languages including Gujarati. They are now not only writing their own literature and their
own history, they are also influencing and shaping the literature of their times in a big way.

Western ideologies that supplied several isms to experiment on form and technique also provided ideals of high humanity and ideologies to combat exploitation and inequality. But the post-independence mainstream writers in Gujarati remained aloof. Gandhian influence produced some literature sympathetic to the Dalits but it did not take roots and withered away for the reasons best known to caste Hindu practitioners. Their priorities were different: they were busy writing poems on leaves, flowers, beautiful women, edible delicacies. But the Dalit writer is absorbing the influences both of heritage and tradition as well as western ideologies and revolutions. He has been inspired by all-round circumstances. Together with general neglect in society and literature, the increasing effects of winds of change blowing through the agents like opportunities in fields of education, employment, politics, industrialization and migration from villages to cities, and the teaching of Dr. Ambedkar- all these brought tremendous awareness of their suppressed identities in the first generation of educated Dalits. They were all well-equipped with the angry word.

With the launching of the first ever poetry journal of Dalit literature, Akrosh, (Voice of Rebellion) in 1978, Dalit Panther, the militant organization of the Dalits provided long-desired opportunity of such expression. Although there were isolated poems and elegies published on Dalit theme composed by semi-literate, it turned out to be a great beginning of Gujarati Dalit literature. To focus on the pitiless murder of a Dalit young fellow in Jetalpur, a neighborly village of Ahmedabad, Aksrosh brought out a special issue in 1981. It coincided with bloodshed of the infamous anti-reservation riots. This is how the power of Dalit poetry was heard by the state for the first time. The special number of Akrosh was seized and its poets were arrested and imprisoned. As the floodgates were open, the word suppressed for centuries was let loose to condemn, to protest, to attack, to appeal, to argue, to persuade, to expose and to reconstruct their identity without fear or shame. The saga of suffering began to be written in poems after poems. In the editorial of that journal, they collectively decided to leave aside their traditional tools, rather picking up pen and become verse-makers. They would initiate learning the ABC of language and
literature. They understood one fact that it was an urgent need for them to express their miseries, humiliations, injustices, prejudices, poverty, hunger, exploitation, persecutions. They were to yearn for human dignity and identity.

Since time immemorial, they have been deeply wounded. So they are found to be filled with the yearning for identity with human dignity. Voiceless as they were for centuries, now they have found the ‘word’ to claim their new identities. With this frank and fearless beginning of Dalit poetry, the movement of Gujarati Dalit literature announced its arrival. The angry outburst of these pioneering poets was quite shocking to the mainstream Gujarati literature. Its diction was unfamiliar, its idiom was offending and the tone was rude and offensive, its construction was crude, its themes were eye-opening. The poets’ purpose is to kill the darkness caused by the oppressors of mankind and restore identity with dignity, equality, liberty and fraternity for all human beings that inhabit the earth. One must know how dark that darkness is. It is that darkness which turns man into slave, man into beast. These poets have tried to answers in their own ways. To quote the words of Joseph Macwan:

“The poet of the Dalit poems is conscious of his own pains-sufferings. The borrowed things he cannot digest, he has to split the firmly fixed web of the orthodoxy. That’s why whatever is in the hand is the best weapon that is his policy, his art is that where he can use his hand. His miseries are immeasurable even the length of the epic is short to narrate that…”

(Macwan, 141)

The poetry created in this revolutionary fervor is an instrumental in propagating human thoughts. Leaving aside the aesthetic excellence and the sublimity of poetic vision, it celebrates the aesthetics of human identity and human autonomy. It marks a shift of the literary current from the splendor of courts and civil society to the regions where a large group of community has been dragged behind the shadows of gloom, poverty, invisible identity and humiliation.
Gujarati Dalit poetry in a true sense provides critical insights on the question of their identity. Emerging as a special stream in a literary landscape, it tends to cover a wide range of ideas and insights governing the social mindset of the Dalits. It also contains a critical evaluation of the prevailing social and cultural practices. These poets themselves are either victims of or witness to social inequalities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political and cultural organizations of Dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and often use their poetry as a vehicle to propagate their views on Dalit identity and prevailing Dalit consciousness. Their poetry does not constitute a homogenous or unified entity. There are divergent currents and tendencies. Its call for self-identity and freedom is governed by different theoretical and philosophical streams. There is a tendency in their poetry which emphasizes on caste as a prime mover of social behavior. They consider caste as a powerful force conditioning the social mindset of the Dalits. Their poems are projecting all experiences and perceptions from the standpoint of social, cultural and religious angle which determine their identity in the society they inhabit. Culture, religion and traditions are viewed as embodiments of dominating influences emerging out of the caste system. This school of thought also voices its anger and protest against the social and cultural inequalities. Economic exploitation is seen by them as taking birth from caste hierarchy and religious sanctions underlying them.

A small section of young and educated Dalit poets in Gujarat in the middle part of 70s have written poems to articulate and project their distinctive identity. Through poetry, they give outlet to their perception for the present and future. They project their aspirations and evolve new symbols and idioms. This poetry provides them new strength and vigor to revolt against Brahmanical tradition. It is an important medium in their search for an identity. Their writings demonstrate that their social location is strategic and enables them to perceive and capture the subtleties of social and cultural realities. In their efforts at identity formation, Dalit poets have begun to trace their linkage with low-caste saint-poets of the Bhakti movement.

Gujarati Dalit poetry condemns the division and divisiveness among the people and the preaching of the religious scriptures and ancient law-givers. For them, Manu who was a
Brahmanical lawgiver is an enemy of social equality and freedom. The *Manusmriti* is hated for its diabolical contents by most Dalit poets of the present times because it preaches hierarchy, dependency and subordination. It denies freedom to some while upholding the divine rights of the Brahmanical castes. Most Dalit writers believe that the material changes that have occurred in India during the last 100 years have altered the cultural veneer of this society. The mainstream mindset is full of vengeance and disregard for the lower castes and their basic needs. They believe that religious scriptures condition and manipulate the behavior of the people and encourage the forces of oppression and inequality.

There is a trend in Gujarati poetry to locate historical characters who have been shown to be of marginal significance and to restore to them a place of honor and recognition. Thus they empathize on Karna (a Dasi putra) as an upright character, Eklavya as a loyal disciple from *Shudra* community, Shurpanakha as a devout tribal woman. These poets attempt to vindicate the innocence and commitment of the historical characters. They reject the dishonesty and duplicity of the rulers who underestimated and victimized them. They are insistent on using their own imageries and expressions rooted in their own experiences and perceptions. A critical division exists between Dalit writers and those from the mainstream. The former are anxious and restive. They refuse to employ the received categories of social knowledge and are constantly in search for their selfhood. The latter, according to the Dalit intellectuals and writers, lack the social experience and empathy to understand the nuances of Dalit existence. An intense issue around which the Dalit identity question revolves is the practice of untouchability and the process of dehumanization. Along with untouchability, the Dalits face a variety of other problems like poverty, hunger, starvation, homelessness, exploitation, sexual abuse and physical torture. The Dalit poets of generation are seriously thinking over these issues. They very well know that how the urban social order is merciless and dehumanizing for the urban Dalits. In addition to this, the Dalit writers have also focused on the grim social realities in the rural areas where power lies with the rich. Neerav Patel remarks in the *Introduction* of *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature*:
“How barbaric and dehumanizing are the social sanctions against the Dalits! Centuries old excess like these have robbed them of their human rights and civil liberties, reducing them to mute herds animals. They have lost their glorious civilizations and culture and are turned into beast of burden and bonded labor. Life is all tears and toiling. The penalties and punishments for any violations are brutally inhuman.”

