

**A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF GUJARATI DALIT WRITING**

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**Abstract**

*Gujarati Dalit Writing is an offshoot of the socio-political situation of the Dalits in Gujarat. The first generation of the educated Gujarati Dalits has passed through enormous atrocities either physical or psychological. They could not retaliate physically against the perpetrators of violence as demographically, economically and politically they lagged behind. Therefore, they have retaliated through literature and resisted against the oppressive socio-political structure of the society. The present paper charts out the journey the literary resistance of the Dalits of Gujarat.*

**Key Words:** *anti-reservation agitation, Gujarati Dalit Writing, Socio-political consciousness, committed writing, Ambedkarite movement, social sensibility*



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**Full Text of the Paper**

On 31 December 1980, the medical students of the B.J. Medical College launched their agitation in protest against the reservation policy for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Socially and Educationally Backward Castes (SEBCs). Dr. Prakash Amin and 73 other B.J. Medical College students had filed a case in the Ahmedabad High Court in November 1979 against the carry forward system, reservations in post-graduation courses, the roster system, and interchangeability of reserved seats. The verdict of the court came in February 1980 in which the students lost the case. They lost the case in the court and therefore, resorted to direct action and thus the anti-reservation agitation of 1981 started within the week after

Shakrabhai's murder at Jetalpur village. The agitation continued for three months. Clashes broke out between students from SCs and STs in general and SCs in particular, and the upper castes in Ahmedabad, Nadiad, Vadodara, and some other cities.<sup>1</sup> The state invariably came to the rescue of the propertied classes and failed to provide protection to SCs and STs.

The middle classes of the upper castes i.e. Bania, Brahmin, and Patels resorted to direct action once again for more than four months in 1985 when the government raised the quota of reservation for the SEBCs from 10 per cent to 28 per cent in January.<sup>2</sup> This time government employees belonged to the upper and middle castes as well as the Backward Castes other than SCs and STs joined the fray by demanding abolition of the 'roster system', which provided relatively rapid opportunities for promotion to SC and ST employees. The anti-reservation agitation, which was confined to urban areas, continued for more than four months. It took a toll of more than 200 lives and property worth several million rupees. The state was completely paralyzed. Consequently, the government not only withdrew the 18 per cent increase in the reservation for the SEBC, but also conceded the demand of the agitators to review the reservation for the eighty-two castes/communities, which are considered SEBC.

The only positive impact of 1981 anti-reservation agitation was that it brought all the Dalit writers together who were trying alone or in small groups to protest the caste atrocities. They came on the same platform not physically but also ideologically. The anti-reservation agitation had given them a common objective and a joint leadership. Rameshchandra Parmar and Valjibhai Patel came out as strong Dalit leaders. Both of them were and are hard-core Ambedkarite. After 1981 anti-reservation agitations, Dalit literature had established itself that it cannot be neglected in the Gujarati literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For details of the anti-reservation agitation refer see chapter 4 "First Anti-Reservation Agitation (1981) and Dalit Writing" of my doctoral thesis entitled *Gujarati Dalit Writing: Questions of Narrative and Translation*.

<sup>2</sup> After the introduction of the reservation for eighty-two SEBC in 1978, members of some of those castes, which were not considered by the Baxi Commission to be socially and educationally backward, made representations to the government for consideration of their cases. The Congress government therefore appointed a second commission in 1981 'to consider whether, there were any other castes/communities/classes which fell in the category of socially and educationally backward classes. Justice C. V. Rane was its Chairman. The Commission rejected caste as a measurement of backwardness. It adopted income and occupation as criteria to determine 'backwardness'. It recommended 28 per cent reservations for occupational groups, which are considered backward. The Commission submitted its report in 1983. The government rejected the major recommendations of the Commission on the ground that they were beyond the terms of reference of the Commission, in 1985. At the same time, the government accepted the recommendation of the reservation quota, and in January 1985, it raised the quota.

