DALIT POETRY

AND ITS COMMITMENTS

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Introduction

When I undertook research work on dalit studies, I was challenged by situations more than one. First of all, due to my being a ‘non-dalit’ researcher (though I have no faith in the caste system as I believe downtrodden people have no caste or religion in particular) some of my senior teachers and scholars were afraid that I may fail to ‘sympathise’ with the suffering of untouchability. Unfortunately, there are still many scholars who believe that dalit studies call for subjective experience. After all I’ve never been subject to untouchability in my life; how would I react to the problem? Well, my answer to this is that as a critic and neutral researcher, it is my first and foremost task to judge and analyse data objectively, just as they appear to me. Most of the founders of the subaltern studies group were not subalterns themselves. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak didn’t have to change her caste to write on the subalterns; nor did our beloved author Mahashweta Devi ceremoniously shun her caste. What I emphasise to have is an open mind that is ready to receive all the relevant information regarding sociological perspectives, documents and literary pieces without falling prey to what Wimsatt and Beardsley called the ‘affective fallacy’.

Secondly, there was a serious problem regarding translation. Most of the poets I selected for this study are Marathi who primarily wrote in their mother tongue. I’m still learning that language and not very articulate in it. On several occasions I was asked how I am working on a language that is not my own, nor have I complete proficiency in that. This issue can be overcome by saying that the primary sources I used are prepared by very well known translators of dalit writings, Eleanor Zelliot, Priya Adarkar (who has recently translated Sharankumar Limbale’s Akkarmashi) to name but a few. Their works are quite trustworthy as I myself compared them to the originals and these works have been done under the supervision of respective poets and authors. I contacted Prof. Zelliot personally and
I’m highly indebted to her because she shared some more flawless translated versions with me so that I had no problem in reaching the core of the poems.

Thirdly, the methodological question turned up. Today we see there is an abrupt flux in the number of researchers working on dalit subjects. I know a number of research scholars who work on postcolonial topics; are quite eager to switch over to dalit issues very frequently may be because of framing parallel studies or may be because of the invitation that this study offers as being a recent entrant in the cult of research works. So, many are interested in working on dalit writings though most of them find themselves at sea lacking fundamental methodology and end up in an ‘interdisciplinary’ hotchpotch. I, on the contrary, tried to stick to the Marxian tenets of looking for commitments in the works. In this thesis Marxism and the ideas and views of Marxist cultural theorists have been used as tools by which I accomplished my task. What I understand by commitment has been discussed in later chapters in details, but here I like to answer why. Why commitment? It is purely because I believe in this postcolonial era, especially in the class-caste-gender-sex turmoil poetry does not come out only of aesthetic need. The poems of dalit poets are activities, agendas, protests, dissents put down in black and white and they must have certain commitment at the back of their mind that functions as impetus behind their writings.

Finally, I encountered another complication. It was regarding the identity of the dalit. As I said earlier I regard caste divisions baseless and inimical toward the progress of this country, I tried to expand the terminology. Ideas and concerns of dalits have been looked at from a socio-centric view where caste division tends to dissolve into a more expanded arena. I remember reading Dilip Chitre’s ‘Father Returning Home’ which almost compelled me to relate my father to the person described in the poem. The term ‘dalit’ once taken as a substitute for downtrodden, should not be confined within any specific caste or race. Situations have changed remarkably. Thanks to the reservation system, the previous dalits,
now a days scheduled castes and tribes have, to a large extent, improved their material condition. It goes without saying many of them have grown wealthier than their so-called upper caste counterparts. In the spheres of education and employment there is constant rise of participation from the constitutional backward sections of the society. I won’t comment anything on its usefulness since there are many other persons more qualified in every respect who can take care of this far expertly than I. But in my view, since ‘downtroddleness’ is the criterion, then I must consider the situation of my father who did not earn more than two thousand rupees per month in his entire life working in the accounts section of a private organisation though he was much overqualified for that job but got no better opportunity. He was not a ‘dalit’ by birth, but a ‘downtrodden’ in society. Birth does not fill empty stomach now a days, income does. I’ve, therefore, consciously chosen poets whose works map the broad inclusivity of the term.

The whole dissertation has been divided into five distinct chapters. The first chapter focuses on the term ‘commitment’ in general and what how it appeals to English poetry during different periods. It also includes discussions on alignment and commitment according to Marxian views. The role and importance of commitment in literary activities have been looked at decisively. The chapter presents the need, nature and characteristics of commitment found in subaltern literature. The second chapter is on cultural and historical commitments found in dalit poetry. It has two segments. In the first one I tried to bring out social commitments and in the second one historical orientation is discussed. In both the segments, close study of dalit poems have been included along with parallel studies as availed from a specific autobiography, Why I am Not A Hindu. The chapter is devoted to the act of penetrating into the spirit of poems and extracting the innate hatred they nurture for mainstream Indian culture and history. Similarly ‘Social Commitments and Dalit Feminism, the third chapter of this thesis throws light on two specific issues – dalit social assertion and
the situation and representation of women in life and poetry. Likewise ‘Dalit Theology: Religious Commitment’ and ‘Political Commitments in Dalit Poetry’, the fourth and fifth chapters respectively reflect upon the specialty of dalit theological and political commitments. In the fourth chapter a few recent theological doctrines have been discussed that have visible impact on dalit religious beliefs. In the fifth chapter, along with a cultural materialistic attitude political orientation and tendency found in poems have been put forward.
Chapter One

Commitment and English Poetry: A Survey
For now, poetry has the capacity – in its own ways and by its own means – to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, torture and bribes, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom – that word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the ‘free’ market. This ongoing future, written off over and over is still within view. All over the world its paths are being rediscovered and reinvented: through collective action, through many kinds of art.¹

The term ‘commitment’ has its etymological origin in the Anglo-French word ‘commettement’ which means pledge or promise. The word, in a broader sense, refers to an action or a particular consignment that requires an engagement; sometimes obligation and dedication. Shakespeare’s use of the word turns up to be little deviated from its common meaning and usge. In King Henry V we find an appearance of the word .committed’ as the king instructs:

Enlarge the man committed yesterday

That railed against our person.²

Here the word encapsulates a legal implication, a more judicial nuance that is often followed nowadays while using legal jargons. Shakespeare’s use of the word in the sense of arrest and imprisonment brings it nearer to obligation but in the administrative ascription. Dictionaries furnish a large variety of usage for the word which is also widely used by patriots, as well as by partisans. It is found in constitutions, more often discovered in political manifestoes. We find politicians, workers, activists committed, we find the Zihadis committed too. Hence, the very wide contextual probability has multiplied the scope of its appropriateness. However, in the domain of literature, commitment has not been existent either palpably or imperceptibly.
The question of commitment has always had its impact on literary activities everywhere in the world. Sometimes unconsciously, sometimes eagerly authors in all ages have executed certain commitment which may be both individualistic and collectivistic in nature. Ranging from the great epics maneuvered in classical and modern languages to the most recent creation, authors have been subject to different overt and covert commitments veiled by a number of nomenclatures.

It may be noted that commitment changes at par with the ever changing role and purpose of literature in different ages. The extent and degree of commitment have always been dependent upon the effective outlook of literature which tends to alter as per demand, taste and requirement of ages. Therefore, either to art or to human values, or toward the society – commitment has always found its niche in various literary periods. There’s certainly a difference between Homer’s and Shelley’s commitment and Sophocles’ and Brecht’s but that varied in terms of what role they wanted their works to perform. It has been a case in the whole realm of literature that every writer felt an urge, sometimes a growing and creative pressure to write in a particular way which have always made ways open for two types of commitments: first, to the self and second, to the readers because every author needs a patronising readership. The more literature advances, the more becomes the need to accommodate newer belief, creed, hermeneutical elements in the work. The problem, to a reader response theorist, is related somewhat in the dichotomy of interpretative attempts and point of view. Writes Fish:

Nowhere is this process [of interpreting a text] more conveniently on display than in literary criticism, where everyone’s claim is that his interpretation more perfectly accords with the facts, but where everyone’s purpose is to persuade the rest of us to the version of the facts he espouses by persuading us to the interpretive principles in the light of which those facts will seem indisputable.
The above excerpt focuses on how various initiatives taken on interpretation act upon the apparent implication of literary texts. Once a writer’s work is set as a medium of communication, the writing inevitably makes way for the author to bring out his vision of his surroundings. It may not be entirely devoted to social reform, nor may it have any superficial iconoclastic aim of prescribing a better tomorrow, nor may it invite the readers’ rage for any revolution; yet, an author writes on the ground of a cluster of specific convictions, a bunch of compelling impetus or certain ideology that stay manifested in the writings. These cumulatively materialise in the form of a commitment that leads the author to a more conscious involvement to different contexts of his age. The issues or contexts urging the author’s engagement are different with regard to a number of qualitatively varied premises which can be discussed later. But in order to build a clear conception about an author’s commitment, it is always important to consider the social and subsequent political atmosphere the artist finds himself in. But commitments, sometimes, may not seem conspicuous or may seem specifically well directed. A perfunctory survey in search of a few poets’ attachment to presentation of reality and thereby an indirect commitment to certain worldly ideology may be carried out with a view to locating the depth and extent of their association with social affairs. For example, Sidney’s *Arcadia*, as he argued to be right in his *Defence of Poesy*, allegorically brings out the need of a rebellion by putting side by side political and social affairs. His aim was to teach readers his characteristic political philosophy by combining in literature and political ideology. Later in Blake’s work we see how realist expression incorporates in it a tinge of contemporary history, but not merely a chronology of dull day to day activities; rather it succeeds in the delineation of one’s social existence and the understanding of the society as a whole. That man is a social animal and his activities originate from and relentlessly shaped by the society he lives in, is the starting point of realism. Though this concept of realism has been accused of being focused upon the mundane
affairs, especially onto the lives of the middle and lower classes in a class-stratified society, but the allegations must have overlooked the fact in spite of its ‘a slice of life’ outlook. Realism gives out the idea of a ‘reality’, both in the subjective and the objective senses. Realistic expressions are, as Blake had proven, a delineation excelling in the combination of empirical observation and visionary deduction. In other words, this has often given birth to social realism which is an immediate derivative of it having been reinforced by the poet’s recurring attempt of social analysis. From the rural perspective, the poems assume a more urban concreteness; the songs extend from ‘The Shepherd’, ‘Infant Joy’ to ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ and ‘Holy Thursday’. Initiating from the rural invocation, the poems enter the hard, dry, and unimpassioned city which will inevitably shun their nascence in ‘London’. One social movement is explicit in the progression - it is the transformation of human society from its preliminary rural being to a city-centric existence; the tender fleecy coat in ‘The Lamb’ will end up in a binary contradiction presenting a blacksmith’s expertise with hammer and anvil in ‘The Tyger’. Social analysis has been enmeshed involuntarily, and Blake consciously kept them included in his poems.

More close in substantiating a man’s existence in a society and the relationship that society holds with an individual are ‘The Little Black Boy’ and ‘The Chimney Sweeper’. ‘The Little Black Boy’ is an account of a black boy who leads a life of servitude in England. Skin colour determines one’s rank and occupation in common in the European city, but here, we must not forget, it’s not a grown up man, but a child that a society treats with disparity. Another aide of society in this treatment is religion and they both relish and nourish racial discrimination by putting the ‘whites’ in a higher plane. The superiority of whiteness comes to the fore when the child claims his innocent soul to be of that colour – “And I am black, but O! my soul is white;/White as an angel is the English child”.

The colour necessarily associated with superiority and goodness is white, even a man’s pure sole is supposed to be
white. But how can soul be of any colour since its concretisation is too difficult to make. But, the soul and the body get equated in the hand of an oppressive and exploitative society which has already started to judge human beings in terms of ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’. The fast emergence of bourgeoisie is not subject to a child’s understanding. But that something erroneous and discriminatory is being put into human-social relationship comes to the brainwave of the child. At the end of the poem he draws a harmonious egalitarian picture which gives out shades of liberty and texture of common sharing of the earth’s resources. There is no need to elucidate further on this. Blake’s a few other poems as well as the classic elegy of Grey or realistic poems of Crabbe hold plenty of instances which herald their retrospective commitment to the mundane affairs of a palpable world. Here, commitment must be conceived as an aggregate of consciousness, approach, view and review of a particular situation where the author remains actively responsive to certain events. At this point, ‘commitment’ begins to entail a sense of sensitivity on the part of the author. With varied cases of implication, applications of the word have become transitional. It can no longer be applied to a specific, fixed semantic usage. Hence, commitment has affirmed its place in various literary and critical canons – from new historicism to post colonial subalternity and even to cultural studies as well. That poets’ imagination and creation are shaped according to the happenings of their ages is not very hard to establish. Thereby, the very type and nature of artistic commitment can also be diagnosed both by the form and the content of literature produced by them. Analysis of already mentioned examples stands in favour of treating commitment both as an inspiration and the resultant activity. Some critics like to classify commitment as aesthetic and non aesthetic, but in many cases, especially in the ‘post’ scenario both these components overlap each other. It is often considered that aesthetic commitments or commitments to art and creation are far simpler than their non aesthetic counterpart. But it is not always the same. This dialectic is quite beautifully
presented in the third stanza of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’. The stanza in discussion has been much quoted in association with Keats’ hypotheses on negative capability, yet one cannot miss the ground reality presented through the eyes of a disappointed young man. If we look plainly at the first few lines of the stanza what appeals the reader is the precisely magnificent illustration of day to day reality:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;5

The use of the word ‘here’ at once refers to the spatial existence of banal reality one has to face every day. Again, if we study Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ we discover similar notes of despair and dejection that comes out of a relentless encounter with reality:

‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round and decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.6

Vibrant tones of protest against blooming capitalism during his period did not escape Shelley’s eyes. Hence, we find following lines clearly directed against the socio-economic menace:

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;

The robes ye weave, another wears;

The arms ye forge, another bears.\

In all the above excerpts aesthetic concerns have greatly been hindered by commonplace events that happened around the concerned poets. Keats’ poem, since its opening, seems to be entirely dedicated to beauty and mutability takes a strikingly different turn, of course not at the cost of thematic integrity, in later few lines. These poems just mentioned are penned by two legendary artists of the Romantic canon in English literature and they have posed specific problems related to everyday reality. Certainly there is a pledge toward reality; to some affairs no poet can ever be blind or insensitive. While Keats was more self assured with his gifted poetic endowment, Shelley had been a well known figure for his revolutionary stance against religious and political institutions in an age of socio-economic exploitation in his own country. But, Shelley’s commitment to public interest or to any particular philanthropic end was never felt; his commitment was to himself as a poet as an ‘unacknowledged legislator of the world’. It is argued that Shelley did not write to ignite public mind, his writings were dedicated to satisfy his own idealistic passions. Similarly if we think about G.B Shaw, we witness a strange amalgamation of belief, view, indoctrination and propagation, certainly emitting a smell of certain commitment – this time both personal and socio-economic in its every aspect. Ascertaining Life Force as the central power house of the world Shaw consciously maintained his adherence to his own artistic commitment. Shaw tried to penetrate the exterior of natural phenomena and find out the fundamental reason behind the objective world. In the process he got occupied with his propagation of the Life Force idea which makes its presence in every major play he authored.
So far we have tried to gain a fast knowledge on a few authors’ handling of reality and their alignment with certain literary commitment, both in a conscious and an unconscious way. From now on we’ll make an attempt to comprehend the role of commitment in literature in the modern and postmodern eras. To accomplish this task, we must have a look at what Caudwell theorises in his *Illusion and Reality*. This book makes a concise study of British poetry of its previous and contemporary times. It reflects vividly on the development of bourgeoisie during the period of Industrial Revolution in Europe and tries to detect the nature of roles the poets performed. Caudwell identified a spirit of revolt among the romantic poets, but this urge to his was nothing more than a ‘bourgeois illusion’ to which all the great romantic poets adhered themselves. In the words of Caudwell:

> [...] at every step the bourgeois is revolutionary in that he is revolutionising his own basis. But he revolutionises it only to make it consistently more bourgeois. In the same way each important bourgeois poet is revolutionary, but he expresses the very movement which brings more violently into the open the contradiction against which his revolutionary poetry is a protest.8

Caudwell concludes that the bourgeois romantic poets are mere ‘mirror revolutionaries’ who are far removed from real revolution. He certifies ‘freedom’ as the object which every poet must pursue yet noted that the romantics failed to achieve that though they tried hard by means of their own customised ideological beliefs:

> The poignancy of their tragedy and pessimism derives its bite from this perpetual recession of the desired object as they advanced to grasp it. ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ has them all in thrall. They wake up on the cold hillside.9

However, Caudwell designates Keats as a more conscious artist owing to the latter’s familial background. He admits that Keats hailed from a financially backward section of the society.
that functioned behind his writings. He draws a clear demarcation between Keats and other romantic poets on the basis of financial condition:

Keats is the first great poet to feel the strain of the poet’s position in this stage of the bourgeois illusion, as producer for the free market. Wordsworth has a small income; Shelley, although always in want, belongs to a rich family and his want is due simply to carelessness, generosity and the impracticability which is often the reaction of certain temperaments to a wealthy home. But Keats comes of a small bourgeois family and is always pestered by money problems.\(^1\)

The understanding of reality by Keats, as supposes Caudwell, is thus greater than that of his contemporaries. Hence, Keats stands a little apart from the ‘bourgeois illusion’ that shadowed poets like Wordsworth and Shelley:

Keats’ greater knowledge of bourgeois reality therefore led him to a position which was to set the keynote for future bourgeois poetry: ‘revolution’ as a flight from reality. Keats is the banner-bearer of the Romantic Revival. The poet now escapes upon the ‘viewless wings of poesy’ to a world of romance, beauty and sensuous life separate from the poor, harsh, real world of everyday life, which it sweetens and by its own loveliness silently condemns.\(^1\)

Thus Caudwell prepares an estimate of the role that the romantic poets played. Along with his such observations on them, he emphasised on the importance of close association of poetic language with society, man and reality so far as a poet’s prophetic responsibility and commitments are concerned.

The Marxist school of criticism draws the essence of commitment or alignment from the poet’s link with the society and exposure to its various aspects. Instead of winding up and
getting lost in the labyrinthine mass of Marxist theorisation we would concentrate on the thoughts of two very significant Marxist cultural critics – Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. This will ease out our endeavour in finding more or less accurate idea about literature and commitment from contemporary Marxian points of view. If we study Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, it becomes clear what it means to be committed author writing in a particular age. From the beginning Williams makes a definite distinction between alignment and commitment though admitting that the former may make way for the latter. His idea of alignment revolves round specificities of men, situation and experience:

Alignment [...] is no more than a recognition of specific men in specific (and in Marxist terms class) relations to specific situations and experiences. Of course such a recognition is crucial, against the claims to ‘objectivity’, ‘neutrality’, ‘simple fidelity to the truth’, which we must recognize as the ratifying formulas of those who offer their own senses and procedures as universal.¹²

Williams maintains that commitment is nothing but conscious alignment. In his study he makes a comprehensive account of Marx’s, Engels’ and Mao’s formulation of literary commitment. Though we are quite familiar with Lenin’s famous sporadic denouncement of non partisan writings, yet Both Marx and Engels agree that a profound understanding of the surrounding reality is indispensable for a writer who seeks to communicate his views. The understanding may be aesthetic in nature, but it must incorporate in it social, historical and political perspective. Overall, in very simple terms, an author should be committed to social reality. Concludes Williams:

The more significant Marxist position is a recognition of the radical and inevitable connection between a writer’s real social relations (considered not only ‘individually’ but in terms of the general social relations of ‘writing’ in a specific society and period,
and within these the social relations embodied in particular kinds of writing) and the ‘style’ or ‘forms’ or ‘content’ of his work, now considered not abstractly but as expressions of these relations.\(^{13}\)

He adds that social relations are always in a mode of constant alteration which are also subject to a limitation that measures the extent of commitment as individual action.