(Patel, 25)

Together with agony and anger, there is an urge to overcome these obstacles through mass awakening and consciousness rising. There is an appeal in their poetry to become conscious of rights and demands. They want their brethren to become brave, shed their difference and inferiority complex. They want them to realize the duplicity and hollowness of the ruling ideas of the dominating classes. The zeal for the identity assertion is found throughout their poetry. The will to assert and conquer is the primary concern for them. Sometimes the will to become is crushed by the hegemony of some castes. Basic human rights are denied to a vast section of humanity. For this reason, they lose capacity to question those occupying positions of power and authority. The question for one’s identity is a prime mover in the struggle for social equality and justice. Most of their creativity is structured around these premises. Theirs is an agenda of rebuilding society on values which promote honor and dignity, justice and equity. Dr. Ambedkar and Jyotiba Phule made them aware of their identities and started revolution for the welfare of the downtrodden. They preached the truth that Dalit unity was extremely necessary to redeem themselves. They made a very important contribution to spread awareness among the Dalits about their crushed identities. Ambedkar, in one of his speeches, proclaimed:

“All Dalits gathered here! How miserable your condition is! My heart is shattered when I see your sad faces and hear your feeble words. Why do you not resist the pain and anguish that the world offers you? Why didn’t you die in your mother’s womb as soon as you were born? You will oblige the world by dying even now. The
world will be redeemed of the burden of pain and sorrow. But if you really want to live, you must live courageously. You must also have your share of food, shelter and clothes like the rest of the citizens. This is your birthright. You will have to stand up to acquire your human rights. You will have to resolve, unite and fight for your rights.”

(Ambedkar, 191)

The Dalits of Gujarat were active in the rebellious movement of Ambedkar right from 1924. They took part in his every Satyagraha based on human rights and liberties. Even after his death, the fire for getting their rights has been kept blowing by the literary artists.

Dalpat Chauhan is one of the distinguished names in Guajarati Dalit poetry. The poems in his collection Kya Chhe Suraj (Where is the Sun?) are highly poignant. In the preface to his poems, the poet says that the sun of his ancestors was stolen and therefore the Dalits had to live the gloomy, dark life. They had almost forgotten what the sun was like. It means to say that they have never seen or felt happiness because their identities were enveloped by the gloominess. The poet further says that the words and creativity became the witness of the sun and a new era of struggle for the light has begun. The search of a Dalit poet is the search for the light of freedom from age-old oppression. In his poem My Introduction, he says that from the time immemorial his community has served kings, royal courts, high and mighty but those who served them have remained neglected and unnoticed. They have lived anonymous lives without shadows. The poet tries to assert his identity at the end of the poem in the following lines:

“I am huge
I have come with my identity
Listen, the sound of my blow
Near your ears!
I am he whom you
Have refused to recognize
For ages.
I am that.”

(Chauhan, 62)

The agony that is manifest in this poem is not imaginative but an experience. And the expression of this experienced pain becomes a quest for construction of ‘selfhood’ or identity. The poet is confidently asserting his identity and warns the oppressors that it is he whom they have exploited for ages. But now they have realized their own importance in the society and are no more ready to get humiliated by them. The process of identity quest arising out of a distressed cry can be felt in his other poems also. He makes an effort to use images as well as words which come from his own experience. His protest is not against any individual or group but the society as a whole. This protest seems to come from his insulted and injured soul. For this reason he says: ‘You think of pain, I live with pain. I am the descendent of the Sun and yet I grope in dark.’ The poet says that the Dalits lived a bleak life and they were accustomed to the miserable gloom. Further in the poem, the poet’s voice becomes a strong rebellion:

“We do not want to speak, enough;
we shall approach you
and brandish the blow of our hands
in air;
not for an answer;
it will be a question,
I hope you know it.”

(Chauhan, 63)

Here the voice of the poet is defiant warning the Savarnas about their awakening. The poet remarks that he and his brethren are not going to bear more injustice. They will not only use words to express their agony but they will directly approach the exploiters. They are no more going to be mild and meek surrendering themselves to high caste people and answering them. They may raise their voice and ask for their rights, liberty and dignified identity. Till now they have lived a life of slavery. Till now they have been speechless due to the shackles of slavery. He urges people to speak out and rebel against all kinds of
oppression. It is true that history has recorded the achievements of a few wealthy, mighty and privileged. But it has never made invisibles visible. But Dalpat Chauhan in the following lines of his poem *The Tortured Time* tries to come out from the darkness making him and his people visible:

“I, whose soul is not at rest, imprisoned in
The flask of darkness.
Mother
I am the caste of an aak plant
Even if I burn and burn,
Others are only irritated by the smoke.
Mother
I am a plant
Who does not need plough,
I will erupt
Breaking the stones
Like the red sheds of your eyes.”

(Chauhan, 44)

Every day of their lives is indeed a nightmare they feel. They have been enduring this pain, insult in the hands of *savarnas* whom they have been serving since centuries. But now it is the time to put an end to this darkness which has made their lives like a hell. The poet’s deliberate use of the line ‘I will erupt breaking the stones’ shows the anger and revolutionary zeal to get identity and human dignity. The same revolutionary fervor is found in his another poem titled *The Others*:

“Even I’m exhausted
tormented…Born
in this “other” culture.
Come,
O my heart…and you too my love.
Let’s fling
these ubiquitous places of worship
into whirlpools.

Let’s toss
our naked children
into the abyss.
Bloody Shankaracharyas call them cursed…
“Better off in trenches”, they’
“than in this life”.

Why huddle in Ghettos away from the town?
Let the caste-mongers burn our shanties
and get scorched a little in return.
Let these flames distend
beyond the sky…and reach across…
better of ashes,
than being untouchable.”

(Chauhan, 201)

Here the phrases ‘exhausted’, ‘tormented’, ‘naked children’ express the brutality which breeds in every mind of this society and also its lack of compassion. The high caste people are sharing the same soil with the Dalits. Then even the poet is feeling dejected and the earth they have inhabited seems to be the ‘other’. All sorts of efforts have been made to awake the society about their plight but all has gone in vain. Now the only option left for the poet and his people to escape from this misery is to anticipate a revolt to get a dignified life. For this reason, the framer of this caste-based society is abused by the poet in this poem. The anger of the poet seems to be expanded like wild fire in the jungle at the end of the poem. He urges everyone to make war to make themselves equal to others rather than being untouchables. Thus the poetry of Dalpat Chauhan echoes the sounds of equality and dignity for the Dalits.

Pravin Gadhvi is also one of the strongest voices in the Gujarati Dalit poetry. His poetry is written free verse. Through writing poems, he makes humble effort to bring the neglected parts of the society into the mainstream so as to ensure a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. He makes his best efforts to look at the scene in a highlighted
moment of time from the window to scan the past history of Dalits, assess the present and imagine the probable future and impact on the society. His fight is actually against the social construction and it comes out in his every poem. In one of his satirical poems *Hold Your Head up High*, he attacks on the hollowness of the Hindu society:

“Hold your head up high
But say that
You are hollow.
Kicking untouchable Shudras
Burning woman like Sita,
Cursing woman like Ahalya
To be stone-like,
Stripping woman like Panchali
Cutting the thumb of a
Disciple like Eklavya
Cutting the head of Shambuk
Insulting son of lower caste, Karna
Entrapping of Abhimanyu
Gambling in the court
Speaking lie in the name of Ashwathama
Burning down of Khandavvan with
Innocent Nagas in
In drunkenness
assassinating a great soul like
Mahatma Gandhi
Preventing Ambedkar to drink
The waters of Chaudar lake
This is our great tradition
Now hold your head up high
And say that you are hollow.”

(Gadhvi, 53)
The hypocrisy of Indian people is criticized by the poet in the above mentioned poem. The poet has located some historical characters like Ahalya, Panchali, Eklavya, Karna which have been considered to be of marginal significance. The poet tries to justify the innocence and commitment of these historical characters while satirizing the deceitfulness and untruthfulness of the rulers who crushed their identities. In order to maintain their supremacy over the less-privileged mass, the *savarnas* did not hesitate to exploit the virtuous beings even. Social segregation and quest for selfhood are the dominant themes of all poems written by Pravin Gadhvi. He aspires a kind of society where there will no difference between man and man the way it is not found in the animal world. His aspiration for equality is found in the following poem *Talking to a Cockroach*:

“We will succeed one day.
There will be no difference
Between black and white, touchable
And untouchable, Master and
Slave, elite and downtrodden, Haves
Not Have nots.
The difference will be
Removed
We will surely get
Freedom and equality.
We don’t want wealth,
We only want self respect
We don’t want crown,
We only want right of
Being human.