Because of anti-reservation agitation of 1981, the crystallization of the upper castes and the Dalits has become more distinct. The small section of the educated Dalits has examined the role of the upper castes as well as the government. This section has been unsatisfied with the attitude of the upper castes and the government. It has concluded that this situation could be changed and society that is more equitable could be established with the help of Dalit literature. In this educated Dalits' view pen will win their battle rather than sword in the due course of time. Dalit writing served two important functions for the Dalits. First, it had documented their emotions and feelings and secondly it had mobilized the Dalit consciousness.

In the next section, I have talked about the use of Dalit literature, which had already gained pace after 1975 as a means to respond to the violent actions of the upper castes.

I Dalit consciousness first stirred in 1975 with atrocities against Dalits and it gained expression in Dalit literature. Neerav Patel and Harish Mangalam, both Gujarati Dalit literary stalwarts, had opined that Gujarati Dalit literature received its momentum from the socio-political actions of the Dalits of Maharashtra. In Maharashtra Dalits had started to pen down their experiences of painful life, the Dalit writers of Gujarat also started to present the oppressive society of Gujarat. In 1975, Dalit Panthers' Gujarat unit had started *Akrosh* and this was the new beginning for the young and educated Dalit writers. In Maharashtra the Dalit intellectuals namely Baburao Bagul, Arjun Dangle, Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Dr. M.N.Wankhede and many others stressed on the cultural core of the Dalit existence i.e. on values and norms, which deeply influenced and governed the mindset of the people. Baburao Bagul reflected a glimpse of such thinking that is quoted by Daya Pawar,

Even if democracy has been placed over government power, even if Manu has been thrown into darkness, he did not die. He is living today in books, in holy scripture, in temple after temple. He lives in mind after mind. The structure of society he created is what we have today. He is so great that society's arrangements are under his control. And only his loving people are at the center of power. So in India at this time there are two worlds, two powers, two life traditions, two scriptures. He who wants victory, he who wants influence, must take a role in determining the future. We must bring our role to completion with literature and art. (22-4)

In the light of the above statement, I could say that it is only through literature and other forms of art Dalits could defeat Manu; defeating not by destroying Manu's ideology but through

creation of a parallel Dalit world that contested caste claims. Not only untouchability but Dalits also faced a variety of other equally demeaning situations like poverty, misery, hunger, starvation, homelessness, economic exploitation, sexual abuse, and physical torture. Bagul directed his attention to the hollowness and infirmities of the social and economic system. S.P. Punalekar quoted Baburao Bagul in his article “Dalit Literature and Dalit Identity” where he opined,

The question of identity is embedded in the social (economic) and cultural matrix and cannot be countered by paying exclusive attention to one at the cost of other. Both the socio-economic and cultural issues must be confronted together with unified struggle and on the basis of solidarity of all oppressed classes. He considered Dalit literature as a potent medium of raising this suppressed consciousness for freedom and liberation, and for self-identity and humanism. (235-6) Thus, Dalit literature is a creative and constructive way to overcome socio-economic obstacles through mass awakening and raising consciousness. There is an appeal in Dalit writings to become conscious of rights and demands. Dalit writers want Dalits to become brave, shed their diffidence and inferiority complex. They want them to realize the duplicity and hollowness of the ruling ideas of hegemonic classes including Brahmins and their cultural stratagems. Sharankumar Limbale defines Dalit literature in his book thus,

...precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief. Every human being must find liberty, honour, security, and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society. These values are now being articulated in a particular kind of literature – its name being Dalit literature. Recognizing the centrality of the human being, this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity’s joys and sorrows. It regards human beings as supreme, and leads them towards total revolution. (30)

Manishi Jani has also expressed his views on the origin and development of Gujarati Dalit literature. In his view, “A Dalit writer must be in a position to give answer of the following questions that are always raised by mainstream writers. These two questions are: (i) what is the aim of the Dalit literature. (Why and for whom does the Dalit literature stand for?), and (ii) How does it differ from mainstream literature? What is the standard of the Dalit literature?” (157)