Eagleton, on the other hand, rids Marx and Engels of deterministic role in judging commitment of a writer. Both of them, as Eagleton points, did not approve of direct representation of social events in the name of reality. In his categorical study of Marxist cultural chronology, he places the problem of reflectionist theory into discussion. In short, the socialist realism promulgated in the USSR stressed on politically didactic literature that comprises verbatim reflection of social realities thereby paving way for a passive and mechanistic literary works.\(^{14}\) Instead he prefers Marx’s and Engels’ formulation:

What needs to be added is Marx and Engels’s ‘principle of contradiction’: that the political views of an author may run counter to what his work objectively reveals. […] There are periods and societies where conscious, ‘progressive’ political commitment need not be a necessary condition for producing major art; there are other periods – fascism, for example – when to survive and produce as an artist at all involves the kind of questioning which is likely to result in explicit commitment.\(^{15}\)

Surprisingly, Eagleton’s above formulation seems appropriate for the postcolonial literary productions, to be more precise, for the subaltern literary activities where conscious commitment generates originally owing to the hostile, repressive social institutions. This tendency is very much noticeable in dalit writings as every subaltern literary work is visibly committed. In the next few chapters the variety, extent and nature of dalit poetic commitments will be discussed.
Notes and References

1. See *Poetry and Commitment: An Essay* by Adrienne Rich

2. Lines 40-41, P. 437 *King Henry V* from *Complete Works* by William Shakespeare

3. See P. 339 in *Is There a Text in The Class?* by Stanley Fish


5. Lines 21-24, P. 193 from *Selected Poems* by John Keats

6. Lines 10-14, ‘Ozymandias’, P.5 from *Ode to The West Wind and Other Poems* by P.B. Shelley

7. Lines 17-20, ‘Song to the Men of England’ P.33, Ibid.

8. See P.86 in *Illusion and Reality* by Christopher Caudwell

9. Ibid.

10. PP. 90-91, Ibid.

11. P. 91, Ibid.

12. See P. 199 in *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams

13. PP. 203-204, Ibid.

14. See P. 46 in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* by Terry Eagleton

15. PP. 53- 54, Ibid.
Chapter Two

Cultural and historical commitments in Dalit Poetry
Cultural Repression and Dalit Retaliation

The broad inclusivity of culture and cultural studies has made spaces open for many disciplines to fit in. It has been one of the most looked into fields of study of different scholarly schools in the present era. The meaning and significance of culture being of central importance, this area of study invites scholars to determine a definition for both culture and cultural studies. But, to fix a point blank definition for culture is not very easy since it denotes and connotes a bulk of varied ideas. Ramification of the various definitions would act upon the precision and specificity of this dissertation. Hence, to suit the purpose of cohesion, the study of culture theorised by Raymond Williams (1921-88) is the ignition from which the whole discussion will come into being. In his path breaking *Culture and Society* Williams reflects upon the change in implicative aspects of a few words such as ‘art’, ‘class’, ‘democracy’, ‘industry’, of which ‘culture’ has also been a part. The complex whole of belief, art, knowledge and habits of an individual in a society, as Williams notes, underwent a change in the nineteenth century England which resulted in an altogether distortion in the meaning and implication of the word ‘culture’. As he relates further, the genealogy gets explicated,

[...] it (culture) had primarily meant the tending of natural growth, and then by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter was, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean ‘a general state or habit of the mind, having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean ‘the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole’. Third, it came to mean ‘the
general body of the arts’. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean ‘a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual […].’

This chronology of evolution suggests an ever broadening area of culture and thereby cultural studies has spread its roots to various other subjects.

So far as the word ‘culture’ is concerned and as we’ve seen it encompasses almost everything related to human life and society, its Indian counterpart is no different. It must be mentioned in this regard that here Indian culture has been considered majorly as the Hindu culture, keeping in mind the subject matter of dalit writings. Though the country is believed to have been the parental abode of sublime cultural conundrum, a deeper look into it would divulge its basic nature, not very far away from the universal temperament thereby providing ample scope for cultural studies to proliferate. This is furthermore applicable to the task of tracing the tribe of dalit literary activities in Indian cultural lineage. This is possible due to a few specific reasons. First, the cult of dalit is closely related to anthropological studies. Second, it has an inherent intra-country subaltern nature, third, for its affinity to contemporary politics and social criticism and finally, its well versed revolutionary stance against the age-old hegemonic Indian cultural heritage, especially against Sanskrit, made it available to cultural studies. This paper will attempt to illuminate the final reason. But before this, ‘cultural hegemony’ in the Indian context needs a little more attentive study.

To begin with the concept of cultural hegemony, the starting point, as obvious, must be Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, who interpreted the term in terms of a palpable relation between cultural practices and power and their interrelation in a society. Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy attempt to hold the idea of hegemony’s genesis in a concise comment

[...] the concept of ‘hegemony’ already alludes to a kind of contingent [emphasis in the original] intervention required by the crisis or collapse of what would have been a
‘normal’ historical development. Later, with Leninism, it is a keystone in the new form of political calculation required by the contingent ‘concrete situations’ in which the class struggle occurs in the age of imperialism. Finally, with Gramsci, the term acquires a new type of centrality that transcends its tactical or strategic uses: ‘hegemony’ becomes the key concept in understanding the very unity existing in a concrete social formation.³

The very popular definition of hegemony finds Gramsci referring to an involuntary consent ceded by the masses to the dominant, manipulative group in a state, as he writes about its form and function, it’s described as a

[...] spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group: this consent is “historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”⁴

He adds further that hegemony performs as:

The apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction, when spontaneous consent has failed.⁵

Now, it’s not a very simple task to put the Indian cultural heritage in a fill in the blanks manner into Gramsci’s view. It’s primarily because of the dissimilarity in the context as well as perspective. The ‘base-superstructure’ model with Gramsci’s expansion, elaboration and contributory interpolation resulting in ‘consent’ and ‘relation to power’ looks apparently inapplicable to Indian soil so far as a perceptible class stratification remained obscure in the country, even though the Indian Marxists claim the caste division to be an Indianised version of division labour vis-à-vis Marx’s reflections on the Indian society. But,
it goes without saying that all along Indian culture owes a great deal to its Aryan fathers who lent it a garb of spirituality and philosophy. The Muslim rulers made their presence felt to a great extent for a considerable period; yet, the Sankritised varnish somehow proved itself more durable. This is primarily because of the monumental influence cast by the two great epics and their unputdownable acceptability and adaptability which survived the onslaught of time. And it does not need a scholar to identify the fact that irrespective of its spiritual solemnity and truth-finding assiduity, Indian culture is conjoined with casteism. Ranging from ways to discover one’s true self, to the popular narratives, caste has always been cementing its place, almost in every discipline of life in the society. Very well known examples from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have not been inserted with a view to preventing overcrowding illustrations. However, as for example, instead of a direct reference to them, let’s have Girish Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* which portrays, as nearly all adaptations of the epics do, a few representative excerpts the rigid framework of untouchability. In the play based on an episode of the Mahabharata, a young lover and his betrothed could not touch each other because the latter was not a brahmin. She was a hunter and therefore the lover had decided to nullify his own caste with immense rebellious courage to come into contact with his lady love. Keeping emotional affairs aside, a perfunctory look at the social injunctions throws light on the stringency and coercive treatment which ruled supreme and overruled everything else. Nowhere other than in India were the social, cultural, religious restrictions more inimical to the people who were theologically thrown down at the periphery of the society. The sudras were abhorred as impure, filthy and as incarnations of profanity. This non perishable mark of untouchability was embossed in their life since birth. Undoubtedly, these discriminations were sanctified, consolidated and made unalterable by Sanskrit verses and hymns. Hereon, this dissertation will try to examine how far Sanskrit was modulated as an instrument to practise dominance over the lower castes and the latter’s
reaction against the language in the form of dalit literary expressions. The whole sect of this literary cult vehemently reacted against the classical Indian culture. But for the sake of brevity, though the title has the word ‘literature’ in it, this study will focus on one or two representative dalit poems heralding stubborn vendetta against the country’s biased cultural tradition.

Sanskrit had not only been a language, but a hegemonic culture in ancient India. Whole Vedic Literature is composed in this language. It used to be restricted within the upper caste usage, especially the Brahmins were allowed access to all Sanskrit texts in order to maintain its purity. Sanskrit is known as ‘Deva Bhasa’ – the language used by the gods and goddesses. It was meticulously taken care of. The bedrock of Hindu culture is created through this language, even today it is required in all ceremonial occasions. No doubt, the language has given birth to phenomenal works in the hands of Valmiki, Vedavyasa or Kalidasa. But it is also true that the social norms, regulations and codes of conduct were devised in the same language. As far as the social sciences are concerned we must bring the Manusanhita to discussion. This book has become object of hatred for the dalits. Before studying its reasons, it would be useful to make out what the book preaches. The Manusanhita is believed to have been composed by Manu, out of whom Manava (human) is created. We find names of a few Manus in Sanskrit texts, but scholars assume that the present compilation of the book is not the sole work of any of the Manus. It has been revised, re-interpreted and interpolated by several hands. The book comprises twelve chapters and in its very first one, the social divisions are explained. The four-fold varna system is reinforced here and specific works have been assigned to each of the varnas, needless to say, putting the sudras at the bottom allocating them meanest jobs. It is also not surprising that the composer had special inclination towards the brahmins. He had given them the highest social rank, sometimes exemption from legal punishments and prescribed privileges for them such as exemption
from revenues. At the same time this book poses inexplicable disdain to the sudras and of course to women. Both have been regarded and recommended lower social status along with heaps of injunctions.

The Sanskrit epics and Puranas have also cast a considerable influence on Indian society and cultural life. The name of Rama is still taken with optimum reverence; moreover temples have been erected with the idols of him, Lakshmana, Hanumana and Sita, considered as the zenith of ethics. Similar is the impact of the Mahabharata as well. This great and massive epic is a churned out collection of the Indian social systems. It has been extensively adapted to theatre and movie versions. Again, Indian historical studies are greatly indebted to the Puranas.

It’s clear that an Indian mind is inseparably linked with the Sanskrit literary compositions. Though the language is not widely used and its development has ceased, still it has successfully confirmed its place in the social unconscious being the most used shield for the upper caste domination is this language and literature. It made the way for the upper caste domination which subdued the lower castes to the extent of a docile existence. Exactly like the Church which is frequently recognised as the private agency for exercising hegemony surreptitiously on behalf of a social group, in India the Sanskrit language acted as the institution drawing overt demarcations between the upper caste and the other communities. Hence the dalits have, validly, identified the language as a medium of spreading repugnance against them. For them it is the language of their doom. They exemplify this language as an evidence of the arbitrariness of the makers of social medians. Dalit poetry repeatedly refers to Hindu epics and mythologies; it very often alludes to the characters found in those works. The dalit poets, in general, have knowledge of the Sanskrit literary culture and they criticise it drastically for being the language of the rulers who own it as one of their personal properties and channelled it subtly against the lower castes. Almost every religious text written in
Sanskrit talks about social division, its necessity and permanence, propagating hatred and malice against the sudras. That is why we see the dalit poets treat the language on the note of arch rivalry. Be it an auspicious mantra or be it any ritualistic sloka, the language, both in smaller or larger scale, is at loggerhead with the sudras. So far been subject to such casteist lingual hegemony, dalit poetry heralds revolt. Zakir Abedi says:

Dalit literature questioned the main-stream literary theories and upper caste ideologies, and explored the neglected aspects of life. [...] Thus to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. [...] These writers make use of the language of the outcasts and the underprivileged in Indian Society.⁶

He adds on,

Dalit literature was really post-Hindu literature, which sought to do away with Sanskrit symbolism. This process was set in motion by Dr. Ambedkar. Sanskrit was essentially a casteist language, anti-people and anti-production, he charged.⁷

Sanskrit, being limited only within the upper castes, has failed to become the language for day to day communication and today has turned up to be a segregated, motionless practice for a very small amount of Hindu priests; it lost its progress and prospect. Hence, the focus gets more tightened on the highly biased writings which were made thousands of years ago lending it severe vulnerability. The dalit poems do not hesitate to pounce upon it in a violent manner of vengeance on a poet who used to write in Sanskrit –

Oh Valmiki,

should you sing the praises of Ramarajya

because you’re the great poet of poets?⁸
Valmiki, the ancient poet has been accused of being blind to his own origin. He was not born in a refined heritage, but having obtained divine blessings he directed his pen only to venerate the name of Rama ‘even there the icy cliff of inhumanity towered up’⁹ This divorce between Valmiki’s social identity and his literary expression is considered as an act of betrayal which is lamented in the poem. It does not impose any defamation on the great poet, but it regrets the fact that a further greatness could have been claimed if the poet had included in his epic the misery of his fellow people.

Again, in ‘Sanskrit’ featuring in the same anthology, Pawar blames the language for being indifferent to a great circle of suffering. The whole Sanskrit culture stayed away from people’s distress, turned blind eye to the sight and deaf ear to ‘the weeping of a broken heart’¹⁰. ‘The great Divine Culture’ in its alacrity to remain divine, severed connections with the mundane human affairs. In connection with hegemony and cultural studies, it’s very crucial to find who’s in power since culture transforms according to it. This is successfully pointed out in dalit literature, which locates the brahminic section perching on the top of social hierarchy. Hence, as the authorial viewpoint has changed, though dalit literature is integral to Indian literary culture, it hurls incessant disdain at the hegemonic socio-cultural tenets which did the same thousands of years back.
Historical Reorientation

We had been excluded from history. In fact, it appeared as if our history was no history at all.\textsuperscript{11}

Retrieval of history has been of central importance in postcolonial studies. Dalit autobiographies, by and large, are attempts of rewriting history. Such an attempt to re-furnish history does not merely mean a rewriting by a few native authors for the sake of a commendable account with a view to getting rid of colonial depiction of their own nation; nor does it mean an expression of the nation’s own interest and identity. A postcolonial retracing of the past must incorporate in itself different textures of its own society, culture, economics and must make a place for the marginalised voices coming out of the masses who have so far been segregated to a secondary status. This broad possibility of a grand inclusion in terms of race, class, gender and caste has certainly contributed to the ever growing capacity of history based on local issues and perspectives. This has made way for subaltern studies which is devoted to unearthing of a parallel historiography that will speak of disillusionment in general, generating from the backward communities. Instead of being an account of the dominant social stratum, subaltern rediscovery of history is largely associated with sordid past and collective awareness. Pramod K. Nayar has sketched a decisive outline:

It is a history from below, utilizing resources in native (non-colonial) languages and non-colonial forms of history recording, such as folk songs, ballads and stories.\textsuperscript{12}

In view of the above the word ‘rewriting’ may seem a little insufficient to dish out a proper understanding of the above frameworks. In this case, critics prefer the word ‘reconstruction’. This reconstruction, however, is significant. A reconstruction based on annals and chronicles
of historical data is not encouraged in subaltern studies. Rather, an insightful recreation of myths, folktales, aboriginal practices and a reclamation of varied native past tradition which is always bordered upon rigorous contestation with the ‘elitist’ mode of producing historical account is necessary at the same time. Contestation, in this regard, has been a mode of resistance that is always functional in the subaltern mode of narration against stereotyped versions of description and commentary. While commenting on the elitist adaptation of historiography of Indian nationalism, Ranajit Guha in his essay ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’ notes:

What, however, historical writing of this kind [elitist historiography] cannot do is to explain Indian nationalism for us. For it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own [italics in original], that is independently of the elite [italics in original] to the making and development of this nationalism.¹³

Thus the reconstruction of the past consciously alienates itself from the dominant mode of writing histories. In the sphere of dalit literature, too, history is reclaimed from a subjective point of view where a dalit individual plays a valuable role. Most of the dalit writings in India, by any way or the other, is a documentation of the past, but definitely not a dry chronology of events and their consequences. For every dalit writer memory plays a vital role; memory emanating from a cluster of painful experiences, memory which is derived from a long tradition of exclusion and ill-treatment carried out to them. Sometimes the reclamation of such memory does not always qualify to be an organized testimony, sometimes they seem too personal, too stereotypical and even repetitive. But this reiteration of the past resonates something which they can call their own, not to mention, authentic and sincere. In African literature, especially in the postcolonial canonical texts we find similar attempts, but the uniqueness of dalit historiographical retrieval lies in its straight-forward
inherent urge for protest, movement and discontentment toward the social system of the nation. Their language, too, very often on the verge of slang etc., specifies this motivation to break free from the status quo. Dalit authors make themselves sufficiently sensitised with the circulated traditional approach of history and they consciously orient themselves to a magnifying self assertive characteristic. Zakir Abedi in his *Contemporary Dalit Literature* has specifically pointed out the nature and dimension of subaltern awareness among them. While reflecting upon the need of appropriating history he identifies a number of ‘drives’ or urges conducive to the effort. In order to remake history and to recreate the past mingled with pathos, a dalit author has two definite paradigmatic motivations:

…the denunciation of an inhuman past and the proclamation of a decisive victory due to Dr Ambedkar and the *dalit* [italics in original] movement. The main dynamics is a strong will of the oppressed to denounce the culprit, on the one hand, and, on the other, to proclaim one’s faith in the liberation movement launched by Dr B. Ambedkar’s fight in the name of Buddhism.\(^\text{14}\)

Besides this, Abedi continues to make us acquainted with furthermore drives typical of dalit writings. Amongst them the recapitulation of the social-economic background related to exploited labour is important. In Ompraksh Balmiki’s autobiographical work *Joothan* we find similar endeavour very frequently. The existence of a dalit individual and his socio-economic relevance and relationships often flood into such narratives. These autobiographies recreate the past by detailing upon social conventions, sometimes even pointing to every custom and practice atrocious to them. Social hostility such as the practice of untouchability as well as labour exploitation is delineated in almost every page of such novels and autobiographies. Another feature worth mentioning which is deeply linked to the rewriting of history is the need for future progress. The memory is recollected with a definite purpose:
The past ought first to be owned, objectively reassessed and reappropriated for an alternative history to be chalked out ahead. One has to link up the present struggles with the fights and labours of the past, especially when this past, for a number of various reasons, has been hidden up, misrepresented or simply forgotten.\textsuperscript{15}

This is further summed up:

The past is revisited, re-composed, re-assessed and re-cognized in the light that finally shines at the moment of fulfillment.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Why I am not a Hindu} by Ilaiah is a discursive account that identifies itself as a critique of Hindu philosophy, economics and culture. It has a textbook like quality indeed so far as the information and analyses accumulated are concerned. In addition to that, characteristically this work keeps up the same zeal found in all dalit autobiographies and novels; it’s the re-telling of history from the dalit perspective. Truly the account has history at its heart which is re shaped and remade based on a few constitutive components like social life and economic production, cultural practices, condition of women, rubrics of politics etc. Closely following the postcolonial trajectory of presenting an alternative historiography, this work unfolds with a deliberate display of distinguishment from the dominant style of history writing, thereby defying the hegemonic caste-interest functioning behind alike presentations.