I was talking with a cockroach
Day and night.
Comrade cockroach do you
Have difference
Between black and white?”
Do you hate each other?
No comrade Nelson Mandela,
No,
We have no hatred,
We touch each other’s
Mustache.
Comrade cockroach, is there
Anybody rich and poor in
Your community?
No, comrade Nelson Mandela
The gutter belongs to all.
Do you have Kings and
Natives?
No, we are same.
We have no Kings and Queens
And no stories of Kings and
Queens.
Comrade cockroach, did
You fight world war,
Cold war, civil war, gorilla war?
No, brother, no, we don’t
Fight.
We all live in together in
This gutter and enjoy our life.
We don’t have prisons and
Punishment.”

(Gadhvi, 21)

Here is the dialogue between Nelson Mandela and a cockroach. Nelson Mandela is in real sense the mouthpiece of the poet himself. In this imaginative conversation, it is found that the poet’s deep desire for a fair and fine society where there is no place of injustice, humiliation and any anguish. Everybody will share this earth equally where no one will
be high, none low, no hatred but love, no economical disparity, no fight but harmony, no
dehumanization but humane attitude among all mankind. At the very outset of the poem,
the poet expresses his views that there should not be any difference between black and
white, master and slave, rich and poor. Being the champion of Dalits, Gadhvi wishes self-
respect, dignity, freedom and equality for marginalized people. The way animals do not
observe any discrepancy, mankind also must not bind themselves in narrow boundaries.
Here we are reminded of the divine vision cherished by Rabindranath Tagore in his
poem *Freedom of Heaven*. The India of Tagore’s dream is a country where her people
hold their heads high with their pride in knowledge and strength born of that knowledge.
One should be open to receive everything from every direction. The poet further adds that
there must not be any *isms* like *Communalism, Casteism, Regionalism, Racism*. The poet
says:

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls.”

(Tagore, 51)

Tagore’s deep wish for freedom can be seen in this poem. Tagore says that freedom can
be achieved only when there is perfect fearlessness, free knowledge, no *isms*. The earth
will become heavenly only when its habitants are free from any narrow mindset.
According to him, people of diverse sect and caste should value all highest values like
love, faith, generosity, fraternity, equality, dignity of one’s self. This is what expected by
Pravin Gadhvi in his above mentioned poem. He further wishes such kind of freedom
from the God in another poem *Forbidden Fruit*:

“You don’t wish, O destiny
That man may become
Equal to you
Once upon a time
You had penalized cruelly
Prometheus because he
Had stolen fire from
Heaven.

You, O, destiny, wanted
Sacrifice of his son
From Ibrahim.

You prohibited Iva and
Adam eating the
Forbidden fruit.

You pushed down King
Bali within three steps.
You, O destiny, hanged Satyavrat-Trishanku
Midway in the sky.
Who wanted to visit heaven alive
Your sky many be forbidden
For us, O destiny,
We will win it one day.”

(Gadhvi, 33)

Here the poet, being the spokesman of his brethren, talks with Destiny, Almighty, who
designed their fate. Actually, it is not with destiny but the high caste people the poet has
talked with. It is because ultimately they have suppressed the identities of low caste people. They are the governing factors in the society. The poet has cited some of the
names of victims like Prometheus, Ibrahim, Satyavrat, Trishanku who met with their
cruel fate in the hands of their masters. Because of caste division and inequality, the
downtrodden have suffered from mental traumas, anguish and wounded psyches. But the
poet is not a man to give up. He expresses his hope for winning their identities in times to
come at the end of the poem-‘your society may be forbidden for us, O destiny, we will
win it one day’. Though the society is segregated and unkind for them, they will gain
their rights and dignity one day. A sense of optimism is found in this poem. In a short poem by him titled *One*, he considers all mankind the one. To quote that poem:

“God and Allah are one
In temples and mosques
Whether black or white
Touchable-untouchable
Mankind is one
Whether souls of marine, land or sky
All are one.”

(Gadhvi, 50)

It is believed that God is one, whether He is in temple or in mosque. Similarly, all human beings made by Him are also the same, whether they belong to any caste or region. The poet expresses the feelings of oneness. But not all mankind believes in this humanitarian ideology. There is one section in Indian society which is denied its basic rights and has to struggle and shed blood to get a dignified identity. On one side, there is a class of people which possesses everything, while on the other side; there is yet another class which is deprived of even resources to fulfill their basic necessities. This reveals that the Hindu society is vigilant towards their every act and they dare not break any rules given by their mythology. They believe that they are supposed to follow their commands making the less-privileged endure penury and inequality. Gadhvi finds this land filled with fury and enmity. He expresses such feeling in the following lines of the poem *Enmity*:

“If our country is same
We have enmity between religions.
If our religion is same
We have enmity between sects.
If our sect is same,
We have enmity between Castes.”

(Gadhvi, 57)
Though equal rights have been granted by the Constitution of India to ensure better living for every citizen but these policies have failed to eradicate some deep rooted problems of our society. This prejudice is still prevailing in our Hindu society. As a result of this, Dalits have always been mired to be treated equally for which they are the victims of social and economic exclusion. Gadhvi’s poetry proved its importance in portraying the stigmatized and helpless condition of Dalits upstaging the subjugation of caste-based society. It focuses on the pathetic life of untouchables and questions the various ideologies of high caste people. His poetry has often been termed as a medium in bringing change in the socio-political scenario of our society. It has provided a platform to the oppressed people to stand against inequality. His poetry reflects quest for identity, social justice and freedom.

Gujarati Dalit poetry is a poetry with a purpose. Being a product of the Dalit movement, it attempts to untangle the riddles of ignored and oppressed who have suffered injustice and humiliation in our society. The main objective of this poetry is to understand the problems of the Dalit community, to analyse the reasons responsible for that and to encourage them to solve their problems. It establishes values and ideals of Dalit life. While recognizing the solidarity of the Dalit community, it nurtures intense desire of social transformation and promotes humanitarian ideology. In fact, it begins with searching roots of discrimination in religious scriptures. Then after it paints heartfelt descriptions of oppression and injustice, provides solution and ends with war cry. Naturally, poetry with the purpose of social transformation does not have any room for the traditional themes. Dalit poets view the things from different angles. They use a different language and a distinct imagery. It is in true sense an outburst of emotions. Their approach towards history is different. So is their understanding. As such, Gujarati Dalit poetry is not just an artistic expression for a socio-economic struggle, but a confrontation against established cultural milieu. After pointing towards the real or perceived cause of his misery, a Dalit poet moves to describe his pathetic social condition. He speaks plainly and does not give artistic veil to the expression. His descriptive poetry is revolutionary by nature. It emerges from situations that he experiences in his daily life. Being a spokesman of his brethren, one of such figures
namely Dr. Pathik Parmar presents a simple Dalit as a noble human being who is surrounded by darkness in following poem titled *By Birth*:

“He was dark skinned by birth
but he was handsome from inside.
He lived outside the town
As he was born in a low caste
He kept the town neat and clean
and yet he was called untouchable.
People kept away from him,
this pain nestles permanently in his heart.
He was rich as a human being
and his soul was like a winged bird.”

(Parmar, 71)

Grimness of life is woven in this poem. A person who is ‘dark skinned’ may not be dark or harsh by heart. A human being who took birth in low caste may not be low by character. A man who stays on the boundaries of the village may not be inhuman. A person who performs menial jobs may not be impure by heart. But the mentality of the members of our society is such that they discard such people who are ‘dark skinned’ by birth, stay outside the village, and do lowly jobs. It is a great irony the poet has presented in this poem that a person who keeps the entire village clean is considered to be unclean. Such is the hostile condition of untouchables in our society. Because of this, the Dalits feel suffocated in their own land they have inhabited. For them, the entire land seems to be ruthless and callous to their misery. As the society is so strongly clutched to its ancient caste system, nothing can be done for the welfare of these miserable lives. It is so firmly griped by hypocrisy and artificiality that it has the capacity to remain numb towards the pangs of fellow human beings. Dr. Parmar depicts the depraved conditions of his people in the following poem *I am Suffocating*:

“Because of my caste I am suffocating
Ceaselessly I am hurt by the ‘Karma Bandhan’ (Caste bond)
When all the shackles be shattered?
Continuously I am stabbed by the dagger of religion.

I am born at the outskirts of a village
that’s why I am kicked and tossed everywhere.

What do I talk about my life?
I am groaning because of hunger and pain.

Nothingness constantly captures my kitchen,
with a hand only I touch gently my belly.

How long I have to walk with my bowed head?
I hide myself behind the eyelashes.”

(Parmar, 221)

The title of this poem itself talks about the temper of the words. The poet feels hurt due to his birth in low caste. He was born in low caste due to ‘Karma Bandhan’. According to Hindu mythology, the present suffering is caused by the evil deeds that a person had committed in the previous birth. It means to say that a person’s present is greatly affected by the deeds of his previous birth. So it is believed that the Dalits are suffering or hurt, because of their evil deeds they performed in their earlier birth. Such is the blind and baseless religious beliefs of the people of our culture. The poet desires for Mukti (relief/freedom) from this bondage, because he feels humiliated due to his birth in low caste. He is continuously ‘stabbed by the dagger of religion.’ The low caste people are not considered human beings by the savarnas. That’s why they are kicked by them every now and then. They are compelled to stay at the outskirts of their village. The line ‘I am groaning because of hunger and pain’ is very appealing. Hunger is always associated with the Dalits. It is the beastly hunger that has forced to become weak as they find themselves ‘groaning’. Capitalism that has snatched the right of living from them keeps all the means of production in its control. The gifts of the nature are mostly absorbed by the savarnas. Their life seems to be unprofitable strife and their heart nurtures no hope to solve their problems. The poet believes that only those who have experienced such self-consuming hunger know how painful the state is. It is something beyond the reach of the sensibilities
of the savarna. Hunger is seen here as a multiple poetic reality and the poet toys with it on physical, mental and emotional level. The persistent haunt of the idea of hunger has affected their psyche adversely. They cannot even think properly about the sublime aspects of human life, howsoever sincere efforts they make. More than this, caste oppression has put them in a state where they begin to feel alienated owing to the behavior of the other castes of the society and they are liable to face the loss of their identity.

It seems ridiculous that political freedom is achieved decades ago while the dream of social equality with flourishing democracy is still a nightmare. Values of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice are still unaccomplished due to the dominance of higher castes. India is a democratic country; still democracy is sometimes mocked at owing to the attitude of its custodians. Getting exhausted by this inequality, Dr. Parmar asks two questions: ‘When all the shackles be shattered?’ and ‘How long I have to walk with my bowed head?’ both these questions are unanswerable because no one knows when these people will get fair justice and freedom. Their identities have been deeply wounded. The resentment of the system and its inhuman attitude is so enlarged that it offends their sense of self-identity and self-worth. Such a life at the end raises sound of protest which is engraved in Dr. Parmar’s another poem *Hey, Beware You*. It is full of revolt at this inhuman treatment accorded to his folk. He says that the inhumanity is so pervasive and so deeply instilled against them that the Dalits have no way out except to rebel. To quote this poem:

“If the eyes become adulterous, hey beware
If the tongue starts hissing be alert.
Since many days they have started mission, are you aware of it?
If the pen of these people will start, be careful.
The sons of slaves openly revolt against us
If their voice becomes stronger, then be cautious.
Kick them, hey, raise the hands to strike
If the corpses of them start crashing, beware you.
Be united hold buttons in hands whatever may happen
If these castes succeed now, then be ready all.

Ay come out from your abodes, what gossip you have held?
Supremacy of us is now shaken awake now.

Ay run away, at our back big crowd is dashing.
See, the swords of them are hissing now, run away all.”

(Parmar, 220)

The poet and his brethren are no longer going to tolerate this lowly existence. They rebel against the inhuman treatment they are getting in this land. Their fight is multiplex and they have to wage war on many fronts, against the scriptures that insist that the Varnas are ‘commandments engraved on stone’. Their war is against the dominance of the savarnas who have stamped approval on this discrimination and whose laws have cast them in a blackened darkness. The prison walls in which they are enclosed are so strong that breaking them is tough. And yet they feel that together they have enough strength in them to break those walls. Dr. Parmar tries to awaken his people to self-awareness, he asks them not to be turned to rocks but be the volcano within. He appeals them to get united and raise voice and pick the weapons up if needed to wage a war. He asks them not to get defeated but continue fighting till getting dignity. Whatever may happen, but they must not give up. He never wants to let his people of his caste to forget the atrocities inflicted upon them because in future these would work as a catalyst in igniting the fire of revolt. That is why, he asks them to ‘be united hold buttons in hands whatever may happen’. In medieval times, the reformers started their revolt through ‘tongue’, now the poets of the present generation have picked up pens in their hands and started rebellion through words. For them their pen is their sword with the help of that they will fight for their identities and equality. Dr Parmar has been inspired by the preaching of Dr. Ambedkar who wanted the educated Dalits to awaken his people so as to ascertain their dignity. Dr. Ambedkar once said:

“I earnestly appeal to the literary creators, you prosper the values, the values of life and cultural through your literary creation. Your
thoughts should not be limited or shallow but make them liberal and vast (universal). Make free your voice from the four walls. Do not keep enlightenment done by your pen limited to your home alone, spread that light everywhere to drive away the darkness of every village. You should not forget that there is another world of the neglected, Dalits and helpless human beings within our nation. Try to understand their misery and anxiety and dedicate your creative power to make their life respectable to other beings. Genuine humanity lies there.”

(Prasad, 137)

As a writer, Dr. Parmar makes it an objective to work for the upliftment of Dalits. He appreciates the inspiring accomplishments of Dr. Ambedkar for giving him tongue to curse and valor to fight for the rights of untouchables. Through his poem, Dr. Parmar wants to revitalize the Dalit community and turn it towards self-respect.

In spite of the persistent efforts made by the leaders like Phule, Ambedkar to bring about socio-political changes for equality of all citizens of our nation, discrimination on the basis of caste has not been diminished completely. Dirty game of politics in which marginalized are further oppressed has been ruthlessly criticized by Yashwant Vaghela. He is against the discrimination based on caste, religion, varna or region. He expresses his faith in the religion of humanity in which no one is considered inferior or superior. To quote his poem Identity:

“Here they know
Who am I
Yet feigning ignorance
They ask me:
Who are you?
I tell them:
This head is Shambuka’s
Those hands are Ekalavya’s
This heart, Kabir’s.
I am Jabali Satyakam.
But these feet are still untouchable.
Today I am a Man.
Isn’t that enough?
Well, who are you?”

(Vaghela, 57)

A man must not be recognized by his caste or creed he belongs to, but by humanity. A man should be a perfect human being full of compassion and benevolence. A Dalit fellow gets hurt when he is asked caste. A questioner, a non-Dalit man, has nothing to do with the injustice done to a helpless and innocent Dalit guy except enjoying a sadistic delight of the scene. Although they are Hindus, so-called upper caste pure Hindus who proclaim themselves to be the followers of one of the most humanitarian religion, they enjoy humiliating others. It is their sadistic pleasure. The question is why they are behaving so inhumanly and the simple answer is that they are doing injustice and inflicting pain under the unscientific and illogical notions that they are superiors and lower castes are inferiors. The very shadow of untouchable is supposed to pollute them but the irony here is that they are not polluted when they slay Shambuka or demand Eklavya’s thumb. The Dalits take their birth and get died, live and walk on the same earth on which the upper castes live and have their temples. It means the entire earth is polluted by the constant defiling touch of millions of Dalits. At each step of life, a Dalit has to suffer more than ever. This shows the hypocritical nature of upper castes. Even the poetry of Raman Vaghela exposes the hypocritical nature of the caste system or untouchability which has been a constant or recurrent motif in Gujarati Dalit poetry. The poem *Harsh Identity* by Raman Vaghela deals with the evil of untouchability. Vaghela has x-rayed the raped identity of low caste people in this poem:

“Harsh is our identity o friend!
Harsh is our destiny.
Born with a spot o friend!
Harsh is our destiny.
Time heals all wounds we know,
A life full of pains we live,
They kick us putting aside shame,
Our bleeding wounds they not see.