We may have a look at the first yardstick by which the author measures the dalitbahujan’s difference from the Hindu upper castes. As mentioned earlier, the qualitative difference drawn between a dalit and an upper caste Indian is Ilaiah’s starting point. According to him, the dalitbahujans are the most productive communities available in the country. Unlike the Brahmins who live a stagnant, unproductive and parasitic life upon exploiting the lower castes, the dalit communities dote on work emerging as the producers of cotton, leather and other usable items. Yet their profession has always been termed as menial; they have all been
relegated to the lowest stratum of the society. Since childhood the children are taught the particulars of hard work so as to keep them in tune with the productive life they live. While relating a few instances, the author has shown how a dalit man and woman begin their life:

A Dalitbahujan couple rises every morning at *koodikuuta* (cock-crow). The man enters directly into his agrarian tasks, the woman begins immediately on her household activities. Bath and prayer have no place in their lives at that juncture. The man has to feed his cattle and clean the cattleshed. [...] then they examine the diseased cattle or sheep and apply medicines.\(^\text{17}\)

In so doing one aspect of their society becomes evident that cleanses them of internal disparity and perhaps this is the reason why they’ve been so economically subservient. It is the non-existence of private property. The dalitbahujans live on a collective consciousness that has trained them to believe in collective effort and public property. Accumulation of wealth, if in no way possible, is never taught or practised. Ranging from the material production to household altercation, nothing is regarded as private or personal. By this way, mentions Iliah, individual dignity and collective consensus gets maintained. Not only does he pen-picture the customs of the oppressed communities, he juxtaposes the conventions found in a Hindu upper caste household. This is done to draw the reader’s attention to the binary opposition the two communities possess between themselves. Whenever any mention is made of the Brahmin, it is either made in utter disgust or made in extreme sarcasm. E.g. while deliberating on the life of an upper caste individual, he writes:

A Hindu – a Brahmin, Baniya or Kshatriya – on the other hand, gets up to take a cold water bath and then still clad in wet clothes picks up his book – the Gita – and begins to relate to God.\(^\text{18}\)
The sarcasm employed here is easily discernible since the unproductive, lazy, loathsome pseudo-spiritual habits of the upper caste Hindu is sharply contrasted with the busy and worthwhile life of a dalit.

It is the difference in the cultural domain that occupies a large share of this book. Cultural difference in every aspect has been highlighted on account of culture being the most important umbrella that covers areas like language, religion, ethnicity and life in general. Ilaiah makes a wholesome critique of Hindu culture with special reference to its gods and goddesses who stand in utmost contrast to their own. The primacy with which discussion on gods and goddesses begins is entirely bordered upon the paradoxes readily found in Hinduism, even when one casts a perfunctory look at them. In Hindu culture from the beginning Vedic gods have been described as figurative projections of the Brahminical mind. Here gods have always been performing two very significant roles, as Ilaiah has discovered. On one hand a Hindu god eternise patriarchy by segregating a goddess to an inferior level, in the form of his wife who remains devoted to the service of her husband which is sanctified in the Hindu life as well. On the other hand, and more importantly, these gods have been manufactured to perpetuate the Brahminical hegemony to its full. The great epics picture accounts of great deeds of heroes but their gigantic achievements were nothing but killing people and spreading Brahminical influence both on the location and the psyche. The great battle fought between Rama and Ravana in the *Ramayana*, in Ilaiah’s eye, is a tale of upper caste dominance over a dalitbahujan kingdom by means of trickery and violence. In the *Mahabharata*, too, are examples of suppression of lower class revolts especially by the presentation of Lord Krishna who, though brought up among and by the Yadavas, makes his political standpoint firm in alliance with the Kshatriyas. Such duality has been vehemently criticised by the author who accuses the god of playing a key role in cementing Brahminical dominance on the majority of Indian people. During his arguments on the Vamana and the
Rama reincarnations of Lord Vishnu, Ilaiah has stripped them of their divine stature and reduced their glory to dust.

With a view to substantiating his critique of Hindu deities Ilaiah goes on to mentioning the goddesses of his community and their particularities. He creates a crystal clear line of demarcation:

In order to understand the alternative cultural, economic and political specificities of South Indian Dalitbahujans, we must examine some of the images of the Goddesses and the Gods that the Dalitbahujans have evolved for them selves. Our entire lifestyles and philosophical motivations are closely related to these Goddess/God images even today. The Dalitbahujan cultural ethos of the future needs to be shaped by carefully studying these plural cultural traditions.\(^{19}\)

Later he adds:

The consciousness built around Dalitbahujan Goddess/God images is rooted in production processes.\(^{20}\)

Clearly enough a distinct differentiation has come up between the Hindu gods and the communal goddesses who are free from gender complication and whose relevance revolves round the sphere of production based activities whereas their Hindu counterparts deal with spirituality, patriarchy and chauvinism. Mention must be made to the author’s description of a Hindu priest to bring out his sharp disdain for the religion. His words dedicated to the portrayal are sardonic enough to refer to the bitter irony:

The people do not know whether the priest is calling on the divine spirits to bless the couple or curse them. But the end-product of that brief encounter between the priest and the people is that the priest acquires wealth.\(^{21}\)
He explains it further:

To put it in simple terms, the relationship between the priest and the people on all such occasions when he comes in contact with them, is the relationship between exploiter and exploited.22

The pomp of Hinduism is shattered with Ilaiah’s study of women in both the castes. By his clinical study with a number of assorted examples he attempts to prove that a woman in a dalitbahujan community enjoys a life far superior than an upper caste woman’s. She is neither subdued by religious impositions nor by any spiritual sanctity which pretends to pay women the highest respect. It is a matter of irony that among Hindu upper castes a number of goddesses are worshipped, yet women are exploited by various means. This paradox is absent in the dalits. Their goddesses have no divine husband symbolising dominance. Similarly women in the dalit houses are free to protest against their husbands’ persecutions; she is also allowed to pay her husband back in the same coin once she is beaten. At least religion has no part to play between them. Another dichotomy comes alive in this context – the Hindu upper castes approve of polygamy but not polyandry. The love Lord Krishna but abhors to name their daughters after the name of Draupadi. The relationship between a man and a woman in dalitbahujan societies are far from superimposed divinity. Their relationship on earth is humane and they put priority on production and reproduction instead of contextualising sex with philosophical jargons

Finally, when it comes to politics, newer insightful explorations take place. In politics, too, does the author find unnecessary spiritual interference. The two major political currents, liberal democracy and Communism, put forward by Indian National Congress and CPI or CPI(M) respectively, have undergone an upper class handling which has always molded politics to be retained in the hands of them. It is noteworthy that Ilaiah is particularly
disappointed of the Communist parties, perhaps because of the apparent failure in implementation of their ideological tenets. He states that leaders of the Communist parties hail from upper caste, well to do families who never cast a glance at the plight of the dalits though they utter Marxist-Leninist theories of equality and socialism. He argues:

Did the Communist ‘upper’ castes give up the Hindu way of life? Certainly not. Their social relations continued to be within their caste circles.[…] They have not built a critique of the Hindu Gods.\(^{23}\)

It is the dearth in understanding of the production based cultural plurality that Ilaiah holds responsible for the Communists’ failure to sort out caste-class issues.

Thus, under the veil of ‘a Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy’ Ilaiah sketches an alternative history of the dalit communities in the postcolonial period by frequently furnishing past incidents vis-à-vis contemporary happenings., thereby contributing to the subaltern purpose of re-recording history from the perspective of an individual from an oppressed section of the society. Therefore, he himself has provided an answer to the problem mentioned in the beginning of this article as he writes:

We must begin by creating our history and we must end by changing this very social fabric.\(^{24}\)

The above assistance taken from *Why I am not a Hindu* prepares the seedbed for some poetic instances. With the help of the enlightening study of Illiah’s autobiographical work, it would be easier for us to comprehend the dalit poetic urge for retracing their history and despair at its apparent loss. In Mina Gajbhiye’s ‘The Weeping Wound of Centuries’ we find reference to the unrest that took place over the dalits’ demand of renaming Marathwada University after Dr. Ambedkar. Though the poem focuses on the incident, it indicates all other cases of
repression that occurred during time immemorial. The poet identifies the Marathwada turmoil as the crater of a volcano that helps erupt age old bitterness. The word ‘centuries’ explicitly declares the historical time span of suppressed angst. Certainly, the weeping wounds get accumulated over centuries and now seeking an outlet through which they may come out and repay some century old debts:

Let the village become a burning ground

along with me

I will not live like a dog, nowhere.²⁵

Arun Kamble’s ‘Primal Bond’²⁶ is a reinforcement to the quest to their own history. The poem may be interpreted as the poet’s resentment against an upper caste Indian girl who typifies the mainstream Indian history and tradition. The poem generates and progresses from a unitary thought. It tries to locate the girl and approximate her role in Indian history. The poem furnishes a few images of excavation, actually intending to unearth not what has been excavated, but what that escaped the traditional historian’s eyes. The poet’s detestation is evident:

How much of this romantic nonsense:

‘…I want to paint your picture

I want to sing you a poem

I want to fill my eyes with you

I want to marry you.’²⁷

To Kamble history is a romantic foolery that concentrated on something which does not have the merit to be concentrated upon. The ‘primal bond’ here is ironically presented. The
naturalness attached to the bond is critiqued on the ground of validity. We are accustomed to a cultural history that is far away from accommodating every section of the society. That’s why the image of a traditional Indian girl conveys to the poet no significance:

I don’t know why, girl,

but I see in you an ancient skeleton

thousands of years old,

found in an excavation…

The images of excavation continue to repeat in Daya Pawar’s ‘The City’. The poem is striking in its choice of climactic point among various ordinary words and expressions. The poem simply illustrates a futuristic vision regarding an excavation of a twentieth century city. Sarcastically enough the poet proves that civilisation didn’t progress by an inch owing to the primacy of mythology. The ancient stone, animal worship still exists. The reference to specific gods is very clear:

You’ll find stones, rocks, images covered with ochre,

some with elephant trunks sticking out of their faces,

some with tails hanging from their behinds.

These metaphors describe the twentieth century city as a perfect parallel for the ancient city of Mohenjodaro. Well, that’s not even enough, the climax is marvelous:

Here’s an interesting inscription:

“This water tap is open to all castes and religions.”
This sentence at once enmeshes the spirit of the poem. This visionary poem apprehends a future that is going to witness a history of casteist repression. Though traditional delineation of historical facts avoids describing such social discrimination, this poem brings about a brilliant poetic justice on the part of the historian-narrator:

Well, all right, then this city deserved burying –

Why did they call it the machine age?

Seems like the stone age in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{32}
Notes and References


2. See P. XV in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* by Raymond Williams

3. See P. 7 in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe

4. See P. 12 in *Selections from the Prison Notebook* by Antonio Gramsci

5. Ibid.

6. See P.2 in *Contemporary Dalit Literature: Quest for Dalit Liberation* by Zakir Abedi

7. P. 4 Ibid.


9. Line 17, Ibid.


11. See P. 54 in *Why I am not a Hindu* by Kancha Iliiah

12. See P. 12 in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* by Pramod K. Nayar

13. See P. 3 in *Subaltern Studies* Vol. 1 by Ranajit Guha (Ed.)
14. See P. 211 in *Contemporary Dalit Literature: Quest for Dalit Liberation* by Zakir Abedi

15. P. 231, Ibid.

16. P. 251, Ibid.

17. P. 24 in *Why I am not a Hindu* by Kancha Iliah

18. P. 25, Ibid.

19. P. 89, Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. P. 21, Ibid.

22. P. 22, Ibid.

23. P. 61, Ibid.

24. P.18, Ibid.


27. Lines 21-25, PP. 87-88, Ibid.


29. Written by Daya Pawar, trans. Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliot with Pam Espeland PP. 129-130, Ibid.
30. Lines 10-12, P. 129, Ibid.

31. Lines 16-17, Ibid.

32. Lines 21-23, Ibid.
Chapter Three

Social commitment and Dalit Feminism
I

Dalit Poetry and The Society

The term ‘Dalit’ literally means downtrodden. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines the word in association with the traditional Indian caste system where a ‘Dalit’ is “a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and that has fewest advantages”. The present days dalits are the lineage of the untouchables having the only occupation of serving the other castes obediently. The three words or phrases obtained till now are very important. ‘Lowest’, ‘fewer advantages’ and ‘serving obediently’ – evidently these expressions constitute the religious, socio-economic and habitual cultural activities of the Dalits. Many discussions so far have been made to determine the definition and objective of the Dalits. Instead of discussing in details, we’ll have a passing look on different turns that the definition took in its way to final ascertainment. A useful sum up has been conducted by Pradeep K. Sharma that the untouchable section of the society “was called by different nomenclature from time to time like ‘Harijan’, ‘Scheduled Castes’ (SCs) and ‘Dalit’. The term ‘Dalit has a wide connotation and is a self-chosen: one that is very much prevalent in the contemporary times.”¹² Thus, the term ‘Dalit’ is the latest to refer to the class which has been backward, oppressed, depressed and exploited.

One important point to be noted in the previous line is that, the moment we’ve reached a more or less definite terminology, the word ‘class’ instead of ‘caste’ came to use effortlessly. Not only that, the epithets that follow the word ‘class’ are all more congenial than what they are in appropriation with ‘caste’. The argument regarding class and caste are hot cups of tea for different polemics. A variety of schools have already fused (and confused) further variety of thoughts in this issue. Keeping all those apart, let’s have a look at what K.L. Sharma has to say: “caste and class are not polar opposites; caste and class are found in both
rural and urban areas; caste is not simply confined to ritual ranking and caste is not just a
 grouping of people based on common economic and occupational interests; [...] Caste is not
 being replaced by class, and caste is still changing rapidly finding a place for itself in non-
 conventional and secular domains of social, political and economic life.\(^3\)

In Indian perspective the literal meaning of class is definitely subject to complication. What was expounded in Marxian philosophy in European context is surely not word for word applicable in Indian social stratification. But, such diversity was not overlooked by Marx. The multi-caste, multi-cultural and multi-sub divided texture of primitive Indian society was for him the root cause of India’s continual subjugation to foreign powers. Marx declares India as ‘A country not only divided between Mahommedan and Hindoo, but between tribe and tribe, between caste and caste; ……Such a country and such a society, were they not the predestined prey of conquest?’\(^4\) The caste system of Indian society made the country vulnerable, both outwardly and inwardly. It hindered the unification of Indian people against foreign invasions and has become so much intertwined with Indian social foundations that it had its impact felt in every superstructural epitomisation.

Literature being the motif of this discussion, we should restrict ourselves within a little acquaintance with how caste-stratification has formed, shaped and determined literary outcomes. Sanskrit alone was the hegemonic determinant in creation of literary texts like epics, plays, poems and prose, all according to the prescription of the Vedic rules. Hence, the primary aim of dalit literature is to bring the plight of the oppressed in the form of realistic records. It is a vast literary genre which can be said, in imitation of the famous speech of Lincoln, which is of the dalits, for the dalits and by the dalits.

Unless we break the shackles of understanding the caste system from its conventional point of view and until we look for a far more universality in dalit poetry, we may fail to have
a complete notion about it. The threat of this limited point of view exists beneath the comprehension of the term ‘dalit’ in its caste-oriented sense. It had been made official by the governments of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh\(^5\). But the word encapsulates a larger connotation. If we take the meaning as ‘oppressed’ or ‘depressed’ then why should they only be the Sudras? It’s true that they are oppressed since the primeval stage of Indian society. But with the course of history, many a change has taken place in Indian economy, polity, culture, society and so on. The mode of production has been altered, from agriculture to heavy industries. Role and character of the rulers have also undergone qualitative and quantitative changes, such is the scenario with the ruled ones also. Then, again the question pops up, why the untouchables only? Why not the under waged workers, the landless farmers or the lower class employers in numerous private firms in the cities and suburbs, who are regularly being squeezed, utilised and exploited are termed as ‘depressed’? Why is this terminology made solely upon the castes even if the term gives out a broader import? Why should religion be the criterion of judging the degree of oppression and why not economic disparity? Sharankumar Limbale seeks the answer and obtains it as ‘Not only are the scheduled castes and sub-castes Dalit, according to the definition given by Marxist commentators.’ He argues that the definition given by M.N. Wankhede and Namdeo Dhasal are more all encompassing and acceptable in terms of the changed and changing situation of present India. Hence the two prefer to define the term ‘from feelings of comprehensive social and political unity’. Hence the term includes everybody who are exploited irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, irrespective of the varied causes of exploitation\(^6\).

In the light of the above discussion, we shall now look at a few specimens of Namdeo Dhasal’s (1949-2014) poetry, which, though obviously based on caste issues, but have far more important motifs to deal simultaneously with the delineation of the suffering and anguish of the untouchables, prioritizing other social factors as ignition for their origin. His
poems have deliberately been selected as they mirror the society from its every perspective, in other words he turns it upside down and then casts a glance. His poetry is revolutionary against the long tradition of Indian aesthetics, yet it is very much part of Indian cultural and historical heritage. This idea may seem self contradictory unless we think of Indian literature as representation of social realism. Didn’t the Ramayana portray its contemporary society besides everything else it furnished? Wasn’t the Mahabharata an anthology of socio-political events? In such perspective dalit poetry is also carrying the baton that literature in India, as literature should be, was not only for its own sake, it has been for the sake of something else. The foundation of dalit poetry is the at hand Indian society, its economic behavior cast on the lowest section. It is already established by many scholars that dalit consciousness comes out of the self understanding of the have-nots (though many may have disapproval for this term used on dalits in the course of history as the most exploited class (here ‘class’ is deliberately used). This consciousness assumes different forms in black and white - fury, protest, agony, anger, disillusionment and so on and so forth. Dhasal’s poetry shuns the stereotyped frustration for what was or craving for what should be. It firmly deals with what is. It denies any association with pseudo-romanticism - lamentation for what it contains. Rather, his poetry assertively flaunts the realities it pictures.

Dhasal’s literary expressions are realistic, sometimes too vivid and direct in meticulous description of what they intend to assert. The poems are free from unnecessary obesity and in many occasions assume the shape of a skinny, dreadful figure to mirror explicitly similar features of what they come out from. In a sense, his poems analyse the society, and, as a matter of fact, this analysis is not limited within the scope of casteism. The poems are often subjective, too much personal, too redolent of mundane Indian households, locality, food, language, culture, habit, mentality – everything found on the Indian soil. But, instead of their glorification as the common practice, the poet shatters them. To him, like
other dalit poets, the country may possess lands full of crops, ponds full of aquatic subsistence and household full of affluence sounding the trumpet of harmonious existence as expounded in history text books – but what the mere books fail to penetrate is the membrane which encases the dark, filthy, stinky potholes. The romantically glorified outlook of the country is made and cherished by the upper caste ones. Its beauty is unveiled only to those who unleash severe oppression on the dalits. Hence, the latter find no magnificence in its land, even they fear to think the country as theirs. The inclusion of contemporary social history lends his poetry a strong note of verisimilitude, the poems become social documents by their own contents. There is certainly a commitment from the part of the Dhasal is performed; it’s the commitment of a prophet who makes everybody aware of what is happening or what is likely to take place. The poems, as already mentioned and shall be observed later, are far distant for distant from aesthetic ornamentation and literary embellishments. Again, they are not altogether chronology of vapid pay to day occurrences. They really succeed in incorporating in themselves a tinge of contemporary kinetic history and become realist outcome of a dalit’s social existence along with an understanding of the hegemonic society as a whole. That man is a social animal and his activities originate from and relentlessly shaped by the society he lives in, is the starting point of realism, better to claim social realism. A dalit does not need to study the society meticulously. His daily experiences, the treatment he receives from dawn to sunset, are enough to be put into in poetic expressions. The descriptions available in poems and autobiographies ascertain the fact that a dalit lives a life at the fringes of the society’s mainstream. Joothan, an autobiographical sketch by Omprakash Balmiki introduces us to everything a dalit has to persevere through in his life and even after that. A dalit child, whatever goal he may set to arrive at in his life, must remain a dalit at first. He must take part, though reluctant he may be, in the act of peeling off hide from a carcass, the act being archetypal of them. As a member of the
community congenitally attached to them, he is not allowed to enter the classroom. If granted permission, he has to sweep the whole room and the adjacent clean. All these injunctions, gruesome even to imagine, are instituted and carried out by teachers! Such is the trail of social taboo that it creeps into the love life and breaks a blooming relationship to innumerable pieces. Plenty of instances are there in the novel where a dalit is barred from taking part into social activities, denied of entry to a upper caste household, forced to toil for free, made to live always at the mercy of the formidable upper castes, so on and so forth. It is very much perceivable to a dalit child that he/she is not like the others, somewhere a boundary is drawn which allows him/her little space to spread him/herself to the full stretch, in most cases socially and of course, intellectually.

Locating the downtrodden individual in the society is another prerogative of Dhasal’s poems. Their social consciousness begins with their intrinsic idea of being dalit. Alongside securing their entity as the ‘depressed’, their come issues like poverty, hunger, deprivation and helplessness. Each dalit individual is plunged into these and they are made to in deprivation. Not only do the poems discover the personal grieves, they engulf automatically the suffering of the own class. Thereby even though subjective, each piece of verse achieves objective reality by pointing towards the problems and disparities that run parallel in India. Though issues like poverty or disparity are global ones, but in the previous line ‘India’ is deliberately written because casteism is found nowhere else in the world which functions both as the womb and seminal catalyst in forming the poems. The primacy of the fact that they belong to the lowest class is the doorway through which they furnish their feelings; whatever the procedure is, the poet candidly puts forth certain issues, discrepancies and deformities that any sociological work fails to register. In other words, the thread-bare condition of our much proclaimed land of past glory is displayed and served in a platter to be taken a dig at. Simultaneously Dhasal’s writings embody the social history of India ranging
from the Vedic age down to the present era asserting that neither India has a past as glorious as it’s attributed to, nor does it presently have it – the dalit-suffering remains unchanged without regard to the ruling authority. Here, along with an aid from the extensive study of Mr. Ram Ahuja on the persisting social problems in India, the tribulations may be briefed in the following order – poverty, unemployment, population explosion, communalism, caste issues, child labour, violence against women, illiteracy etc and Dhasal’s poetry depicts them all. Once again it needs to be stated that the poems are but an outcome of caste discrimination and casteist exploitation, but their circumference envelops a larger sphere of functionality. It will get clearer during the discussion over a few representative poems in the following section.

The onslaught of poverty is all pervasive in Dhasal’s poems. The material existence of their lives comes directly into his consciousness and it constructs the base - ‘This is do number ki duniya. This is the bottom of the world. This is where my poems come from’. Dilip Chitre gives the explanation of the above lines – ‘…do number has a double meaning in Bombaiya slang. It connotes the black market, unaccounted money, the contraband, the illegitimate and the clandestine – or in short, of criminal origin and character. In Namdeo’s usage, the world acquires further shades and deeper connotations; it means second class human beings, a second-hand world, a subordinate society, an inferior zone and so forth’. Chitre claims that Dhor Chawl, the living place of Dhasal in Mumbai was full of lumpenproletariats who crowd his poetry.

Dhasal tags the Dalit Panther as not-Marxist. But he also acknowledged that somewhere he had an affinity with the Communist Party of India. He had an inclination towards Karl Marx, though Ambedkar, the monumental figure who shaped and formed the Dalit movements was not in good terms with the Bombay Communist trade unions as they ignored the caste-issue as a trivial superstructural phenomenon. However, Dhasal was not
very far from Marxian views. He writes, ‘I wanted revolution. I wanted to overturn the
government…The greatest support of the revolution comes from the human beings whom the
process of exploitation crushes’. He clearly talks of the proletarian stratum of the society,
echoing the basic tenets of Marxist-Leninist idea of revolution, that it should be undertaken
and fanned up by the have-nots of the society. In this process a considerable Indianisation of
the proletariat has been conducted which is brilliantly touched upon and dealt with in the
poems of Dhasal.

To start with ‘Their Eternal Pity’, Dhasal here puts up a realist discussion on the
attitude of the ruling upper class that determined and dictated the way untouchables should
live. The poet gives vent to his disdain towards them by comparing the ‘feudal lords’ to the
dealers of prostitutes of Mumbai’s very well-known red light area. In the third line of the
poem, Dhasal makes the distinction between the haves and the have-nots – “They’ve
locked all light in their vault”. Here light is obviously enlightenment, liberation. But the
association of the word ‘vault’ leads us to consider it from a materialistic point of view.
‘Vault’ is synonymous with a ‘secret chamber’, a ‘chest’ where a man keeps aside all he
earns- all his profits, the profit generated by squeezing those who exist at the other end of the
ruling system. Dhasal further delineates the condition of his fellow people

No pavilion put up in the sky for us.

Lords of wealth, they are, locking up light in those vaults of theirs

In this life, carried by a whore, not even the sidewalks are ours.

The agony imparted to these lines is the voice of poverty and marginalisation; it is the sum up
of their eternal sorrow. Again, in the same poem, when the poet says ‘The rising day of
justice, like a bribed person, favours only them’ it’s understood that he has identified the State and its agents as an instrument for exploitation of the have-nots.

‘On the Way to the Durgah’ is a verbatim projection of the underbelly of our society. The poem is very short, but its each line is self-explanatory. It illustrates the life of a beggar begging on the way to a holy place, a very common sight in India. But what is more important in the poem is the social realism depicted in it, extending the reach of the poem to a further universality. The moment Dhasal says

When I was born

On the pavement

In the rags

The lines build up a poem very much similar to ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ in Songs of Experience by William Blake. Exactly like the child uttering blasphemies, Dhasal’s ‘human with his fuse blown up’ shouts ‘Give me five cents/I’ll give you five punches’.

The poem Song of the ‘Dog and the Republic’ is a more vivid and elaborate portrayal of the dichotomy exerted by the republican state for the have-nots. The poem is an exquisite blend of subjective representation and objective realities. The constitutional rights have been criticised as being “full of sound and fury signifying nothing”. For the exploited section of our country, the protection prescribed by the republican constitution is full of loopholes, bestowing little space for the oppressed. Empty stomach does not allow cerebral proceedings, hunger does not give birth to intellectuality, stark want doesn’t bother about the benevolent euphemisms of the constitution. Dhasal writes –

Friends, I ask an uncircumcised boy
the meaning of democracy

Or

I ask the mother with the worn out patched sari

the worth of breast milk

Social jargons are useless for the poverty-stricken mass, who don’t crave for ‘Total Liberation’ but desires surety for a little food a day.

In this poem Dhasal terms this age as an ‘age of darkness’ that engulfs our beings.

The futility of democracy is thus criticised –

We are becoming homeless

We are becoming orphans.

Leaving our houses...

Instead of ensuring a shield of security, democracy plays the role of a device frequently manipulated by the ruling class to serve their own purposes. A Marathi proverb is also mentioned in this poem, the answer being watermelon which gives out juice as red as blood, when cut. The blood-bathed mind of the poet seeks escape leaving the paean of the republic reduced to be a mere incantation of the untouchables during an eclipse –

Give alms, the eclipse is over

Give alms, the eclipse is over.

The last poem to be looked at in this dissertation is ‘So That My Mother May Be Convinced’. In this poem the ‘mother’ is the medium through whom the plight of the oppressed, the deplorable condition of the exploited has been sketched. A poor woman in
Indian society is a further downtrodden. The poem offers a spectroscopic reading of the Dalit condition sprung from a focal point. As addressed to a mother, Dhasal paints her as confined, ignorant - a figure shaped by oppressive culture, custom and society. She mothers, like Maxim Gorky’s ‘mother’, the revolutionaries, who attempt rebellion ‘against this culture, this tradition, this custom, this thought and these justifiers of the status quo’.

In the mother’s mind, in the form of an imagination, a contradiction has been drawn between classes. She envisions, yearns for a grandson ‘plump as the child on the Amul milk tin’, but reality dismantles such dream. Even her epic accomplishments, qualities, capabilities and potentialities have been subjugated by the economic disparity, when the means of production went to the hands of the ruling exploiting class. Dhasal depicts the situation as –

Your prominent place in individual development,

public development

your faith in freedom, your part in national defence

your accomplishments in all of this,

all of this vanished when man came to know the use of land

land

The ‘I’ in the poem is the voice of the Indian have not, so long been here in this discussion. He does not require stereotyped motherly sentiment. Rather he prays for revolutionary encouragement to fuel him up for fulfilling his historic achievements. He wants the mother to say in praise of him, his ultimate socialistic deeds –

“He will create wise economists,

he will reshape the land,
he will produce the things that the people need.”

The have-not sets free his satanic, instinctive enthusiasm. The black-spots of the society stir his every nerve, he seeks inspiration in the last lines of the poem – ‘Mother, be the support for my weapon’.

In the above poems and in many others, Dhasal having transcended the precincts of caste issues, speaks against inequality, class-stratification, societal exploitation by means of presenting an representing that backward section of Indian society termed as depressed, scheduled castes and dalits, bearing under such veils of nomenclature millennium-old wounds of socio-economic deprivation, subjection, misuse and exploitation; he makes his poems come out and reach a broader sphere of social whereabouts.
II

In Search of Dalit Feminism in the Post Independence Era

Poems written after independence become more eclectic, direct, effective and esoteric; nevertheless, it grew much more ‘feminine’ both in the content and by the context. Speaking specifically of the post 1980s situation in the Third World, owing to the rise of modernity, education and the emergence of a distinct middle class urbanity enjoying better financial state along with easy exposure to contemporary feminist activities, we see women, working in different fields of professions are coming up as poets. The investment of their own experiences and professional coverage contributes hugely to their poetic enterprises and it is found in general that most of the poems bear vexation towards the social set up. While discussing on the women poets after the 80s, especially belonging to the ‘Third World’ environment, it might be of help to have a prior understanding of the rage, angst and insistence of the women and the diversities of the rage. Julia Lesage notes:

...we need to promote self-conscious, collectively supported, and politically clear articulations of our rage and anger. [...] Black women rage against poverty and racism at the same time that they rage against sexism. Lesbians rage against hetero sexual privilege ...Nicaraguan women rage against invasions and the aggressive intentions of the United States.19

In the same page she identifies society’s centrality in women’s suppression and hence speaks of the necessity of a proper comprehension of the unique social, political and economic conditions.

Along with some impactful transformations in political, economic and social areas change occurred in cultural practices too. Self and collective consciousness converted the
mode of literary presentations. Apart from mainstream literary creations with its sustained aesthetic zeal, literature by women writers gets directed by purposeful urges. Major political figures, social activists started trying their hands in writing and the convention went vice versa as well. Hence, literature in the post 1980s scenario went hand in hand, almost essentially, with a large number of non-literary issues. Dalit literary activities came into being along with various movements, agitations and events of unrest. Being a child of quite a few heterogeneous factors, its formulation and accurate theorisation need not only literary erudition, but insightful expertise in various other socio-historical aspects. However, the insistence on liberation and equality being central to each specimen of this literary cult, it has opened and is still opening newer scholastic approaches. It triggered off prominently in the late 60s, developed and proliferated in the 70s and firmed its place in the enormity of Indian literature in the 1980s. The practice of writing spread largely among dalit activists in many parts of India and the result is what we see today – dalit literature is not something that only speaks of revolution and demolition of age old inequality pressed on them; it offers some distinct variations in its subaltern nature by means of continuously attempting to recreate the past. It would be unjust if we classify dalit literature only as a mere documentation of the contemporary society. Rather, this canon is multi layered, heterogeneous by character and variedly oriented as the author nurture different ideological premises. Related to this factor there lies another equally important one – it’s about the participation of women in dalit writings. Because in the ever broadening facade of dalit literature it is observed that male poets dominate the scenario while only a few female poets (better known as activists) find their place in. It may seem a setback against a literary movement that seeks emancipation in every sense of the word has conspicuously lesser number of female counterparts.

In an attempt to address the probable reasons behind the shortage in dalit women poets, the first obvious point that comes to the fore is the omnipresent patriarchy which is
almost congenital to Indian society since the Vedic ages. There’s no need to seek further beyond the colossal epics which present and represent the legitimised infallibility of men’s authority on social and religious norms. Though there are a few names of some erudite women float to the surface, but their mention is limited within school level curriculum. We are all aware of the marginalisation of the ‘weaker’ sex that took place in every historical age no matter who the ruler is. This repression against gender got sanctified and became perpetual by the formidable organs of religion. Therefore while answering the question there come further questions. Is the lack of female poets due to the apparent politicised outlook which the women generally have an aversion against? Or is there any deficiency in feminine enthusiasm while responding to the call of protest and change? Or is it because of the prevalent patriarchy in the lower castes that remains indifferent, just like its upper caste counterpart, about the participation of women?

Before laying down some straightforward answer for the above questions, it is necessary to illustrate one or two fundamental characteristics of poems written by dalit women. There are, of course, some similarities with the other streams of female literary practices but alongside a few dissimilarities too. Keeping a strong bond with the typicality of post colonial writing practices, each of the dalit poems frames reaction against the Hindu culture and custom in an essential woman voice. There are caste issues working everywhere in them. But they present a intra cultural critique too. The pile of superstition and pseudo religious activities has blackened their mind and vision. Let’s consider ‘Request’ by Anuradha Gaurav. The poem is a choric communication made to the people of our country from a typical dalit standpoint. It’s a combination of dalit traditions and their eventual courses. The poem unfurls from the custom of devoting children to the service of different gods and goddesses. The children, especially girls, end up in prostitution, become more at service of men than that of gods. In a self-condemning attitude, the poet denigrates her whole
race to beasts, devoid of sensibility, depending entirely on circumstances – ‘We know what’s going wrong/But what can we do?’

They can only see what’s happening, can never make anything happen. The realization is at work behind the following specimens of acknowledgment –

Our ancestors did the same thing

we are doing today

Our children will inherit that same thing.

It’s a helpless passivity that flows through heredity. She cracks one example of divine injustice – Shambak was killed by virtuosity personified, Rama, for listening to the Vedas. But no remonstration took place, no voice was raised against that supremely ‘righteous’ king – ‘Our eyes were shut then, too’.

The first distinct feature that dalit women’s poetry showcases is the delineation of women labour, especially labour by a mother. The ever fixed existence of a woman or a mother in the society has always been dominated by man. Engels in his ‘Origin of the Family, Private Property and State’ has drawn a chronological illustration on what the title suggests and at one juncture points out that though the function of inheritance owed itself solely to the maternal lineage but due to the huge increase of property and wealth multiplied the importance of the father who eventually overthrows the lineage of the mother. Engels wrote

The overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex [Italics in original]. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of a man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children.
Surprisingly, besides rage, this is exactly what dalit women poets filled their lines with. Many of the unskilled, sometimes even underpaid worker engaged in menial professions, are dalit women. Besides their own labour power, ‘Women’s sole creative function was the lowly task of reproducing the labor force’. But as it’s been commented earlier that this tribe of poetry incorporates too many dimensions, in order to keep precision in this dissertation we’ll critically analyse two poems, one by Hira Bansode and the other by Jyotí Lānejwar and try to relate our earlier discussion above with other subsequent discoveries.

The poem ‘Slave’ by Hira Bansode (b. 1939) is full of ironies which mirror those found everywhere in Indian society, especially in its treatment to women. Half of the poem has plenty of epanaphora intended to create a recurrence about the spot it wants to turn our gaze at. All the ‘where’ (s) mean our country. At once the dalit poets’ attitude to our country is revealed. Hira Bansode invests this stance in a little varied purpose. She enters the world of women presenting contrasting images in succession and a refrain. The first stanza outlines the Indian ritual of embellishing houses with fresh mango leaves to complement occasions of auspice. ‘Little flaming oil lamps’ are also symbols of traditional Hindu decoration of households. It also instigates in our mind the occasions of offering ‘puja’ to goddesses. But the next line in the stanza lashes the ideas of worship. It’s truly a huge irony where female deities are offered puja with devotion – ‘In that country a woman is still a slave’. The stanza is studded with antithetic phrases and its conspicuous outcome is its successful tracing out of a fundamental hypocrisy existing beneath the surface sacredness.