Sprinkle salt of humiliation they,
Saying it is sweeter than honey.

Owl-like we search for night in day.
O friend! Harsh is our identity.

With aching palms and bruised feet,
Burdened with untouchability,

We thirst for a drop of water.
A mirage cannot quench, can it?"

(Vaghela, 67)

The title itself suggests the nature of the poem. The poet has presented the photographic plight of the untouchables. It has exposed the real condition of downtrodden mass. The narrator of the poem feels an intense pain and he is sharing his pain with the world. He thinks that he and his people are destined to live such gloomy life full of darkness. There is a burden of being untouchable they are born with. They are kicked by the savarnas every now and then due to their birth in untouchable family. Theirs is a wounded identity which is not visible to the high castes. There are very few people in this world who sympathize them or listen their painful story. Their existence is compared with that of owl which hunts for night. Similarly, these depressed people also search for night for getting relief. It is in their sleep they find themselves relieved. Daylight is full of discomfort and agony for them. They are burdened with both-physical as well as mental pain. The phrase ‘aching palm and bruised feet’ shows that they do laborious jobs entire day. Because of insufficient education, they do not get white-collar jobs and thus need to do field work with more work and less remuneration. So their palms and feet continue being ‘bruised’ all the time. Because of traditional custom, they cannot access open water resources as they are meant for the savarnas only. And the mirage cannot quench their thirst. They are forced to live on the outskirts of the village. Theirs is a colony full of
squalor and misery. It is a colony of those untouchables who execute impure tasks only to maintain the touchability and purity for the touchables. Their resources are plundered by the colonizers and local oppressors. They are denuded, despised and humiliated. The entire society seems to be an antagonist to them which deprives them of basic resources. India is a democratic country but everyone cannot enjoy the fruits of democracy. Raman Vaghela thus had presented the pain and sordidness of the Dalit existence. He bemoans that even in the twenty first century these ancient wounds are still bleeding. They have festered into chronic disease which cannot be washed away. Despite the progress of civilization and talks of common brotherhood of man, their hands are empty. Without a respectable identity, the outcastes seem to be homeless and nameless even in their own homeland. See the poem *Misfortune* by B.N. Vankar mentioned below which expresses the same miserable picture of our land:

“There is no bread
But there is royal food
There is no loincloth
But there is pitamber
There is no home
But there is hermitage.

What a misfortune!
How miserable is man!”

(Vankar, 54)

This small poem clearly shows the difference between two groups of the same society living together. One is having everything, while the other is having nothing. According to Marxist ideology, our society is divided into two streams: haves and have-nots. The haves in the society are enjoying all worldly pleasure exploiting the have-nots. The irony of our country is that on one hand people can afford royal food, on the other hand one section of our society toil hard to get a piece of bread. In this country, there are ample number of *ashrams, gurukuls, dharmsalas* built by the people on the name of God or religion and people believe it to be their moral duty to expend some amount from their income after religious rites and ritual, while there are a lot of people, ill and dismayed
who are homeless. People donate land for building temples, while they do not have enough space in their village to be allowed to the outcastes to live in. The poet’s anguish in the line ‘what a misfortune’ is quite understandable. This is a matter of great concern for anyone to ponder over it.

It is unfortunate that in a land where Hindu religion has always granted equal status to all human beings, a considerable number of people feel culturally and socially ostracized. There has been politicization of religion and this has proved to be detrimental. Everyone should not further divide but should follow a policy of inclusiveness and amalgamation to become a strong and single unit. It is not with a policy of rejection and revenge but a policy of acceptance that everyone can bring about a change for the better future. Everyone should pledge to remain single unit and not become fragmented under the influence of divisive forces. The lord Shiva, often known as Mahadeva, is one of the most widely worshipped Gods in India. He is also the Lord of the outcastes and tribals. Those who practice untouchability need to ponder: while worshiping Shiva at home, do they treat humans in inhuman manner?

The Upanishadas declare that every human being is divine irrespective of caste, creed or family descent. There is nothing wrong in what Bhagvad Gita or Upanishadas said, there is something wrong in understanding and implementation of the same. It is unfortunate the caste system is wrongly based on birth and not on aptitude. Social ostracism has sprung from this misconception and so lower castes have been exploited and treated as outcastes, downtrodden, polluted and marginals. The most misunderstood, misused and misrepresented institution in India is caste system. The misinterpretation of some of the smritis has also contributed to this. Some of the Indian sages like Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Aurobindo Ghosh have contributed a lot to sorting out the misrepresentation. However, only the atrocities committed in the name of caste system have been highlighted in the press and media. The reforms as well as unity among the people of various castes and backgrounds that have happened in the past and are happening through the efforts of many saints have gone largely unreported. It is to be noted that as far as solution is concerned, revenge is not the solution. So the solution is neither in revenge not in revolt. It can only be achieved through understanding.
The ancient Vedic scriptures have depicted how the four different castes come from one body of society and related them to the various parts of the human body. According to these scriptures, let Brahmana represent head-power of thought, the head represents the intellectual, let Kshatriya represent His arms-power of protection and preservation, let Vaishya represent thighs-power of acquisition and distribution, let Shudra represent feet power of support and movement. Moon emerged from His mind, the sun from His eyes, the fire from His mouth, the wind from his breath. This is how the world came into being. The Vedas have given equal status and honor to all communities, as different parts of the same body cannot be labeled as being good or bad. Among the bodily parts, it is the feet of God that is generally worshipped in the temples rather than any other parts of his body. The rishis and the Vedas proclaim ‘Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam’—means the entire world is a family. So how can one justify treating the Dalits as outcaste or not as part of his society? To exclude people from the social structure is going against the Vedas, which brings misfortune to our society. This is what the poet has talked about in the above mentioned poem.

Despite all the administrative steps taken towards the welfare of the marginalized and subordinated masses in the post-independent India, the progressive individuals in upper social mobility have been continually suppressed in the social matrix. It has been observed that the socially disadvantaged position is wrought by economic exploitation from generation to generation. Even the menial jobs of sweeper, agriculture workers have been too ill paid or lowly paid. It is due to caste-based oppression and class-oriented inequality and due to assigning conventional jobs imposed by outdated feudal society. The oppression and exploitation are rooted in local traditions, culture and language. The system is so ‘paralyzed’ that there is a volcano of misery and ‘hunger’. The entire system seems to be coercive. Despite the education and economic ample opportunities availed, the social inequality by and large prevails.

A strong believer in the dignity of man and equality of all men, Dinu Bhadresariya is naturally shocked by the inhuman way the untouchables are treated by those who belong to the high castes, especially the Brahmins. He has satirized the framers of the graded society where the unfortunate section of the society is degraded and humiliated openly on
the name of religion. Below mentioned poem *Either God or Maker of Casteism* by him is a great satire on entire humanity:

“Is this a reality or fable?
To say: ‘don’t touch him, he is untouchable’
We, sophisticated human beings!
Cannot love the man we see,
and claim to have a sight of disappeared lord
How can it possible be!!
Can your Christianity name ADAM-EVA’S caste?
or
Can your Hinduism of BRAHMA-VISHNU-MAHESH?
or
Can your Islam of any KHALIFA?
“A MAN IS NOT CONSIDERED as MAN”
Why after such reformation of our culture?
By birth, he has not been stamped as
Brahmin or Shudra has been?
oh 33 crore complex forms of *Devas!*
Why don’t you give justice to man?
If you know caste-ism, who will break the chain?
Rama couldn’t recognize Shambuk
Krishna couldn’t recognize Karna
Then how can I recognize you as GODS?”