Dalit poetry, constructed upon Hindu tradition of India, bears link with the country’s epics and mythologies. The second stanza showcases three legendary women, two from the great epics and the other from mythology. At this juncture, the poem sheds its apparent ‘dalit’ label and universalises the quandary of women in all ages in the hand of patriarchy and its
different persecutory agents like infidelity, voluptuousness and polygamy. The poet’s venture meets success in its statement. Sita, Ahilya and Draupadi are incarnations of women treated most inhumanly, sometimes even by the best of apostolic figures. Bansode devotes only three lines to expose their dire states, each having one for her. The women had to undergo the nastiest situation ever in their lives either with a view to satisfying or as a result of discontent of a few stalwarts of masculine hegemony. Sita, as she was kidnapped by Ravana and kept in his custody for some days, the all-virtuous Rama asked her to undergo a fire-test to check whether his wife had had any scrap of infidelity in herself. The incident of Ahilya seems more obnoxious and arbitrary in its perspective. By the touch of Rama Ahilya got back her life after she had been cursed to be a lump of stone in suspicion of having an illicit affair with god Indra. Keeping religious solemnity apart, it appears to be ridiculous that on one hand Rama liberates a woman from curse, but sends his wife to acid test under the impact of similar mistrust, on the other. Again, events related to Draupadi are equally gruesome. She was made to wed five brothers together. The pandavas shared her almost as a commodity; she was kept at stake in a gamble in later episode. Detail explanation is unnecessary; one can easily infer what went on her body and soul.

The poem wriggles deeper into deconstruction of the concrete figures into abstraction. What women crave for, what they aim at, what they pursue and what they are capable of are always ‘..trampled under a heel’. If the previous stanza excels in precise allusion, this one triumphs in documenting the interior of a woman mind. Again, in three lines the poet embosses women’s aspiration on a centripetal connotation. It also highlights further gaps between optimism and materialisation. Each of the lines contains hyperbolic exaggerations to designate that women’s dreams, force, potentiality, individuality and identity are relentlessly ravished –

Where the silvery moonlight of happiness must be
poured into a jar of darkness

In that country a woman is still a slave\textsuperscript{27}

The last two identical lines – ‘To be born a woman is unjust/To be born a woman is unjust’ can suffix any punctuation mark they like and will definitely give out varied but right interpretations. The first line may have a question mark after it and the second a full stop. This will form a template of a question and an its answer. If the marks exchange their positions it’ll comprise an interrogation against a firm traditional belief., so on and so forth. Moreover, these two lines are a poetic confirmation to the opinion of Anita Ghosh – “a woman in India is a’Dalit amongs Dalits’”\textsuperscript{28}.

On the other hand, Joyti Lanjewar’s (b. 1950) ‘Mother\textsuperscript{29} is a visual collage of the women’s contribution to dalit movements. It’s not an appeal made to a mother for becoming an inspiration, Mother renders her as already a motivational figure. A dalit mother’s countenance and activities are placed side by side with the depiction of affluence in the opening lines. “gold-bordered saris’, ‘gold necklace’ and the other accessories mentioned in the lines are never at the disposal of a dalit mother, not even in her dream. Her actual niche is far more appalling. Her femininity is denied as she is put to toil hard amongst a group of labourers. She is one of the workers engaged in road construction. The mother’s trials are made more prominent through the images opposite in nature. Putting her little children aside ‘in a cradle on an acacia tree’ she joins hand with the prole.

The mother’s labour continues. She carries loads of soils on her head, but is never oblivious of her affectionate ‘kiss to the naked child’. Situations have made her a daily wage earner, situations have murdered motherhood. Having suppressed every exertion and keeping her each torment secret, she remains busy in ‘building a dam on a lake’. \textsuperscript{30}
In the optimism of creating her own house, the mother carries hod of building material. She jeopardises pregnancy, overpowered by poverty as stomach listens to nothing. She must work till the evening until she expends every atom of her physical capability. Paradoxically, she is mutely contributing to our country’s development, herself submerged in darkness. The later illustrations are, though stereotypical, but authentic representations. The mother, though in desperate need of money, hands a few coins to her child’s happiness. To do away with their distress she wishes another Ambedkar to emerge from her progeny. The dalit mother exemplifies sacrifice, remains unfed while trying her best to make food for the family. Lanjewar subtly brings out the voluptuousness the mother has to confront every now and then. Unlike others, she has somehow learnt the way to see atrocities face to face – ‘chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately/with your sandal in your hand.’ On one hand the mother copes up with personal struggle, she takes part in collective ones on the other. Her endeavour transcends from personal to universal sphere – she takes pride in her son’s heroism subsequent to the great idealist struggles; she retains a residual revolutionary powerhouse in herself willing to dedicate more sons to the cause of the untouchables. She understands the value of their present agitations, feels the need to ‘fight on’. At last she dies an inspirational death calling for more participation in the struggles of the dalits.

The poem, in the end, makes a circle complete. It began with the mother’s personal sufferings on what she never hoped nor had. A microcosmic issue finally gets shape in macrocosm. Personal predicaments bring forth her necessary courage and steel it to the point of putting up a strong confrontation. But it ends in re-affirmation of her personal dearth thereby referring to the millions of similar incidents that happen across the world. The two poets in discussion have touched the chord of universality through their own subjective perceptions.
It is never easy to maneuver a tailor-made definition for dalit feminism. Any attempt towards formulation of dalit feminism must undergo the typical procedure of describing conventional feminism (or feminisms) and thereafter situating dalit feminine perspective in contrast to it. However, in order to keep brevity, we may treat the whole chunk of feministic movements as being western in origin and thereupon estimate its Indian counterpart especially after independence. In a nutshell, feminist movements came into prominent being in the 1840s as a counter reaction against the widespread practice of slavery in the USA. Among various emancipating demands there were property rights, change in marital relationship, women suffrage etc. These movements are known as the ‘first wave’ of feminist activities. Its sequel, noted as the ‘second wave’ procured nourishment from highly acclaimed theoretical works like *The Second Sex, The Feminine Mystique* and *Sexual Politics*. It was observed that feminist movements began to accommodate social, political, historical and economical issues and extended itself to the cultural spheres. The movements were theoretical, radical and practicable. It was in the 1990s, to be more precise, in the postcolonial era, feminism is said to have adopted a ‘third wave’ which is much more complex than its predecessors. The complexity arose primarily because of the inclusion of caste and racial concerns to a large extent and this is where we should begin our quest to get to the root of dalit feminism.

It is quite unjust to miniaturise the whole lot of feminism in just a short paragraph as attempted above, yet it sufficiently brings out the seminal characteristic of mainstream feminism – looking for all round freedom from oppressive patriarchy. This point, once again provides us with a breakthrough for initiating discussion on dalit vision of feminism. To be very point blank, dalit feminism came out as a rejoinder against traditional feminism in India after independence. Dalit studies, in general, suffers from a serious dearth in women representation as we saw in the poems analysed above. Only a handful of dalit women poets
came to the forefront. Smita Patil feels the significance for a feministic concern in dalit writings:

[...] in the case of the Dalits, the women’s issue is important for two reasons. First, many of the expressions of marginalization of the dalits are manifested through their women. Second, Dalit women have over the years evolved their own understanding and critique of women’s situation that should constitute a part of Dalit studies howsoever it is understood.32

Hence the challenge for dalit feminists is twofold. First, they must rigorously retort against the upper caste representation of caste, gender and women studies, second, they are to raise voice against malevolent dalit patriarchy by re interpreting Phule’s and Ambedkar’s thoughts. Several autobiographies by dalit women writers, as well as confessional poems by dalit women poets (already discussed in this chapter) portray the mass of agonising experiences that make the foundation of dalit feminism. Karan Singh puts forth a useful observation:

Their [dalit women’s] hard life, their openness, their experiences of working outside home make them undergo different sets of feeling and yet the female sensibility peeps through their dalitness. The amnesia of their existence is a result of the limiting circumstances they are surrounded with.33

On the basis of above excerpts and analyses, we may say that dalit women’s commitment to their own feministic concerns is still dependent on themselves as it is a matter of realisation and active participation in issues like gender and sexuality. Smita Patil concludes in a skeptic fashion:
[...] Dalit women writers are failures at questioning Dalit women sexuality and not breaking this silence, even though exploitations and oppression of Dalit women in the larger society as well as within their own communities are much more. 34
Notes & References


2. Pradeep K. Sharma in *Dalit Politics and Literature*, P.2


7. See ‘Contents’ in Ram Ahuja’s *Social Problems in India*


9. Ibid. pp. 100-101


14. Lines 13-14, Ibid.

15. Lines 57-59, Ibid. P. 70

16. Lines 84-85, Ibid. P. 71


18. Lines 141-143, Ibid. P. 66

19. See Julia Lesage, ‘Women’s Rage’ in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture P. 420

20. Translated by Sylvie Martinez, S.K. Vimal Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot in An Anthology of Dalit Literature PP. 81-82

21. Lines 7-8, Ibid. P. 81

22. Lines 9-11, Ibid.

23. Line 14, Ibid.


26. Translated by S.K. Thorat and Eleanor Zelliot. An Anthology of Dalit Literature, PP. 30-31
27. Lines 18-20, Ibid. P. 31


30. Line 21, Ibid. P. 100

31. Lines 55-56, Ibid. P. 101

32. See Smita Patil’s ‘Feminist Consciousness in Dalit Literary Forms’ in *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History*, P. 137

33. See *Dalitism and Feminism* by Karan Singh. P. 67

34. See Smita Patil’s ‘Feminist Consciousness in Dalit Literary Forms’ in *Dalit Assertion in Society, Literature and History* P. 149
Chapter Four

Dalit theology: Religious Commitments
Dalit thoughts on theology and religion are well reflected in the works of dalit authors. Novels, autobiographies, poems written either by a dalit or by a non dalit writer reproduce unequivocally the inherent religious creed the author or the narrator was possessing. Different religions, even among the dalit writers, become prominent in the literary works, though they have one theme in common – dissent against dominant Hindu religion and culture. Nevertheless, a variety of religious concerns is seen at work in dalit writings. Manohar makes an useful observation:

The Dalit autobiographers have expressed their strong association with their religions. Bama is claiming to be a Christian in her Karukku, Sangati and Vendetta; Narendra Jadav in his Outcaste: A Memoir, Vasant Moon in his Growing Untouchable in India, Omprakash Valmiki claiming to be the Buddhist in his Jhoothan; whereas in the non-Dalit literary texts such as Raja Rao’s Kanthapura, Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable they have portrayed the Dalits as the typical followers of Hinduism whereas Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things depicts the Dalit family as the Christian.¹

But unlike the novels, their poetic counterparts are rather complex in nature. Very few of them indicate affinity to a particular religion, whereas most of them are multidimensional at heart with respect to religion and theology. They convey a commitment which emphasises on the need of putting an end to the injustice under the guise of religion. Apart from their relentless attacks on Hinduism, a large number of dalit poems are redolent of socio-centrism where a free and fair society comes to the front in the form of religious heresy.

However, any discussion regarding the religious commitments of dalit poetry must have a prior understanding of the religion it is based upon. In course of such discussion we’ll take into account different aspects of Hinduism, its genesis, expansion and purviews, its forms and constitutive parts and not to mention the constellation of various schools of criticism and
interpretation it invited. With a view to exploring dalit poems’ attitude toward Hinduism and its customs, it is always necessary to know in what ways this religion either contributes to or casts an inimical effect on the formulation of themes. It is no use in denying that dalit poems, as expressions of revolt and suffering, share a strong bond with Hinduism, mostly to its caste system. Hence, to have an authentic view of these poems’ rage against the religion one must study and analyse the Hindu canon with utmost importance. The aim of this chapter is to penetrate into significant aspects of Hindu religion and a deep study which will enable us to point out certain facts with respect to the hostility it proffers to dalit literary practices. To accomplish such a task it is never easy to sort out specific reasons both systematically or chronologically. Moreover, the fact that dalit poetry makes a stark stance against Hinduism being well known, one might fall prey to a plurality of methodical problems related to what should be the most appropriate approach that could be conducive to bring out the religious commitments of this genre of poetry. Another difficulty that comes in the way of a researcher in the form of a question is how far Hinduism is involved in the poems since they repeatedly refers to Hindu religious customs and rituals. In other words, dalit poems are never far away from religion even though they claim to be disdainful to it. Numerous references are made in those poems to Hindu religion and culture. A further question that pops up in this juncture is, are the dalit poets calling for a reformation in Hinduism by their continuous effort in picking out deceptions and follies of this religion? Or are the poems baked in the heat of revolutionary zeal demanding abolition of the caste system, thereby extinction of Hinduism as a religion?

There are people in our country, leaders as they are, support caste system. The infallibility of the Varnashrama and the supremacy of the scriptural precepts have been meticulously maintained due to various reasons. Groups and counter groups have emerged in support of respective caste interests eyeing mainly political benefits especially in the form of
fishing in troubled water. Till date, the caste issues have been kept alive though everybody is aware of its every knohow. It is not the place to judge whether this system is harmful or beneficial, but some useful points pertinent to this study may be touched upon. First, what is the religious significance of the caste system? We all know that untouchability is discouraged. But did the untouchables have any influence on religion? Have they ever accepted Hinduism as their religion? Secondly, the oppressed classes were denied of the religious rights. They had no considerable function to play in religious customs. Yet why are dalit poets so eager in maligning the religion? Many dalit authors have pronouncedly detached themselves from the precincts of Hinduism, then why they frame a religion of their own? Thirdly, there is no harm in marching forward to religious reformation. It has taken place everywhere in every religion. So what prevents the dalit poets and authors, except a very few, from putting forward an enthusiastic reformatory enterprise within the religion especially when they have categorically identified the discriminatory faculties of it?

On a whole dalit poetry has not come up with an explicit agenda on the religious ground except for a few revolutionary compositions imbued with grievance and angst. No substantial religious statement has been conspicuous in poems that are bordered upon religious issues. Hinduism to dalit poets is more a huddle of castes loosely built than a composite religion. Hence, they reckon Hindu religion as something that is devoid of meaningful religious consciousness. In our attempt to trace the relationship between Hinduism and dalit reaction, we must go back to the basic concepts of the religion. Whether Hinduism is a philosophy or a complete religion is a matter of great argument. Both the premises have specific logics to support their respective viewpoints. The beginning of Hinduism, as we know, is shrouded in mystery. It has always been claimed that this religion is ‘Sanatana’, having no prophet or introducer. To be more clear in this respect reference can be made to a comment by Gail Omvedt:
The term *Hindu* [italics in the original] is ancient, deriving from Sindhu, the river Indus. The Hindu religion as it is described today is said to have its roots in the Vedas, the poems of the Indo-Europeans whose incursions into the subcontinent took place many centuries after the earliest urban civilization in India.²

Scholars, to some extent, agree that the term ‘Hindu’ comes from the river Indus where the Aryans stepped into for the first time. But this specific term is nowhere mentioned in the Vedas and therefore it is inferred that the conception of the term ‘Hindu’ is a much later work in the Vedic Age. Some orthodox Hindu scholars claim this religion to be less dogmatic than other ones as it is not founded by any individual; it has evolved naturally. It never prescribes a set of morality, yet it stresses the importance of knowledge, action, devotion and control over body and mind.

It is well known that philosophy and theology went hand in hand in the history of Hinduism. The religious beliefs have always been nourished by transcendental philosophy in the separation of body and soul and the identification of the latter as eternal, indestructible part of the whole cosmic entity. Dr. Radhakrishnan has summed it up beautifully:

The Purusa Sukta speaks of such an eternal sacrifice which sustains man and the world. In it the whole world is pictured as one single being of incomparable vastness and immensity, animated by one spirit, including within its substance all forms of life.³

He also accepted that Indian religion has been moulded in human terms which is not found in western religions. A cordial harmony between God and man has ever been present in the religion, thereby ‘naturalism and anthropomorphism seem to be the first stages of the Vedic religion.’⁴ One may add to this the theory of rebirth and karma which function ceaselessly. It must be remembered that the rise of Jainism and Buddhism was a great threat to the Vedic
religion which at that period began to be determined by the thoughts and beliefs of the Brahmins. This threat led to the composition of smritis, epics and the Gita. The aim of these works was to concretise the hitherto unpalpable doctrines of philosophy into perceptible religious codes of conduct. It was in that period the strong impasse of caste system came into being in a more formidable and stringent manner. In reality, there had been two ideas running parallel in Hinduism – the philosophies taught in the Upanishads and the evil practice of the caste system along with its rigid, unalterable regulations on untouchability. This trend continued for more than a thousand years and experienced a further consolidation in the British colonial period.

It has been a matter of long controversy whether Hinduism preserves the practice of untouchability on social or religious perspective. It is not also clear how religious discrimination became part of day to day life though we must admit that the Indian thought have always been spiritual. Therefore, it might be a cause that untouchability wriggled in to civil code of conduct under the veil of spiritual prescription. Whatever be the reason, this custom has been consciously maintained in different ages owing to different purposes. In the Vedic Age, it was necessary for the Brahmans to maintain social supremacy. In the later ages rulers of various religious creeds deliberately kept it alive to do away with the possibility of a unified revolt. In more recent ages the British rulers carefully indulged in the custom for the same purpose. During the colonial rule, the Hindu elites were seen to be highly pro-active in preserving Hindutva and in the process extendind support for this evil custom. While commenting on the condition of Hindu leaders in the 1930s Omvedt notes:

What the ‘construction of Hinduism’ successfully accomplished was to establish Hinduism as a taken for granted religion of the ‘majority’ linked to the backward peasant core of a pre-industrial society. In this context Gandhi identified with it, and with the peasantry as he understood it; Nehru saw both as backward and inferior. Both
accepted the brahminic core of Hinduism and the need for a paternalistic enlightened leadership.\(^5\)

Before moving further in the study of a multitude of interpretations for Hinduism, an in depth discussion would be worthwhile on the history of the caste system and its subsequent trajectory to untouchability. In very simple words ‘caste’ stands for ‘jati’ in India which is related to one’s birth. The word caste shares its etymological bond with Spanish and Portuguese ‘casta’ or Latin ‘Castus’ which seem to have been used in the sense of race though in English and French minds the words bore the idea of tribe.\(^6\) Louis Dumont, while devising a decisive definition of caste took help of quite a few points of view that changed over different time periods, though sometimes overlapping each other. Caste divisions have been analysed in terms of religion, division of labour, status group, social stratification, racial differences, geographical distribution and so on.\(^7\) He goes on to comment that every actual caste system was more or less limited to a definite geographical area. In an unambiguous style, he opines that the whole structure of caste is based on difference, a ‘fundamental opposition’ resulting from the difference between the pure and the impure though there are other criteria of such distinction in the form of social gradation and rules strengthening the separation. Yet division of labour was considered primary because purity or impurity apparently existed in the profession.\(^8\)

Now, the issue of purity and impurity needs special attention. Whether they emerged on the ground of hygienic concern or they are permanent in nature is matter of debate. It has been noticed that impurity is attached to professions like washing clothes after childbirth or menstruation or a barber’s handling of impurity after someone’s death. It may occur to mind that these impurities are temporary and they share their common root with the unhygienic premises. But in actuality, tags of impurity on some profession have been adhered not for the cause of hygiene, but on the presumptions of religious notion. Unfortunately change of this
structure was strictly prohibited and if attempted, it readily invited excommunication. Slokas in the Gita sanctify obedience to one’s profession advising not to change it in any case. Customs and practices were made permanent by religious texts where many a type of impurity is elaborated. Gradually, under the control of Brahminism several other types of profaneness made their way to the list of impurity. In Omprapaks Balmiki’s *Jhoothan*, as already discussed in previous chapters, we come across plenty of such tasks performed by the untouchables that required dingy engagements. Hence, more than economic and political reasons, religion is responsible in making distinctions. One important fact must be mentioned in this regard that the Varna system and casteism are not the same, though the terms are frequently used interchangeably. They have a slight difference between themselves. Whereas caste is fundamentally based on purity and impurity, the Varna custom is a little more complex in construction consisting of two specific divisions – on one hand the group of Brahmin, Khsatriya and Vaishya, on the other hand, the Sudras. Thus the Varna system is based on hierarchy where the untouchables were relegated outside the denomination. In course of this study, we shall attempt to define caste and untouchability on the basis of views and conceptions of different scholars and researchers. With a view to problematising the complications the following observation of Dumont can be useful:

> The caste, unified from outside, is divided within. More generally, a particular caste is a complex group, a successive inclusion of groups of diverse orders or levels, in which different functions (Profession, endogamy etc.) are attached to different levels. Finally, far more than a ‘group’ in the ordinary sense, the caste is a state of mind, a state of mind which is expressed by the emergence, in various situations, of groups of various orders generally called ‘castes’.

Thus it may be said that besides being a religious construct, caste stretches its realm into human psyche, obviously getting assistance from the former.
The hierarchy of caste is strongly based on religion. The difference between the pure and the impure has a strong religious basis which enjoyed undisrupted support from literary texts. This dependence on religion has made the relationship between the Varna and the caste complicated in nature. It has been pointed out that the caste divisions emerge from concepts of purity and impurity which was sternly handed down from generation to generation. No alteration of norms was ever possible in such rigid line up. This is where the system of caste bears a characteristic dissimilarity from the convention of Varna which is conceptually free from the laws of heredity. Hence, it may be noted that caste system represented the exterior of the theologically built foundation of Varna. But it must also be mentioned that the lawgivers and compilers of religious norms must have conceived a watertight compartmentalisation. That is why political power has always been kept subordinated to religious guidelines, so a king, in terms of status, remains under a Brahmin. The classical authors have consciously endeavoured to keep religious hypotheses triumphant over politico-economic concern thus making the situation favourable for the subsequent caste categories. We shall discuss the salient components and basic rituals of caste based rules.

In view of the above, we may cast a glance at the tradition of marriage as an agent of religious dominance. In a Hindu society marriage plays a very important role and it is by this convention that religion perpetuates its relevance. In order to keep ‘purity’ intact, marriage outside the group was forbidden. On a whole it is religion that reigned supreme. Notes Dumont:

What is before us so far is a religious organisation of society, which shapes it according to the universal order and submits temporal power to the rule of religion. There is no transcendent sanction: only the notion of thid very order, conformity with which takes on the value of a duty, dharma [italics in the original]. This has often been recognized as the core of the religion of the Hindu living in the world.10
On the basis of the above discussion, for the sake of clarity and brevity, we may progress to shape a definition of the caste system on the religious context. So far it has been noted that caste is a closed group, hereditary in nature and associated with rigid, specific occupational norms guarded by religion. We’ve had a look at the source of castes owing to cultural aspects in earlier chapters, but informatively, we may conclude that the members of a particular class were not allowed to marry outside. On that logic, caste appears as an unchangeable group that has a particular profession attached to it which was transferred by a generation to the next one. This idea may lead us to think that caste is nothing but a social group based on occupation. But it will turn out to be an oversimplifying propensity if we term the castes with different professions like priesthood, soldiery, merchandise etc. But it is too far intricate to be put to such specific categories. Historians, to some extent, agree that the caste system might have had something to do with ancient tribalism found in the subcontinent. It has also been argued that the Dravidian inhabitants of this country having formed a civilised society, had a section of them left outside the mainstream. The outcasts continued their savage life thereby sowing the seed of Varna based discrimination which was further cemented by the Vedic settlement. The era brought out some definite set of formulas that directed itself to a society distinctly based upon certain groups showing the way to landowning and serfdom. The society was conspicuously divided between two sections – the privileged and the underprivileged castes. It goes without saying that Brahmins always topped the list while the Sudras were allotted the permanent nadir.

So far we’ve been reflecting on the system of caste with regard to its characteristics and origin. It has now provided us with a scope to dive into the question of untouchability, an issue immensely pertinent to the whole discussion. In short, the practice of untouchability closely follows the footsteps of caste division that segregated a large cluster of people from the purview of four Varnas. We’ve already thrown light on the concepts of purity and
impurity. Now, we’ll concentrate upon the factor of racial diversity and religious theory of pollution. So far as the racial discrimination is concerned, Naronakar’s remark is worth considering:

The practice of untouchability may as well be attributed to the racial discrimination. At the beginning stage of the Hindu culture the very use of the term *Varna* [italics in the original] for caste system indicates that it was based on racial considerations. Racial groups with their varying natural complexion did not permit the mixture of various racial groups.¹¹

Truly, marrying outside one’s group was retributed by excommunication and other alike punishments. Children resulting from such marriages, too, fell onto the range of relegation and thereby untouchability firmed its roots. In terms of permanent impurity, it’s been a tradition to inflict perpetual isolation on some tribes who are entrusted with supposedly menial occupation and have to live outside the city or village. These people are mostly tribal in origin who are considered ‘polluting’. The extent of untouchability is narrated thus:

The practice of untouchability was observed in respect of basic requirements of life like water, food, air [italics in the original] which were considered to be very effective means of defilement.¹²

The purpose of this chapter is to map and analyse the role of religion behind the formation of dalits and their consciousness. Keeping this in mind the following section will be restricted within the limits of dalit reaction towards religious hostility with special reference to activists like Phule and Ambedkar who shaped dalit religious thoughts. Study will also be carried out on a parallel theology that nowadays dalits are endeavouring to form. The role of Christian liberation theology on dalit religious consciousness will also be taken into consideration as it is at present being adopted by activists. It must me mentioned here
that individual study of Hindu religious texts has been consciously omitted for them to be considered on their cultural merit. Apart from religion, these compositions share great cultural importance and they will be looked at from the cultural viewpoint along with the dalits’ attitude to them. As of now, we’ll try to develop a knowledge of the works of dalit activists named earlier and thereby proceed to realise their views and visions.

Phule (1827-1890) attacked Hinduism at every point, challenging its legitimacy and questioning its existence. What is striking in his works is his refusal to even recognize ‘Hinduism’ as such: to him it is not a legitimate religion but superstition, a bag of tricks, a weapon of domination.13

Such is the attitude of Mahatma Phule to Hinduism. His voice was one of the first ones that was heard in the nineteenth century when the practice of untouchability along with casteism was purposively fuelled by British colonisers. Phule pioneered the dalit urges for emancipation from the clutches of Brahminism. His attack was laid upon the orthodox elite classes of Hinduism dominated by a few educated Brahmins who founded organisations like Prarthana Samaj, Brahma Samaj etc. Phule’s contribution towards abolition of caste system can be divided in the following order. First, he questioned the rigid caste system and showed revolutionary intents against it. He spoke for equality of the untouchables and identified the Hindu reformatory activities as pretentious, fraudulent attempts to cheat the lower castes. Secondly, he, like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar of Bengal, realised the need for women’s education. He appointed his wife as a teacher in his own school founded in 1948.14 (Abedi, 33). He continued to establish more schools for girls. Thirdly, he postulated his anti-caste view in his literary expressions like poems, plays and prose works.

In one of the ballads composed by him, he described vividly the fraudulent practices resorted to by the Brahmin officials in the Public Works Department.15
Finally, he publicly denounced the Varna custom and declared his intention to dine with people belonging to all castes. Thus Phule effectively attacked the foundation of the institution of untouchability and thereby deserves immense relevance in dalit studies. His diagnosis of the basic problems was accurate which propelled him and his followers to attack praxis Hinduism on the ground of religion. He is rightly considered as a monumental figure fighting uncompromisingly in the cause of the dalits.

It’ll need a furthermore acute study of another epoch making figure behind every type of dalit consciousness – B.R. Ambedkar. He continued from the point where Phule had ended and not only did he wrote extensively on all possible aspects of untouchability, but also set up solid foundation for dalit theology. His formulation of such parallel theology may be presented in a twofold way. First, his critique of Hinduism and second, his showing way to religious equality by a possible inclination to Buddhism and a creation of socialist outlook within the realm of religion. We’ll furnish a few of his key remarks on Hinduism and try to assess his religious notion and vision.

Let’s start with his observation on the Gita. This colossal work has been given a divine status only comparable to the Bible, the Koran and alike sacred books belonging to other religions. Being a part of an epic this composition has achieved a phenomenal place in disciplines such as religion, metaphysics, spirituality, epistemology and philosophy. Ambedkar begins his caustic criticism by denying the Gita the prestige of being neither a religious book nor a philosophical compilation:

*Bhagvad Gita* is neither a book of religion nor a treatise on philosophy. What the *Bhagvad Gita* does is to defend certain dogmas of religion on philosophic ground. […] It uses philosophy to defend religion.16

He adds further:
Another dogma to which the Bhagavad Gita comes forward to offer a philosophic defence is the Chaturvarnya. The Bhagavad Gita, no doubt, mentions that the chaturvarnya is created by God and therefore sacrosanct. But it does not make its validity dependent on it. It offers a philosophic basis to the theory of chaturvarnya by linking it to the theory of innate, inborn qualities in men. The fixing of the Varna of man is not an arbitrary act says the Bhagavad Gita. But it is fixed according to his innate, inborn qualities.17

Thus Ambedkar strips the Gita off its divine garb and puts it to the type of a propaganda devoted to perpetuate inequality among men. His critique of the book, as clear from the above excerpts, is based on two arguments. First, he discards the religious and philosophical significance of it. Second, he identifies the seed of casteism in the book which enumerates inequality as something which is innate and controlled by a divine disposition.

Further, in the same essay he puts forward a very appropriate question and provides the answer himself:

Why did the Bhagavad Gita feel it necessary to defend the dogmas of counter revolution? To my mind the answer is very clear. It was to save them [the Hindus] from the attack of Buddhism that the Bhagavad Gita came into being.18

Ambedkar divided the Hindu texts into two major categories on the basis of the time of composition. He placed the Gita in the post-Buddhist era while the Vedas fall in the group of pre-Buddhist age. According to him, it was necessary for the Brahmins to keep Buddhism at bay. Therefore the Gita was composed with a view to boost Hindu religious ideologies for it to be potent enough to combat the increasing influence of Hinduism.

His attitude to Hindu gods and goddesses is expressed in the following sarcastic remark:
If Krishna were to appear as a lawyer acting for a client who is being tried for murder and pleaded the defence set out by him in the Bhagvad Gita there is not the slightest doubt that he would be sent to the lunatic asylum.\textsuperscript{19}

Examples are many in which Ambedkar made scholastic attempts to negate Hinduism as a philosophic religion. In his ‘Annihilation of Caste’ he claims:

Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. […] There is no Hindu consciousness of kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of his caste.\textsuperscript{20}

Following are a set of questions he makes in his ‘Conversion’. One or two would suffice to present his view:

Does it[Hinduism] teach the Hindus that the Untouchables are their kindred? Does it say to the Hindus it is a sin to treat the Untouchables as being neither man nor beast? Does it tell the Hindus to be righteous to the Untouchables?\textsuperscript{21}

The questions share a common spirit – the spirit of dissent. Subsequently Ambedkar resorted to Buddhism. He supported a religion which keeps harmony with reason and keeps up some basic tenets like liberty, equality and fraternity. He denounced Hinduism for it being a multitude of commands and prohibitions by prescribing different moral laws for different classes and in the process brings about inequality and injustice.

The quest for liberty, equality and fraternity in religion has channeled dalit religious commitments to the fundamental principles of liberation theology which proliferated in, though not restricted within, Latin America. Liberation theology, having its root in Christianity does not entirely entail caste issues but dalit theology should be in dialogue with it.\textsuperscript{22} This claim has a few reasons. It has already been established that dalit theology is a
reprisal against Hinduism. In its search for social justice dalit theology tends to orient itself towards Indian Christianity, but eventually it got disillusioned with the unsympathetic face of Indian Christian elites. That is why dalit version of theology is in search for a congenial theological concept that will not only provide it with religious equality but will also enact and ensure social justice. This is where dalit thoughts come close to liberation theology. Once we go through a few central concepts of the theology of liberation, we can make out why and how dalit religious consciousness might find an aide in that.

To begin with, liberation theology aims at liberation. Banal as the introduction is, it is somewhat point blank, because liberation theology in its every aspect includes the spirit of active movement against social oppression and marginalisation, setting a step forward to liberation in every sense of the word. This movement within Christianity found a fertile soil in Latin American nations especially tagged as third world countries. Nowadays this theology has become a very broad term which engulfs theories and praxes related to sociology, class struggle, oppression, economics, politics and cultural issues. It is clear that liberation theology is not confined within mere theology; rather, it utilises different sociological and political theories a stools in combination with gospels. Gustavo Gutierrez in his *A Theology of Liberation* has made a pioneering study of this movement. Based on his observations, we may arrange a few key ideas of it in the following way:

i) Liberation theology makes use of gospels in a newer way. It demands that they should benefit the changed human situations. Gospels should be remodeled with a doublefold commitment – to God and to the people.

ii) This movement attempts to adopt an eclectic outlook. It gathers fruitful thoughts from non European and non North American countries. It develops its organs from Islamic and Jewish
sources as well. Liberation theology is related to life and faith of the people who are becoming aware of oppression and neglect.

iii) This theology deals with poverty. The genesis of its founding thoughts exists in the compelling and aggressive zeal on the part of the poor whose suffering and optimism have always been overlooked. It is an expressive aspiration. It leads the poor to shape out their own faith.

iv) Liberation theology includes racial and cultural issues and gives specific attention to feminism.

v) Commitment to the poor, being an essential component of liberation theology runs beyond the realms of social analysis, human compassion. It finally arrives at the faith on God. Liberation theology in this respect, puts emphasis both on theocentrism and anthropocentrism.

vi) On the religious perspective, it emphasises on re-explanation, reinterpretation and re-orientation of the Bible. It seeks a comradeship in God who will act as the Liberator.

vii) Finally, liberation theology is not a way of revolt. It is a revised and renewed hope for justice and equality.23

However for a characteristic definition we can’t help depending on Gutierrez himself:

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle which the exploited social classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation the possibility of
a more human and dignified life, the creation of a new humankind – all pass through this struggle.\(^\text{24}\)

Strikingly, dalit poetic commitment falls in place with every word spoken above. The phrase ‘commitment to abolish injustice’ permeates each single specimen of dalit poems written on religious perspective. Again, ‘active, effective participation’ is also pledged by poets and activists. It is no wonder that a large section of dalit poems has religion either directly or indirectly as central motif bearing strong allegiance with above postulation. Keeping that in mind we can begin with ‘Amen’\(^\text{25}\) by Prakashchandra Karandikar. This poem sets the motion with an effortless smoothness. It maintains an ironic composure throughout. In a dramatic setting it places God as the protagonist who lives affluently in an upper class atmosphere. The demotion of God as an upper class, insensitive man is the crux of the poem which continues to depict His living manners in terms of human attributes. The activity of His resembles that of a man, a man who is well to do and who casts at cursory glance at the ongoing turmoils around him. He does not feel alarmed as he himself is safe and secure in his ‘living room, small and handsome’\(^\text{26}\) In an absolute pachydermatous manner, he sets his eyes on

A television set

That declares

Nothing is too expensive for pleasure\(^\text{27}\)

These lines refer to the commodified nature of society and claim God’s participation in that. What impresses us is the random collection of events that heightens at a time but ends in an anti climactic, sardonic note:

Earthquake in Guatemala, disaster in Chansala
Thousands dead. A hundred and fifty beggars arrested

Inhuman rape on Harijan woman

Jobless youth, depressed, commits suicide

Children sold off

For subsistence.

And much, much more, Sundry, Trivial.²⁸

A juxtaposition of social problems is noticeable and these problems bring religion and society very near, holding the former responsible for troubles in the latter. The poet does not limit his thoughts within a particular issue like caste discrimination or women abuse. His approach to the social problems is all inclusive. That is why rape on a woman is placed side by side on youth committing suicide. The most striking expression comes thus: ‘And much, much more, Sundry. Trivial’. This line at once is resonant of bathos and irony. The ease found on the part of the onlooker, i.e. God, is presented through a latent sarcastic mode.

Dalit poems end with brilliant thought provoking conclusions. Precise expression, though not very poetic, yet sufficiently moving characterises almost every poem. ‘Amen’ is not an exception. The final tercet is self-explanatory and excels in shocking inertia.

God’s in His Heaven

All’s right with the world

Amen!²⁹

Here, the poet’s attitude to God is conspicuous. He does not target any particular religion, though the mention of a hanging figurine of Lord Ganesh reminds us of Hinduism. But, on a
whole, his reference is to a somewhat secular deity. What comes prominently in a nutshell is insensitive and compassionlessness of a God who behaves like an upper class individual and feels comfortable even with most inhuman occurrences across the word. The final word ‘Amen’ associated with an exclamatory note, perhaps, stamps an approval of the inequality and injustice.

‘Under Dadar Bridge’\textsuperscript{30} by Prakash Jadhav, though, not entirely based on religion, but shows an outcast’s disgust at it. A child, hailing from the underbelly of the society brings out his inquisition on his identity, first of all, the religious one:

Hey, Ma, tell me my religion, who am I?

What am I?\textsuperscript{31}

His mother’s reply comes out readily:

You are not a Hindu or a Muslim!

You are an abandoned spark of the World’s lusty fires\textsuperscript{32}

Both the religions have washed their hands off and the child remains unaccommodated since the society does not approve of a bastard child. Religion is claimed to have an all encompassing reach, yet its reach seems short in this occasion.

It is necessary to have a view of dalit Buddhist orientation. They embrace Buddhism due to their aggravating disenchantment of Hinduism. In ‘Tathagata:One,’\textsuperscript{33} we find an invocation to the Buddha. With a view to transmigrating from the deplorable living condition, the poem behaves as an appeal to the Tathagata (thus comes one, thus gone one). It opts for a transcendence and surrender to Him: ‘Take me within your fold, away from this darkness’\textsuperscript{34}
Gautam 92

(line 12, Dangle). The illuminating character of the Buddha has been approached here which introduces enlightenment to one’s soul. Such transformation has been put in the plea in the end:

So transmigrate into me from that picture

in flesh and blood, into my effusive being.35

This pray is given another dimension in the very next poem by the same poet. It is ‘Tathagata:Two’ in the compilation. This poem is directed against the stereotypification and idolatry of religion. With a grievance at heart, the poet prays:

Pardon the slaves of fetishism

Who created idols in your name and festivals.36

Finally, Hindu metaphysics is nowhere else so crystallised than in the poem ‘One Day I Cursed that Motherfucker God’37 by Keshav Meshram. His words are reckless; it doesn’t care for refinement to bring out his own attitude to the Hindu gods. The poet has essential knowledge of Indian mythologies. He is also aware of the epithets that are popularly used to describe God – ‘Indescribable, Qualityless, Formless Juggernaut’38. The English translation of the original words is not ideal, though sufficient in communicating the sense. His blasphemy receives caustic objection from the neighbourhood – ‘Shame on you for trying to catch his dharma-hood/ in a noose of words’39.