(Bhadresariya, 237)

Here is a great quest to God and the believers in false religious ideologies. In the first part of this poem it is found that the poet vehemently criticizes the hypocritical nature of the people of our nation. They believe in invisible God whom they try to search in temples, but they do not believe in living human beings. Saintly figures like Kabir, Raidas, Devayat Pandit, Dasi Jeevan, Narsinh Mehta and many more were of the opinion that a person should believe in oneself. God stays within the self of everyone, so one does not
need to search God here and there. He should respect all human beings considering them elements of God. Here it is reminded of an oft-quoted sentence of Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘Trust thyself’. But the human force of the Hindu society worships the invisibles and discards the downtrodden ones. They do not feel divine pleasure in worshipping humanity, but feel proud in not touching the Dalits. Moreover, all Gods be it Hindu, Christian, Muslim are casteless and divine in nature. Even no one comes into this earth with a stamp of any caste on any part of the body. But it is Hindu social structure that has divided man from man. Further in the poem, the poet makes a plea to God for justice. And he asks an over-whelming question to Almighty if He himself follows this evil design (caste system), then who will be their savior? Who will become their Messiah? Who will hold their hands and keep them away from this devilish social structure? If Rama could not recognize the innocence of Shambuk, if Krishna could not identify the purity and nobility of Karna, then the poet angrily proclaims that how can he recognize them as ‘GODS’? He thinks that if the designer of the system is so apathetic towards the torment of the oppressed then from whom the Dalits expect their welfare? At the end of the poem, the poet’s voice becomes more defiant and bold. His protest is not against any individual or a group but society as a whole.

All Gujarati Dalit poetry is distinct in compared to mainstream writings. On one hand, there is denunciation of the given order dictated by the caste society; on the other hand there is strong zeal of asserting to claim their rights and liberties so that they live with dignity and self-respect. In other words, it can be said that it aims at creating a counter-culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in the society. Generally, these poets are not against any group or religious sect but against the establishment, the government and the society which keep them depressed and deprived. It can be noted in this reference that the search for identity is a basic dynamism in Gujarati Dalit poetry. That is why issues related to poverty, powerlessness, untouchability, hypocrisy and several other social practices have generated a variety of responses from these poets. Those are the forms of protest aimed at bringing about social change through a revolution. This has been opposed by the establishment in this caste-based Hindu society. What is more unfortunate is that some critics of Dalit literature do not accept it as ‘creative art’ and regard it as reactive and propagandistic. The Dalit artists refuse these charges by arguing that all
literature is propagandist because all writers follow a certain philosophy while writing. It is because an author is first and foremost a social being. Very few accept and realize that he is capable of viewing and criticizing an event from different aspects. When these poets look at the scorching social reality and respond to it in an aggressive and bitter manner, his poetry is condemned to be propagandistic. To say this in other words, when these poets are concerned to think in terms of social change, they are regarded as propagandistic. Those who regard them thus themselves follow a certain philosophy by which they can be termed as social propagandistic. All literature is in this sense is propagandistic by nature, some insist on the literary values, some on values of life. Gujarati Dalit poets value the values of life, values of humanity. They can be regarded as the writers with deep social commitment. A close study of their poetry shows that they juxtapose the social evils against the mindsets of individuals and some privileged sections of the society.

Madhukant Kalpit, a renowned figure in Gujarati Dalit poetry is also one such figure. He has depicted in his poetry the miserable lot of unfortunate untouchables. He has also suggested that they can be freed from the shackles of killing orthodoxy and tradition only if men fill in their hearts some sympathy and tenderness for the outcastes. He also asks his lot to muster enough strength and courage to live boldly and healthily. Such urge can be seen in his following poem Awareness:

"Awareness flows within me,
The apprehension palpitating in the chest
And in the eyes, a disabled dream,
The self that suffered from a pitch black life
Tired, now looks at the sunrise.

Please do not think that
You cannot celebrate me like a festival.
From the boundary of the field
There is a lush green message:
‘If you call me a human being,
I will feel good!’
This is the place where a dream of a man
Like a stone strikes the eyes, so sharp.

In the valley of chest
Lighting a lantern,
Wanders a story, so silent.”

(Kalpit, 80)

At the very outset of the poem, the poet has portrayed a bleak and distressing life of the untouchables. There is deep nervousness in their heart and not a beautiful dream but a dreary and ‘disabled’ dream is found in their eyes. It is because they have been passing through a ‘black life’. The historical struggle of Dalits has witnessed violence, exploitation and revenge. Theirs is a life full of dirt, filth and darkness. For the poet, the society seems to be caught in the grip of age-old superstition and traditional beliefs that prevent them from undergoing fundamental changes. They have got ‘tired’ of leading such hellish life, so looking for ‘the sunrise’. Theirs is a desperate want for change. They hope that a new sunrise will bring profound warmth and renewal. The needs, rights of Dalits are a few and they do not ask for the mountains to bow down and skies to open up. What they want is compassion from the dominant class people. For this reason the poet says: ‘If you call me a human being, I will feel good!’ they do not want worldly pleasure to be offered to them, they are asking for their rights as men. The same urge is found in Kalpit’s other poem Prayer in which he makes a plea for justice and compassion for his lot:

“It’s a laborer, I wish to talk about.
The worth of his sweat and tears
is not even as much as
A stream of water that trickles down the body.
Whether a lush climber of tears bloom in his blood or
his perspiration emits
the fragrance of parijaat,
What difference will it make
to his exhausted consciousness?
He has no ambitions;
no discontent either.
Carried off by the flow of time
He wants to finish living anyhow.
Responsibilities he has not any,
so for the warmth he needs
...
He has failed to understand
the agony of his real identity
and the despair of being a
stranger to himself:
what can one do?
In front of me are
numerous pages bearing such compassions.
that’s precisely why when I
turn the pages of the book,
the rustling sound rattles
in my memory and
within my sealed lips
prayers start writhing.”

(Kalpit, 210)

Here the poet has talked of the life story of a hardworking Dalit laborer who is often found with full of ‘sweat’ and ‘perspiration’ toiling on the open field all the day. His is an ordinary life. He has no more ambitions in his life. His life is devoid of any identity and for this reason, he feels ‘stranger to himself’. The poet feels melancholic because of loneliness and emptiness that his people have in their life. The conditions prevalent in the society worsen this loneliness making them lonelier than ever. As a human being with full of compassion in him, he prays for the betterment of his community through writing. Kalpit is a poet who writes for a cause-the cause being the Dalit’s amelioration. He is a
poet with mission of asserting identities of the socially and economically ostracized people. He values the ethics that turn a man into a perfect human being. He integrates all the oppressed and exploited men of the world and offers an action plan through human values of indiscrimination, love and brotherhood in order to ensure them a dignified life. Humanitarianism is the slogan he chants to bring peace and serenity in life. As a poet he is aware of his duties and responsibilities.

Poetry has always been used by the Gujarati Dalit writers as armor against the established socio-political norms, long drawn out traditions, dull and dreary customs and hypocrisy. In the case of Dalits, many writers, have dealt with the subject of Dalits’ conditions and consciousness prevailing in their times. The squalid picture of the Dalits in their society has led to awakening of their consciousness by some voice of a new generation. It is this awakened consciousness that inspired and produced their own literature. The Dalit poetry can be termed as a foster child of their deep concern and aspiration. It is this concern which has compelled them to disgust taboos, fake beliefs, exploitation and persecution of the oppressed society. It is this aspiration that has made these creative writers to stand by his brethren. Today, they are no longer willing to fight for their cause with weapons. Now they are fighting through writings. They articulate firsthand experience of their community and their focus is ‘man’ at the center and depicts their trauma, pain and suppression in a very lucid manner. Theirs is vision to assert the identity of their lot in the mainstream society. One such figure among is Budhdhan Visnagari who demands for equality in his poem Equal Lines:

“From childhood have I burned!
Humiliated by inhuman treatment.
When I see the boards of ‘genuine’ astrologers,
I think:
There must be a line of untouchability
In my palm besides the lines of wealth,
Children and fortune.
Why should I be a Dalit otherwise?
Scholars of palmistry I ask you:
Where is the line of equality
In all this conspiracy of yours?
Where have you hidden it?
I have been waiting for ages
For the line of equality to appear.
When will it show in my palm?
I know it won’t be carved
By the goddess of fortune.
I will have to engrave it myself.”