The effect of ‘another good hot curse’40 stirs the religious institutions. The upper castes always maintain a symbiotic liaison with religion; erudition, as the poet observes, is kindling religious beliefs. Instead of carrying out fundamental researches on the unanswered questions, they toil to find ‘what makes man angry’. The supremacy of God is thereby subtly protected. Whether God serves the purpose of the untouchables, whether He is benevolent to
the poor – all these seminal questions are discouraged to be raised. The ‘scholars began doing research’ on human psychology for such strong disbelief. A clear distinction is drawn between those who think and those who are thought about. The scholars are never out of snugness, nor do they come to probe the untouchables’ sufferings; how can knowledge of a few information and some cliché theories facilitate them adequately to soothe the pent up grievance of the dalits. The experts are plainly described, but these flat words acquire great sharpness –

They sat in their big room fragrant with incense
their bellies full of food
and debated.

A recurrence of consecutive curses occurs in vehement desperation. God never joins hand with the untouchables, He is of no use to them. He is described as all-kindness but His kindness does not minimise their torment. God is worshipped as the destroyer of every evil, but his destructive abilities seem powerless for abolishing the injustice unleashed on the dalits. The poet wishes Him to be accountable, God is now facing a heated session of cross-examination –

Would you chop a whole cart of wood
for a single piece of bread?
Would you wipe the sweat from your bony body
with your mother’s ragged sari?
Would you wear out your brothers and sisters
for your father’s fix?
Would you work as a pimp
to keep him in booze?\textsuperscript{43}

These things are a common happening for the dalits. God seems to be at the sole discretion of those who are powerful, influential, wealthy and persecuting. Hence, the poet decides to pay Him back in His own coin, by ricocheting the treatment he gets from Him. The poem is concluded with a reflection on God’s inability to wipe out evil – ‘You could never do such things’\textsuperscript{44}. As the reason Meshram points to His lineage. God does not have to bear the yoke of social castaway. He has not been given birth by a dalit mother who suffers humiliation, injustice and oppression from the society. He won’t realise their struggle and that is why the poet finds no reason for an apology; he confirms his deed and registers another shade of fervency in the final line – ‘One day I cursed that mother-fucking God.’
Notes and References

1. D. Murali Manohar in *Dalits and their Religion(s)*, P. 146

2. See Gail Omvedt in *Dalit Visions*, P. 7

3. S. Radhakrishnan in *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, P. 41

4. Ibid. P. 74

5. Gail Omvedt in *Dalit Visions*, p. 15


7. See Chapter 1, Ibid. PP. 21-32

8. Ibid. P. 43

9. Ibid. P. 34

10. Ibid. P. 273

11. A. R. Naronakar in *Untouchability and Caste System in India*, P. 83

12. Ibid. P. 86


14. Zakir Abedi in *Contemporary Dalit Literature*, P. 33

15. Ibid. P. 35


17. Ibid. P. 194
18. Ibid. P. 196

19. Ibid. P. 197

20. Ibid. P. 267

21. Ibid. 228

22. Eva-Maria Hardtmann in *The Dalit Movement in India*, P. 108

23. See Gustavo Gutierrez’s introductions in *A Theology of Liberation*. PP. xiii-xlvi

24. Ibid. P. 174


26. Line 6, Ibid. P. 48

27. Lines 15-17, Ibid.

28. Lines 22-28, Ibid.

29. Lines 33-35, Ibid. P. 49


31. Lines 19-20, Ibid. P. 56

32. Lines 21-23, Ibid.


34. Line 12, Ibid. P. 29
35. Lines 19-20, Ibid.

36. Lines 17-18, Ibid. P. 30


38. Line 7, Ibid. P. 117

39. Lines 8-9, Ibid.

40. Line 10, Ibid.

41. Line 12, Ibid.

42. Lines 14-16, Ibid.

43. Lines 21-28, Ibid. 118

44. Line 30, Ibid.
Chapter Five

Political Commitments in Dalit Poetry
Examples are plenty in number where classical poetry based itself on political perspectives. It has often taken the form of either allegory or satire or both in many cases. Political literary practices in England came into existence with the rise of political consciousness in the continent, though its seed had been sown by the Greek masters like Plato and Aristotle. It has been observed that contemporary regimes had profound impact on the writings of that age. Poets were made to praise, sometimes forcibly, a despotic ruler. They had to keep an eye on the readers’ choice and produce at par literary works. The literary schools of new historicism and cultural materialism have always emphasised that the literary artist has always been under influence of a particular horizon that shaped their writings. Political forms have always been important to construct the ‘horizon’ which were both directly and indirectly under the rule of typical regimes. A marked distinction has been drawn by Marx who propounded on the poets’ service to a class society, whereas most of the critics accept that political ambience, in a broader implication of the word ‘politics’ is a major impetus behind poetry written till date. However, this proposition does not mean that each piece of poetry must necessarily incorporate political subject matter, but it must be kept in mind that man is a political animal and a poet is no different. Now, one or two words are worth consideration regarding the analytical perspectives of new historicism and cultural materialism. Both these schools, the former in America and the latter in Europe hold somewhat similar attitude to literary texts. Though primarily reading texts in association of historical evidences of the age is the common practice, yet there are a few other significant features that characterise them both. The term new historicism was coined by Stephen Greenblatt and subsequently it gained popularity among critics, though often critiqued due to some incidental paradoxes within it that most prominently come out of a greater importance imposed upon the ‘non-literary’ canon though this school of criticism claims itself to be literary in nature. Yet, critics conforming to new historicist rules agree that the political
background needs to be studied very closely for better understanding of texts. This political primacy continues in cultural materialism as well which, a step further, looks for political commitment alongside politico-historical context of literary excerpts. Peter Barry notes:

The British critic Graham Holderness describes cultural materialism as ‘a politicised form of historiography’. We can explain this as meaning the study of historical material (which includes literary texts) within a politicised framework, this framework including the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape.¹

From the above, it may well be surmised that the phrase ‘politicised framework’ clearly refers to its connection with Marxist ideological thoughts that largely made way for political concerns to be considered it terms of commitment to be discovered in literary texts.

In order to prove this point, amongst a variety of ready examples we may make a casual reference to the great Shakespearean tragedies. Hamlet had been the prince of Denmark whereas Macbeth’s tyranny had a lot to do with the politics of Scotland. Both of the protagonists’ lives were intermingled with the essential political scenario of the respective nations. Again, Absalom and Achitophel is more explicit in its approach with regard to politics. It satirises the question of succession after the regime of Charles II centered upon the conflict between Whigs and Tories. The saire was intentionally crafted by Dryden to secure conviction of Shaftesbury who was under trial at that period. This work survived through ages as an exponent of literary works dedicated to politics, especially conceived as the question of political power. Some of the nineteenth century novels hosted not so prominent political indication where private affairs and domestic concerns prevail. Yet, Marxist critics claim to have found traits of bourgeois democratic propaganda in them. Pradeep K. Sharma rises up to the situation:
the concept of politics has comprehensive meaning and processes complex nature
with wide scope. It includes, on the one hand, the study of its theoretical formulations and
narratives whereas on the other, it critically scrutinises that applied and empirical factors
affecting the very nature of body politic. [...] A politically conscious person, however fluid in
color, would possess a sense of political activity, political process and political power.  

Sharma here has brought out the tripartite function of political thought occurring to a
conscious person. Political activity may be defined as a communication made between human
beings as members of social associations which get extended to political process that reaches
its climax in the form of political power. This is of particular importance in the sphere of
subalternity. Writes Sharma:

[...] the most powerful component of political consciousness becomes political
participation and expression. [...] Political participation of a community is guided by
objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership and organisation and incorporates both
institutionalised and non-institutionalised individual and collective actions initiated
and adopted by a community to achieve desired goals.  

It is characteristic of subaltern literature to have close bond with political ideology. It
falls under the purview of cultural materialism as study of literary texts within a politicised
framework is more commonly known by the term. As a principal thought in this practice,
literary texts are not studied in isolation from the political institutions in a society. It
emphasises that social changes have it necessary impact on its every aspect, including
literature and culture. If viewed more closely, cultural materialists consider political economy
as a regulating factor behind production, exchange and consumption between socio-cultural
systems. This political economy is constituted by political organisations, factions, division of
labour, caste, class and other institutions. Once again, they are not far from a superstructural
basis that often determines different forms of art and literature. When theoretically considered, cultural materialism seeks to establish relationship between structure, infrastructure and superstructure in a society. A continued bond with the study of culture has always been kept up in this respect. The evolution of culture has to be assessed in order to a better understanding of the link between culture and politics. It would suffice to state that culture portrays the conscious expression of a particular mode of production. A set of ideologies is always functional behind literary expressions. The formulation of ideological concept has a long ancestry. Eagleton defines:

Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole.\(^4\)

The formulation of ideology has experienced a number of interpretations. We’ll constrict this discussion within the range of Marxism. Hence we’ll examine the concept from the viewpoint of Marx himself and then from the additions and Interpolations of his followers. It is easy to notice that the term does not appear directly in the writings of Marx, yet it has undergone a number of modifications in course of time. To begin with the concept of ideology Larrain notes:

Two strands of previous critical philosophical thought directly influence Marx’s and Engels’ concept of ideology: on the one hand the critique of religion developed by French materialism and by Feuerbach, and on the other, the critique of traditional epistemology and the revaluation of the subject’s activity carried out by the German philosophy of consciousness and especially by Hegel.\(^5\)

Marx pointed out that German philosophers overlooked their surrounding while constructing their theories. An extraneous emphasis was incurred on the indispensability of religion and
epistemology. Hence German ideology had been theocentric in nature that had little space for man as a crucial factor. He added that all other disciplines like metaphysics, politics, judiciary, morality etc. came to be considered as offshoots of this religious understanding.\(^6\) He remarks wonderfully:

The dominance of religion was presupposed. Gradually every dominant relationship was declared to be a religious relationship and transformed into a cult, a cult of law, a cult of the state etc. It was throughout merely a question of dogmas and belief in dogmas.\(^7\)

This conclusion of Marx opened the premises for the materialistic understanding of history as well as consciousness and ideology. It was Marx who, for the first time, put man in the central position and his ability to produce his means of subsistence has been identified as the prime factor behind his relation with nature. Material activities of men determine the production of ideas, conceptions and consciousness. Material behaviour reflects itself in the form of conceiving, thinking, politics, religion, law, morality and other disciplines. His striking conclusion makes way for a secular understanding:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. [...] It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.\(^8\)

This phenomenal claim turned every existing ideology upside down. His specific study on the ever changing structures of society gave out some insightful comments upon the origin and development of ideology. He speaks specifically about the emergence of ideology as a social product explored and manipulated by the ruling class irrespective of age, nation and community.
The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. 9

He adds further:

Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an historical epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers and producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. 10

In the light of the above excerpts, the idea that comes to our view regarding ideology is related to dominance over human intellectuality. Ideology, as per Marx, has always been determined by the ruling class (comparable to Indian upper caste people), who tend to maintain distance from the working people (may be thought as social outcasts in the Indian context) by means of providing with an illusory ideological reality, sometimes also termed as ‘false consciousness’. However, the term is not always sufficient to bring out the quality and extent of distortion caused by the ruling classes. Yet, Marx’s analysis of ideology always refers to the distortion related to the suppression of a contrasting reality, thereby always putting forth a negative connotation. Arguments have been carried out by the followers of Marx with regard to the validity of the negative dimension of ideology. Engels in his letter to F. Mehring 11 lays emphasis on the derivation of political, juridical and other ideological notions. In order to judge the scope and range of the actions taking place on the backdrop of basic economic facts, he claims –
[...] in so doing we neglected the formal side – the ways and means by which these notions etc come about.\textsuperscript{12}

The ideas and interpretations regarding ideology, as stated earlier, have taken many turns during later ages. In his work ‘Ideology and False Consciousness’ Joseph McCarney argues that Marx did never use the term ‘false consciousness’ in his writings on ideology. Nor did he attempt to craft a wholesome definition of the term. In his preface to \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Plotical Economy} Marx mentioned that:

In studying such transformations [of the superstructure] it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.\textsuperscript{13}

Here we find an invitation to be associated with the ‘social conflict’ by becoming conscious of it. Hence ideology here appeals to the cognitive domain not in terms of a dearth, but in association with accomplishment. Concludes McCarney:

[...] for Marx, ideology is conceptually compatible with both theoretical comprehension and incomprehension. This is to suggest that ideology is not, for him, an epistemological category of any kind. In more concrete terms, he is, it may be said, indifferent to questions of truth status in deciding to designate items as ‘ideological’\textsuperscript{14}

The conception of ideology came to a striking alteration with the theoretical exegeses of Lenin. He was interested in the realm of politics and for him ideology is synonymous with political consciousness related to the interests of different classes. According to him ideology is not the distortion which hides real contradictions, but it is a fundamental concept linked to
the political consciousness of classes. While writing on Machiavelli’s *The Prince* Gramsci identified religion as the generalised ideology of the former time. He asserts that a series of tradition which refers to a choice and a determinate goal is the basis for an ideology to turn up. In the following chapter titled ‘The Study of Philosophy’ he connects general consent to ideology which functions as a set of commonsensical thoughts though in actuality they are purposefully forged to benefit a specific social class. Hence, to Gramsci, ideology appears not as confronting philosophical or intellectual paradigms but something uncritical or unconscious in nature that grows out of ‘common sense’.

To conclude, we must look at the discussion Williams presents in his path breaking work *Marxism and Literature*. He identified three specific tendencies in the hermeneutic studies of ideology. According to him its concept has extended itself beyond Marxism and made itself as ‘a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group’. On the other hand, he points to the Napoleonic understanding of the term which gives out an implication towards ideas which contribute to liberation and destruction according to point of view. Interestingly, Williams leaves the third tendency open and un concluded with a view to heighten the absence of a general agreement in the realms of culture and language. Hence he places the proposition unanswered:

But it is then an open question whether ‘ideology’ and ‘ideological’, with their senses of ‘ideas’ and ‘theories’ or even their senses of a ‘system’ of beliefs or of meanings and values, are sufficiently precise and practicable terms for so far-reaching and radical a definition

To relate the origin and application of ideology, once again at this point, we go back to Gramsci for finding a linking thread. The relation between subalternity and ideology and one’s influence on the other are of importance for the ongoing study of the political
commitment of subaltern literary production. Gramsci was enthusiastic in combining ideology with a philosophy of praxis. In his attempt to show a close connection between the two he refers to the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and argues that the ideological acquaintance of hegemony shares an epistemological base. Thus he opines:

The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge.\(^{22}\)

In view of the above discussion it may be said that the journey of ideology which began as a distortion of reality purposefully made to safeguard the interests of a particular class, went forward to a general understanding of an effortless production of meaning and ideas. However, for easy comprehension of the term we may treat it as political consciousness prevalent among different classes, as Lenin thought it to be. Now we’ll begin our quest in search of dalit political consciousness that provides backdrop to its ideological framework. Political consciousness, if thought in normal terms may indicate socialisation, agitation, movements, participation in political parties and their activities etc. As of dalit consciousness in the political scenario, it can undoubtedly be said that it was immensely influenced by the thoughts of B.R. Ambedkar. Comments Sharma:

Dalit consciousness is guided by Ambedkarite ideology, programmes, leadership and organization and incorporates both institutionalised and non-institutionalised individual and collective actions initiated and adopted by the community to achieve desired goals. Leadership provided by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had powerful impact on the community and subsequent course of *Dalit* [italics in the original] movement draws inspiration and strength from his vision.\(^{23}\)
It is essential, before proceeding further with recent scopes and tendencies of dalit political ideology, to obtain an edifying knowledge about Ambedkar’s political views and activities. Ambedkar spoke very clearly against the upper caste Brahminical leadership that represented Indian National Congress. From the very beginning he envisioned the establishment of the rule of a governing class that will function as a quantitative replacement for the British rulers. It is noteworthy that he identified the Brahmins as a constituent part of the governing class. He also categorised the workers and farmers along with outcasts as the servile classes. This class included the marginalised people in majority. He predicted a doom while commenting upon the future of the servile section of Indian society. As per him, India will not be able to host an egalitarian society by ensuring equality and rights to all her people. He sardonically asks a valid question on the ideological supremacy of the upper caste people:

Between them [the Brahmins and the Banias] they divide the spoils which belong to the governing classes. Can anyone who realizes what the outlook, tradition and social philosophy of the governing class in India is, believe that under the Congress regime, a sovereign and independent India will be different from the India we have today?

The question looks verbatim by of its echoing Ambedkar’s apprehension which appeared in the previous pages of the same article. His fear of socio-political alienation of the lower caste people is evident as he felt threatened by the possibility of further deterioration of the marginalised section. Hence we find him speaking in explicit enunciation on the future after the British rule:

One thing is certain. The governing class will not disappear by the magic wand of Swaraj. It will remain as it is and having been freed from the incubus of British Imperialism will acquire greater strength and vigour.
Ambedkar’s vision here clearly speaks of Marxian ideological elementary ideas while reflecting upon the universal nature of the ruling classes. He accurately analysed the attitude of the future rulers of India and this analysis strengthened his bond with Marxism. In short, Ambedkar’s ideological understanding discovered a great companion in Marxian ideas. At the same moment he restructured Buddhism to bring out an eclectic sort of political outlook that came out as a result of a synthesis of Marxism and Buddhism. In his highly controversial comparative study of these two apparently distant schools of thought that belong to two separate spatial and disciplinary realms, he presents an analogous treatise on the relevance of both the thoughts with regard to his formulation of an ideology of the oppressed. He adulates the Russian dictatorship, simultaneously speaking in favour of positive human spirituality:

It has been claimed that the Communist dictatorship in Russia has wonderful achievement to its credit. There can be no denial of it. That is why I say that a Russian dictatorship would be good for all backward countries. But this is no argument for permanent dictatorship. Humanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values to be retained.27

Ambedkar sought to combine the two humanitarian ideologies into a unified one which will ensure social, economic and moral values among citizens. He also put stress on the need of liberty and fraternity alongside equality with the hope for a co-operative society in future India.

After Independence, dalit political movements began to gain momentum by gathering influence from Ambedkar’s ideological formulations. D.L. Sheth in his enlightening essay ‘Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations’28 has assorted the recent transitions in dalit political practices. This essay specifies a few trends located in dalit political commitments. Sheth indicates at the change in the socio-religious structure that has
been experiencing breakdown, though gradual, but steady. The intermingling of various castes due to various reasons has somehow made the caste distinctions blur. This has had it effect in the following aspects:

i) The vertical religious hierarchy based on purity and impurity is dismantling. Rituals are fast being replaced by cultural collectivism.

ii) Certain castes demand for special advantage and recognition thereby giving birth to a legitimate status and socio-political representation.

iii) Specific political interests are being displayed by the castes as they have come up to gain active participation in economic affairs.

iv) Different pressure groups and federations appear to take part into negotiation with the government.

v) Age old, worn out ideological stances against existent discrimination have now become obsolete. Dalits are looking forward to adopt newer, more socio-centric ideologies that will brush off inequality and injustice. A considerable discussion on liberation theology has been conducted in this chapter.

vi) A change has taken place in the micro level of caste system. Personal or domestic habits, rituals and occupations are now diverse enough to act upon the traditional compartmentalisation of specific castes. In other words, An allover progress owing to welfare state and scientific advancement has cast deep influence on the demarcation of castes. Intra-caste individuals are getting differentiated from each other with regard to education, profession and income level.

The above tendencies, in aggregate, have caused a middle class to come into existence that is qualitatively at variance from its colonial counterpart. Lower castes have made their
entry into the middle class society by means of reservation system in the post independence era. The empowerment of the marginalised people has thoroughly changed the definition of middle class and has multiplied the intricacy in class stratification in India. Today, an upper caste farmer is found to be placed in the lower or lower middle class whereas an ex-untouchable individual having reinforcement from the ‘quota’ system has booked his berth in the higher-middle class stratum. This mixed-up situation is quite important in Indian democracy. Political parties pledge more and more advantages to the SC, ST and OBC communities in order to channelise their political support to attainment of power. Concludes Sheth:

By forming themselves [the lower castes including dalits] into larger horizontal, not vertical hierarchical, social groups, their members now increasingly compete for entry into the middle class. This has changed the character and composition of the old, pre-independence middle class which was constituted almost entirely of the upper castes. Nearly 50 per cent members of today’s middle class come from the lower strata of the traditional social hierarchy.\(^{29}\)

The above discussion has given us some useful information. We’ve been made aware of the complicated class caste scenario (more of it will be discussed in Social Commitment Chapter). It may also be noted that this newly formed middle class has no specific political orientation. Dalit political commitment has been subject to alteration in the post-independence period. Though there was a well known rift between the ideological stand points between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar mostly because of religious reason and partly because of political representational issues, yet, Indian dalits had been a committed vote bank to the Indian National Congress till the beginning of 1970. Here comes the significance of literary expression as foundation of literary organisations like Dalit Panther was extremely impactful in re-orienting dalit political party preferences. During the 1970s
and 80s dalit political activities came into full shape by means of protest, rallies, agitations and movements. While attempting to measure the growth and development of it Omvedt identifies the 1980s as a decade marked by collective dalit assertion in all spheres. It incorporated marginal people from all sections. She has also had a discourse upon some major figures of Hindu legends and epics who acted as impetus behind their political mobilisation across the country. Deconstructing the symbols of Sita as characterising the exploited and Bali Raja as theologically duped figure, dalit movements went onto crystalise as definite perceivable political activity. Very significantly she pointed out three seminal issues which frame the dalit political ideology in recent days. First, dalits took on the concept of Hinduism as a religion and the hegemonic dominance it created. The main focus of this stance was obviously throwing a challenge at the face of prevalent governance and polity. Second, it adopted an all encompassing attitude to include every facet of society like adivasis, peasants, women and other backward castes. Finally in order to meet the cultural challenge, dalit ideology opened itself to the newer politico-economic goals.

While tracing the trends in dalit political concerns in literary expressions Pradeep K. Sharma made an assiduous sketch beginning form Premchand. We may summarise the contents of his works in order to have an overview of the writings of both dalit and non dalit writers who rigorously looked upon dalit- political centricity as a well pronounced theme in their works. Dalit Politics and Literature offers a ready reckoner to obtain a smooth and quick look on dalit writings in a chronological order ranging from the beginning of twentieth century to the 1990s. Sharma argues that Premchand’s writings concentrated on the dalits on a whole and not singularly on political frameworks. Yet, a few sporadic evocations of political consciousness should not be missed in Godan. Sharma observes that though the caste of the protagonist is never mentioned directly in the text, yet, there are references to his
caste identity. The protagonist belongs to the lower caste section of the society whose political standpoint is not so articulate though perceivable. Notes Sharma:

If we explore his political mind, we find that he was also representing the contemporary political understanding prevalent in his community that was exploited in the name of religion, tradition or prestige. […] At the same time his [Hori’s] son, Gobar is representing the young generation, though rebellion (in its embryonic form) but also not articulated plotically…³²

As a reason for such inarticulate aspect there existed a serious reason, as depicts Sharma in the same paragraph:

It should be kept in mind here that the whole novel is contextualised in the northern Indian village, where there was no political leader like Ambedkar and the voice of the Dalit community was not expressed politically.³³

Later in the same discussion we find several other noteworthy entries and observations. For example Jagdish Chandra’s Dharati Dhan Na Apana is recognised as a portrayal of the socio-political situation during 1970s. Here again, Sharma analyses:

The novel also attempts to expose the hypocrisy of the socialist and communist orientation adopted by the educated upper castes in the village, (represented by Dr. Bishan Das and his fellows) who sympathetically and notionally supported the cause of the Dalit liberation but when it comes to real and genuine solidarity they aligned with the upper caste communities.³⁴

Besides, Sharma goes on to another insightful observation on Mannu Bhandari’s Mahabhoj. This novel is more political in nature with its exploration of the ground reality related to Indian politics. Notes Sharma:
Mahabhoj narrates all kinds of political manipulations (even merciless death of an innocent) employed by the political leaders to gain and maintain political power. But it is to be noted that the author writes about the whole political system and its complicated nitty-gritty in such a way to make it clear and precise without any special emphasis that politicians have betrayed public trust and lost even minimum respect to human dignity, democratic values, principles of natural justice and morality for the sake of political power and opportunism.35

The above discussion brings some of the political issues expounded in dalit literature in general during the time period of almost a century. However, contemporary dalit poetry is more expressive, pointed and target-oriented in an organised manner. This is because no effort on the dalits’ part proved to be effective and long lasting. The period between 1980 and 1990 saw the weaning away of Congress’ political dominance and the rise of sectarian regional parties. Political coalitions and back up from other social, religious organisations became indispensable for parties to remain in power. In the meantime Bharatiya Janata Party, nourished by various Hindu fanatic associations appeared to be gaining strength and a nationwide existence of the same was felt. Left parties, though full of promises of revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat, failed to contextualise themselves amidst the cultural diversity of India and shrank within a few clusters of the land. Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul, though at times felt attracted to Marxist humanitarian appeal; afterward became disenchanted at the lethargy of communist leaders to associate themselves with required enthusiasm. This generated a mutual distrust between the Marxists and the dalit activists. Dhasal’s candid confession makes the situation comprehensible:

Its [Dalit Panther] early success made all the left parties take notice of Dalit Panther. We had our sympathisers among both the communists and the socialists.
In 1975, all of a sudden Raja Dhale accused me of being Marxist and contented that Marxism and Ambedkarism were mutually incompatible. My own party expelled me as I found myself in a minority. Marx and Ambedkar do contradict one another and this debate has been going on since 1938. I was only its latest victim. 36

On a whole, a sense of disillusionment toward and estrangement from the ongoing significant political bustle features in dalit political to a large extent. A major work regarding this disappointment toward Indian National Congress is ‘The Chamcha Age’ that came into being in the form of a book by Kanshi Ram, the founder-leader of Bahujan Samaj Party. Dalit politics in north India was greatly influenced by his views on the high caste Hindus working as agents of the Congress party. Kanshi Ram’s ideology, Mayavati’s subsequent accession to power in Uttar Pradesh cast a long term impact on polarisation of votes. Yet, an all pervasive discontent continues to rule in dalit poetic expressions. Poems of the collection Moorkha Mhatarayane Dongar Halavile are dipped into Maoist-Naxalite fervour. They reflect the poet’s vision of revolution. Though not very systematic, yet his idea of revolution reveals an individual’s effort to break down the ongoing politico-administrative status quo.

‘Man, You Should Explode’ by Namdeo Dhasal can hardly be called political in overtone until one discovers the embryonic anarchical savour that creeps in the poem. It is sarcastically chaotic, deliberately deranged and revolutionary in nature. At the first look, one may wonder why the poem has been categorised as political. The obvious answer is its anti-establishment stand. The poem becomes political for its advocacy of disorder that might be the vanguard of a new order to set in. Outwardly it is full of obscene words and images, boastful of its intentional vulgarity. But it reminds us of the Naxalite fervour that opts to dethrone the ruler for the sake of genuine republicanism. The poem summarises in precision all the diabolic political games played throughout human history:
Man, one should dig up roads, yank off bridges

One should topple down streetlights

Smash up police stations and railway stations

One should hurl grenades; one should drop hydrogen bombs to raze

These lines portray all the supposedly terrorist acts made out to overthrow the ruler in all ages, in all nations. This also reminds us of the unrest that marks every revolution and precedes a consequent social order. Keeping in view of a much needed tremor in the governing machinery:

Wage class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars

One should become totally savage, ferocious, and primitive

One should become devil-may-care and create anarchy

These lines bring out the poet’s indignance at the inertia of common man. He feels a Promethean urge to energise the dampened souls. Similar poems can be found written during freedom struggle in India by eminent poets. Perhaps, these sorts of poems are found in every country where the poet assumes the role of a prophet and asks his fellow men to put an end to the existing oppressive social system. Violent as the images are, they bear an unbearable angst on the part of the poet with a view to summoning his readers to be active. According to him, only the exhibition of bestial force can draw the situation to peace – destruction will lead to immediate construction. He prefers the ‘eye for an eye’ method to demolish social upheaval; in the midst of drab living he seeks for fiery upsurge to bring about socio-political equilibrium:
After this all those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others their
slaves

After this they should stop calling one another names white or black, Brahmin,
Kshatriya, vaishya, or shudra;

Stop creating political parties, stop building property… 39

These lines capture the anti-racist, anti-casteist and anti-capitalist zeal of the poet. If observed
closely, these three may be identified as the root causes of disparity and discrimination in the
present age. The poem achieves a remarkable contrast with its opening in the final lines.
Though initially it conveyed a mood of wanton disorderliness, the poem attains an ennobling
conclusion as it sings of a welfare society founded on the pillars of humanity, equality and
brotherhood:

One should share each morsel of food with everyone else, one should compose a
hymn

To humanity itself, man, man should sing only the song of man. 40

The anti-establishment attitude continues to appear in ‘A Seasonal Poem from the
Police Custody’. Strangely enough, the jailor presented in the poem has been compared to a
cactus. We may infer that the poet conveys the uselessness of them by his attempt of finding
a ‘mutual resemblance’ between them. The personification of cacti in the opening lines is
somewhat awkward:

There are four thousand and five hundred types of cacti:

Among the cacti there are different castes, races, cultures, styles; 41
We find here a direct implication toward social disharmony. The cactus can also be considered as a symbol of coercion and intimidation used by the State as apparatuses in the form of law and order. In his work, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* Althusser notes:

> Remember that in Marxist theory, The State Apparatus (SA) contains: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons etc. which constitute what I shall in future call the Repressive State Apparatus. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question ‘functions by violence’…

This also reminds us of Foucault’s unforgettable lines:

> Confinement, that massive phenomenon, the signs of which are found all across eighteenth-century Europe, is a “police” matter. Police, in the precise sense that the classical epoch gave to it – that is, the totality of measures which make work possible and necessary for all those who could not live without it; the question Voltaire would soon formulate, Colbert’s contemporaries had already asked: “Since you have established yourselves as a people, have you not yet discovered the secret of forcing all the rich to make all the poor work? Are you still ignorant of the first principles of the police?”

Dhasal, by his own inimitable style, sketches the oppressive apparatus that functions in the intellectual plain too:

> Even if one didn’t touch them, they would prick one’s mind.

> They wound the soul.

In the sympathy shown to the jailor as an agent of the already mentioned repressive state apparatus, the note of condescension must not be missed:
They become so sterile, that in no season a tender shoot would sprout in their heart. Yet, the poet observes that being repressive is not the innate nature of the jailor. Administrative turmoil has made him so. He is not congenitally as blunt as he looks now – he, too, is a victim of the task he has been entrusted with. The jailor has to function as a part of the ruling machinery and this practice, in return, makes him passive, insensitive and ineffectual as a man. His inexorable dealings with the underbelly of the society have robbed the jailor of his softer humanitarian faculties. An unprecedented reversal is found in the poem where the prisoner deigns to comment on the lousy disposition of him:

Your prison official is as innocent as a child
Whose heart has remained tender in a dense forest of cacti.
I don’t even think of him as a jailor.

A deliberate contrast between the visions of the representative of law and the law breakers has been drawn to negate the futility of the stagnation of the prevailing facade of political repressions. The wheel is described to have turned round where the top and bottom places have been exchanged ironically. The last few lines of the poem make it politically paradoxical by relating a role reversal:

He has become the ocean itself, and is thoroughly stagnant; and sailing that ocean
Prisoners are making journeys around the world, in the boats of their minds
In the bleak desert of a prison.

‘The Tree of Violence’, another signature poem by Dhasal, is founded upon a split up ground between the reactionary and the revolutionary forces. The pronoun ‘they’ bears an indicative note of a domineering entity which the poet detests. The poem is visibly allegorical in the
beginning. It’s politico-cultural outlook is established in its gross description of the ‘Tulsi Vrindavan’. This corresponds to the upper caste Hindu cult of bringing up a basil tree at the centre of domestic courtyard and treating it as the habitat of a certain god. The tree is well looked after and worshipped with due reverence. This image bears a binary oppositeness with what Dhasal has presented. The basil tree conveys an antithetical idea of what it is not. The malpractice of violence, dominance, ill treatment, discrimination, intimidation and coercion is the allegorical ‘tulsi’ here that has been nourished by the repressive state. It also alludes to the underworld’s increasing shadow over a metropolitan. The tree draws sustenance from the surrounding murky atmosphere:

The tree danced! The tree sang.\(^{48}\)

However, things took an unexpected turn when a politician comes near it. Keeping with the allegorical overtone, he comes under the evil impact of the tree. As a result:

He blacked out.

He fell to the ground.

A crowd gathered.

They took him to a hospital.

For days he remained in a coma.\(^{49}\)

Notwithstanding the tree’s diabolic power, the creator falls prey to the Frankenstein he once brought up. Hereupon starts a series of events that evokes quiescent adroit irony. The assiduousness found on the part of media, physicians, attendants and the government should be read as a symptomatic mockery against the system. Dhasal goes on to paint the unrestful
days of the 1970s when Naxalite movements spread across the country demanding social change, removal of private property, resignation of the government:

Finally they found the roots of the tree

In the Havelis of the Zamindars and in their Mehfillis

Finally the roots of the tree were found

In the safety-vaults of capitalists and monopolists

Finally the roots of the tree were found

Under the throne of the Empress

This poem functions as a gazette of the political scenario of its contemporary period. It shows two opposed forces involved in an unceasing combat, the result of which is seen in the invincibility of the tree. The opposed forces here may be defined in a number of ways – they may be right and left wings, government and anarchists, secularists and communalists, capitalists and communists or in simpler terms the rich versus the poor. ‘The Tree of Violence’ is genuinely an apocalyptic poem that not only brings out an oppressed man’s vision of ongoing political activities, but also a political overview seen and judged through the eyes of a man conversant with insightful political sociology.
Notes and References

1. See Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory*, P. 182

2. Pradip K. Sharma in *Dalit Politics and Literature*. P.17

3. Ibid. P. 18

4. Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, P. 15

5. See Gorge Larrain’s write up on ideology in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, P. 248

6. Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*. P. 35

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid. P. 42

9. Ibid. P. 67

10. Ibid.


12. Ibid. P. 496

13. Karl Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, P. 21


15. Gorge Larrain’s write up on ideology in *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, P. 250

17. Ibid. P. 147

18. Ibid. PP. 321-322

19. Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*. P. 69

20. Ibid. P. 70

21. Ibid. P. 71

22. Antonio Gramsci in *Selections from the Prison Notebook*. P. 365

23. Pradip K. Sharma in *Dalit Politics and Literature*. P.56


25. Ibid. P. 148

26. Ibid. P. 143

27. B.R. Ambedkar. ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’. Ibid. P. 189


29. Ibid. P. 175

30. Gail Omvedt in *Dalit Visions*, PP. 84-85

31. Ibid. PP. 86-87

32. K. Sharma in *Dalit Politics and Literature*. P.97

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid. P. 107

35. Ibid. PP. 115-116

36. Namdeo Dhasal in ‘Namdeo on Namdeo’. The text is an edited version of an interview. It’s restructured by Dilip Chitre in A Current of Blood. P. 114


38. Lines 52-54, Ibid. P. 10

39. Lines 60-62, Ibid. P. 11

40. Lines 68-69, Ibid.


42. Louis Althusser in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. PP. 142-143

43. Michel Foucault. Extracts from Madness and Civilization in The Foucault Reader Ed. Paul Rabinow. P. 128

44. Lines 6-7, ‘A Seasonal Poem from the Police Custody’ in A Current of Blood, P. 34

45. Line 15, Ibid.

46. Lines 22-24, Ibid.

47. Lines 26-28, Ibid.


49. Lines 17-21, Ibid.

50. Lines 116-121, Ibid. P. 41
Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre in his *What is Literature* used the term ‘engaged’ synonymously with committed. Though he stressed only on prose writing and examined poetry as other form of art, yet by his observations on literature in general he presents a close study on what it means to be committed:

The “engaged” [committed] writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.¹

According to Sartre the poets deal with emotion instead of meaning of words. Therefore poetry is not necessarily committed. But in the subaltern scenario poetry has become prosaic agenda, a tool for protest, a way of disclosure and a manifestation of consciousness. This is elaborated by Spivak in the following extract:

When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* [italics in the original] say becomes important. In the semioses of the social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of “the utterance”.²

So far we’ve tried to make an estimate of the inherent commitment of what dalit poetic works speak of. Notwithstanding the above premises, we’ve found that dalit consciousness is articulate enough, without requiring any extraneous medium to reach out to the readers. This study addressed various sorts of commitments found in dalit poetry in association with a one or two autobiographical narrative work. In our search, we’ve discovered very specific orientations in the poems. They have been discussed in separate chapters erstwhile. On the basis of the whole we’ve discussed, illustrated, analysed and reflected, it is established that dalit poetry is committed. Its commitments come out more
effectively when it becomes less and less aesthetically concerned. It is sometimes verbal, straightforward, prosaic and even repetitive, yet one cannot miss its inherent conscious alignment. Without proceeding further unnecessarily, with a view to concluding this study satisfactorily we may echo Limbale’s claim while commenting upon commitment in dalit literature:

Because Dalit writers write from a predetermined certitude, their writing is purposive.

Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. […] They [dalit writers] regard their literature to be a movement. Their commitment is to the Dalit and the exploited classes.³
References

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature*, P. 22

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* P. 287

3. Sharankumar Limable in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, P. 33
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