(Buddhidhan, 84)

Here is a poignant verse which opens new vistas of the ways in which the Dalits have been demanding for their reserved rights. In the initial lines of this poem, the poet has depicted the miserable conditions of these outcastes. The humiliation, they have been suffering since their birth, is unbearable for them. That is why the poet raises some doubts in his mind. He longs to ask an astrologer about the lines of equality. First of all, he doubts on such astrologers whether they would be ‘genuine’ or not. He thinks there would be a line of untouchability on his palm. But the reality is that no astrologer in this world can find the lines of untouchability on the palms of untouchables. It is a man-made formula in order to preserve the supremacy over the less privileged ones. Here the hypocrisy of dominating class people is brought into the light by the poet. Mostly Brahmins forecast the fortunes of people who consult them whenever they face some problems related to money, entangled relationship, and matrimony. Here the poet asks another over-whelming question to the fortune-tellers: ‘where is the line of equality?’ This question can never be answered by them as they themselves are the creator of inequality. They have separated man from man on the base of caste. In order to maintain their dominance, they made divisions in the society making the Dalits untouchables. So how can they find the lines of untouchability and equality in their palms? This ‘conspiracy’ has been in vogue for ‘ages’. It is this ‘conspiracy’ which has suppressed these outcastes. Even God cannot carve out these lines in their palm because for Him all are equal. But in man-made society, some are more equal than others. The poet ends this poem with a note of searching his identity and freedom on his own. He was conscious of
his commitment as a poet and therefore through his poems he wants to give identity to the Dalits. His purpose is to make people aware about the pitiable plight of the downtrodden section of the society.

Gujarati Dalit poetry is not devoted to the deeds of heroic persons; rather they have Dalits as their subject. It is famous for the use of strong tone and harsh and sardonic language. This indicates the depth of anguish filled in the hearts of these poets. They have tattooed songs of liberty in their anthologies and played drums of defiance on their lips. The dominant distinction between Dalit poetry and that of mainstream is whether to reject the tradition or to accept it with or without reforms. While Dalit intellectuals firmly oppose the age-old Indian tradition based on the caste system with its religious hierarchy, non-Dalits maintain that the tradition cannot be rejected. The Dalit writers realize the word ‘tradition’ as deceptive that has been used as a ‘shield’ throughout Indian history by a class of people for their selfish motives. Dan Vaghela asks his lot to throw away these meaningless traditions and seek refuge. He asks his brethren to leave all land and go to a place where they find dignified life. In a furious tone, he says this in the following poem *Another World*:

“Throw away the caste from self and go out
Take the light, leave the night and go out.

The dividing line may become transparent
Leave discussions of others, and go out.

Since so many eras you are a building, ruined,
Leave cyclone alone, and go out.

You drown the hollow rituals
In the seven seas, and go out.

You will be able to see another peaceful world
Leave the pretentious teeth, and go out.”

(Vaghela, 88)
Moving away from the immediate and local context to the distant and global context, this poem addresses the outcastes, in a tone of pain and anguished mixed with sarcasm, asking to abandon this land and settle somewhere. The poet with antagonistic tone asks his brethren to leave this country and get settled to such a place where they find a dignified life. The poet is fed up with the present social context. The exploitation and suppression of his people seems to be a ‘cyclone’ to the poet and he requests them to leave that one. He never wants them to forget all injustice inflicted upon them by savarnas. He lets his people know that all their life they were sucked dry and now they do not need to bow down before the system. He wants to spread the message of fearlessness, consciousness of their anguished existence and faith in ‘self’ so that their revolt may prove to be fruitful and they may get their rights. The poet wishes to destroy the whole edifice of caste hierarchy and explode ‘hollow rituals’ so as to establish the rule of equality. The desire for exiling in a new land is the demand for a new living with full of vitality and enchantment. The demand for new country is the demand for new ethos to live with. Thus it is observed here that the poet being repulsive about their deserved position in the society and raising some doubts regarding their affinity towards the land of their birth. The present poem in true sense anticipates change. The poet here sketches a promising revolt which is likely to bear the fruits of freedom. It has echoes of a separate land wherein they could stand as equal to all the living beings.

Here it is confronted with the question of their identity in the prevalent social order and the dignity with which each one of them would like to live. The call for separate identity and individuality has become inherent part of the Dalit poetry. It questions about the docile manner in which the Dalits have been accepting their wretched life since time immemorial. The poets want to assert the fact that a man is not created on this planet to suffer and toil. Each life on this earth has a distinct meaning and has a role to play. They urge the outcastes not to be dumb and docile but have enough courage that makes them realize about the injustice leveled against them. How can they remain mute spectators towards the unfair practices against them? Priyanka Kalpit imagines to have waged a war due to the unbearable suffering caused by the evil caste system. This image is seen in the following poem titled Cold-blooded Murder:
“A tumultuous war with caste and self
Wages within me.
So many arteries are
Severed in the massacre,
Fountains of blood ensue.
This face is a mashed
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’”

(Kalpit, 91)

The poet entangles in the evil of caste to such an extent that she will not have bliss in her mind till she wages a war. It does not mean that the Dalits do not face any other problems, but the fact is that they are entrapped in the mesh of caste system so much so that they do not have time to think of other problems. In fact, the caste oppression has a toll on the psyche of outcastes. Thus they begin to feel alienated as their identities have been reduced to non-identity. Whenever they make a demand to the upper caste people to ascertain their identity as free men, they not only answer to all their demands in negative, but preach them to be submissive in the name of religion and tradition. Thus any expression of rebellion against or challenge of authority is rejected or crushed so that the Dalits continue live in the miserable state forever. They are told that their dharma is to follow the upper caste people and to listen to them. It is an unpardonable sin for them if they walk against the wind. They are supposed to be a blinkered bullock whose dharma is not to see but ignore what they see. Even if these dominating class people shower compassion on these miserable souls, it will not be out of generosity, but out of
hypocrisy. It will merely be a show-off. Kalpit captures this tendency in the following lines of his poem *Compassion*:

“In freezing cold on the footpath,
they cover us with a blanket
and capture the moment
in their Camera.
The very next moment
the blanket is pulled away
and
we are left to shiver
and shudder and shake.”

(Kalpit, 238)

Really, it is the high time to think over these discarded and abandoned outcastes. The *savarnas* should dive deep into the ocean of misery in which this lot has been engulfed. The miserable souls must not be condemned. They are the significant components of our nation. The economy of our country cannot remain healthy without the cooperation of this mass. Thus they must not be consigned to oblivion. Honestly speaking, Dalits should have their own culture, their own religious world, distinct from the world of upper castes who have marginalized them economically, politically, ritually and socially. Dalit writers wish that they and their lot should have a space for smiles and laughter. Their poetry is marked by revolt and negativism as it is the expression of the hopes of the untouchables. It is not only a literary movement but a logo of a change and revolution where the main aim was the liberation of this mass. They have rejected all role models, traditional literature and decided to create a literature of their own, an identity of their own. They cannot forget that Hindu religious scriptures have nourished an unequal caste system. They have been encouraged to construct new myths. Such rejection of religious figures and a bold voice for asserting respectful identities are best seen the poem *Jivli* by Maheshchandra Pandya:

“Let us go to the village O Jamni
I want to buy a gun.”
A gun, but why Jivli?
Are you off your head?
What will you do with a gun?
Dear Jamni, my sister,
Don’t you know?
Poor Shambook was meditating
On the Vedas and Rama killed him.
I want to shoot Rama with that gun.
And next I want to kill Drona
Who demanded from Eklavya
His thumb in *gurudakshina*.
The five husbands of Draupadi
Who witnessed quietly while
The Kauravas robbed her honor
I want to shoot them repeatedly."

(Pandya, 209)

Here the poem expresses the anger of a Dalit woman. She wants to kill Rama for killing Shambook, Drona for demanding Eklavya’s thumb and Pandavas for witnessing Draupadi being robbed by Kauravas. Actually, these religious figures have not made any physical harm to those historical figures, but they have actually killed their identities. To reestablish respectful identities, a mask person of the poem wants to diminish the stereotyped mindset of the high-caste people. She wants to advocate equality, rights, respect and love.

It is also to be noted that a large portion of Dalit poetry bears a confessional characteristic made by the authors themselves. The confession is made to invoke the bitter experiences the authors and their lot have gone through in their lives. It is in this sense that they invoke pain that is mostly the pain of their whole section. They have guts to strip themselves before us. They present their heartrending pain before readers. It is that pain which they have suffered for no fault of theirs. The readers feel modesty to confess that these creative writers often drive them to tears and make them feel guilty for failing to observe
humanity for all. Such heartbreaking story of a pitiful Dalit life that one has lived during his childhood can be best seen in Chandra Shrimali’s poem *Childhood on Sale*:

“We sell our childhood to fill our belly.
They live in mansions, practice casteism,
hold kathas to accumulate good deeds,
do charity for stone tablets bearing their names,
nothing helps to banish hunger, Mother.
Books we cannot read or decipher,
We’ve never held a pencil in our hand,
we are destined to spend our childhood
doing errands at the road side tea-stall.
And if by chance a cup or saucer is broken
We are thrashed, our mother-sister abused.
We have no place to sleep, no food to eat,
that’s why I whisper in your ear, Mother.”

(Shrimali, 224)

Here is a great satire made by the poet on the so-called religious institutes and the people who believe in themselves to be the dominating figures in the society. The downtrodden class people do not have time to listen religious sermons as they pass the entire day toiling on the open field or other laborious duties to fulfill their appetite. How can a man worship any religion when his belly is empty? Reading or listening the religious scriptures or discourse will not satisfy one’s hunger. Those who are comfortable financially and socially will definitely enjoy those things, but the disadvantaged people who send their children for menial jobs will certainly find them boring and useless. Those high caste people try to wash their sins by holding kathas. Their hypocritical nature is brought into light here. They donate a lot of money only for name and fame. It is a matter of shame for such people that they practice untouchability and encourage casteism on one hand and listen the lessons of religion on the other hand. One may have question: don’t these religious sermons teach them the lessons of humanity? If yes, then they might offer dignity to all living beings of all castes. But in reality the speaker of that religious sermon
himself promotes untouchability on the name of religion. If this is so then how can one expect him teaching the lessons of equality and humanity? Further the poet says that these Dalit children cannot read or comprehend all this because they have not that much education level. Because of their laborious jobs they perform entire day, they cannot go to school to seek education. This shows the destitute condition of this helpless segment. Wherever they go for work, they have to do their duties mildly and meekly. If they commit some mistakes, they will be abused, sometimes severely bitten by their masters.

The entire society seems to be antagonist to them; nowhere they find any sources for permanent solace.

The Gujarati Dalit writers are committed to present realism especially when they write about social matters. They write about what they know and feel in an authentic manner. They raise their voice for human rights which have been deliberately forgotten in the Hindu structure. They declare their *magna carta* by insisting that they believe in their right for equality and no privilege should ever exist unless it is approved by the masses. Their poetry is a discourse concerned with the social and economic concerns. They sometimes wonder whether a country wherein such large mass of humanity is humiliated and ignored, can be called cultured or not. Dalit poetry has similarities with the problem play. In a problem play, the playwright deals with contemporary sociological problems and the focus is on defective systems of the society. In Dalit poetry, the problem lies in the defective age-old honored laws of Hindu religion and philosophy. The speaker or the mask persona of Dalit poetry reject the old morality and develop and adopt new humanistic morality with a view to improving the existing condition of his brethren.

Gujarati Dalit poetry is not an ideal representation of life; rather it is a potent expression of the commitment. It is the commitment for the redemption of society. Oppression and injustice, inevitable parts of Dalit life find expression in this poetry. These writers make use of the language of outcastes and under-privileged. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of these writers has become sharp. They use confessional, satirical, conversational and colloquial language. Their tone becomes ironic, language becomes terse, and style turns to be realistic whenever they try to assert their identity in the current society. The harsh reality they express in their poems is often
criticized for the improper use of language. But, in fact, it is clearly a measure to scale the depth of their anguish of their hearts. Many critics object to the use of typical language by these writers. For them, the poetry should be ‘pure’ written in embellished and ornamental language. But they forget that the Dalit poetry is not the product of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, it is an outcome of an intense pain and suffering they have felt in their heart. So they use the same language as they speak in their daily life. The readers may be unaware of ethos and surroundings in which the Dalits reside where children roam half-naked, men and women return their homes after accomplishing their menial jobs. How can one expect them using sophisticated language? The writers recognize the worth of language and its deep impact. Their language is the language of protest. They are not merely concerned to project their pain; they also represent the quest for identity. There is a deep urge for the total transformation of the society where one’s dignity is valued and respected. The use of symbols and imagery is abundant in their poetry. The profuse use of such devices portrays the social realities, helplessness and aggressiveness. Their tone is often found to be bitter. They immensely draw material from the canonical texts. The mythological characters like Eklavya, Shambook, Karna, and many more who are the symbols of humiliation become the vicissitude of their poetry. There has begun a new trend of re-writing Holy Scriptures highlighting their quest for identity. They have evolved new myths and changed the definition of the traditional myths.

Thus Gujarati Dalit poets have repeatedly emphasized that they do not need compassion from anybody. What they want is their human rights—the status of human beings and not the underdogs. They believe that the power is in the hands of forces of Brahminism that will never promise equal rights for citizens from all fronts of life. This is being witnessed in India with Nation State having become an Agent State of Hindutva forces. Multiculturalism in our nation will naturally make Dalits effective instruments in the hands of dominant forces. It will be a national catastrophe if nearly 240 million Dalits in this country are governed by Brahminic worldview and become an instrument in the hands of Hindutva forces.
Gujarati Dalit poetry is an ideological discourse. It provides literary and intellectual expression to the depressed classes. It is a literary depiction of the marginalized groups with sympathetic perspectives. It has emerged as a voice of resistance against dehumanizing and marginalizing forces of society which tend to suppress their identity, their way of living. It also depicts their strengths that have helped them survive centuries of brazen exploitation. It is a sincere attempt of rewriting the history from the point of sufferer. Dalit poetry hence by exposing the foibles and prejudices of high caste society towards the Dalits instills in them a new consciousness. It has two dimensions. One is to familiarize Dalits with their past explaining them that they have been enslaved, to show that they are human beings and it is their duty and right to fight for the rights of human beings. Another dimension is to arouse pity and sympathy among the dominating class people for the downtrodden class people persuading them that they are also human beings. It is to convince them that they should change their age-old mindset and thus should not suppress the outcastes.

Gujarati Dalit poetry tries to create an awareness of the self, about the social location of the self. It has often been vexed by identity crisis. The ‘I’ in this poetry acts as an instrument to convey their agony, pain, struggle and protest to the world. Their prime aim is to create awareness about the marginalized existence in the minds of the readers. This is how the Gujarati Dalit poetry stands on the threshold of twenty first century. It has yet a long way to go but it has indeed served as a powerful instrument of catharsis for the Dalits. It is needed that this trumpet call should reach every corner of the remote areas to smoothen the wounds caused by the unequal social structure. As soon as the dream of caste free society is realized, Dalit poetry will have achieved its goal.

The study of this chapter has taken up the question of Dalit identity and explored the emergence of self-consciousness. It also examines how historically and socially this identity has been formed and lived out. A close study of Dalit poetry is indeed a promising one as it has bright prospects for making our society integrated. It is being concluded that Gujarati Dalit poetry promotes love and cooperation which are cardinal features of a healthy society. In this way it has begun to bring about a change. It has enabled non-Dalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset which makes them perceive Dalits
as lower than themselves; and instead to them as equals rather than pitiful victims. It also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. The poets have their own philosophy to bring their lot in equation with others and this vision cannot be rendered true until they have confidence and pride in them. Once they become confident and proud, they begin to shatter the unjust social system which promotes inequality. This is the ultimate aim of Gujarati Dalit poetry. It indeed fights against the system not against men. The poets, whose poems cited above, have tried to assert the identity of Dalit section by projecting their harsh life in their poems. It means to say that they have attempted to realize their full assertion. It does not mean that they have gained what they aimed for. In fact, they are still struggling to establish their human identity in an unjust society.
Works Cited