Thus, based on Baburao Bagul's, Sharan Kumar Limbale's and Manishi Jani's idea of Dalit literature one could easily perceive that Dalit literature is deeply concerned with identity formation, self-confidence and self-worth of marginalized sections of society. Most of their creative imagination is structured around these premises. They propose to rebuild society on values, which promote honor and dignity, justice and equity. It is in this respect that there is a difference between Dalit writers and other writers. The difference is not only in ideas but also in experience, content, subject matter, style, and language. The reason for this is that there is a great difference in the life and characters they are writing about. That is why they have thrown off the values, principles, purpose and aesthetic criteria of middle-class writers and critics. Eleanor Zelliott has outlined Dalit literature in her essay "Dalit Sahitya: The Historical Background" thus, "new language, new experiences, new sources of poetic inspiration, and new entrants into a field previously dominated by high castes – these are all non-controversial accomplishments of Dalit Sahitya (18)."

In Gujarat Dalit writing began to appear in journals like Panther, Akrosh, Garud, Kalo Suraj, Dalit Bandhu, Ajampo, Muktinayak, Disha, Dalit Mukti, Dalit-Mitra, Abhyudaya, Nayamarga, Tamanna, Pragati jyoti, Taras, Avsar, Akshay and Hayati, Gujarati Dalit writing was to open its account with poetry. The credit for editing the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit poetry goes for Prof. Ganpat Parmar and Manishi Jani who published the anthology Dalit Kavita in 1981.

Gujarati Dalit writing found numerous poets. Dalpat Chauhan, Pravin Gadhvi, Nirav Patel, Harish Mangalam, B. N. Vankar, Yashvant Waghela, Arvind Vegda, Chandu Maheriya, Raju Solanki, Sahil Parmar, Babaldas Chavda, Shankar Painter were associated with Gujarati Dalit writing from the very beginning. Afterwards many writers have published their poetry. K. B. Pandya's anthology of Dalit poems captioned Chingari (The spark), Visfota (The Explosion) ed. Chandu Maheriya, and Balkrishna Anand in 1982, Asmita (Identity) edited by Chandu Maheriya in 1983, Raju Solanki edited Sankalan Geet in 1986, Nilesh Kathad edited Eklavya no Angutho (The Thumb of Eklavya) in 1987, Vasant Purani edited Manas (Human Being) in 1992. Dalpat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam and Pravin Gadhvi edited Dundubhi (The Big Drum) in

2001. Among these Dalpat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam, Nirav Patel, B. N. Vankar and Pravin Gadhvi are leading Gujarati Dalit poets.

One may derive from the way Gujarati Dalit short stories are being written that generating a room of their own within Gujarati writing is the driving force. Dalit short stories made their maiden venture into Gujarati writing with the collection *Gujarati Dalit Varta* published in 1987, a unique and valuable effort. Dalit short stories have attempted to establish social values and bring to light certain hidden aspects. The expression of the customs, the way of life as well as the hopes and aspirations of the Dalit community give shape to a different world altogether. Notwithstanding, Dalit short stories are expressive of anger and revolt against injustice in an admirably subtle manner. Thus, Gujarati Dalit short stories reach out in all directions.

The last decade has witnessed the success of Dalit short stories; the cause can be attributed to the movement of the short story from the traditional mould to novel experimentation. The writer today is fully occupied in trying to examine the various possibilities of presenting short stories in an innovative manner, by accepting the importance of the event and the character rather than obscuring the event; Such efforts have achieved fruition conscientious writer must attempt to study such possibilities; particularly from those Dalit short stories already published.

Writers of Dalit stories may be divided into two groups – one consisting of born Dalits and the other comprising writers who are non-Dalits. Writers who are born Dalits have themselves undergone the pains and agonies of Dalits either directly or indirectly, and hence they have an edge over the others. Mohan Parmar has said in his article “Gujarati Dalit Varta: Ek Churcha” at the end of the collection *Gujarati Dalit Varta*, with emphasis on the abundance of prose writings in Dalit literature thus:

We need to approach the genres of the short story and the novel if we wish to bring about a social revolution or abolish rigid customs. It is more so the novel which provides ample scope for the establishment of the values of human life. The short story on the other hand is more effective as far as subtlety of expression is concerned. This is responsible for the spurt of Gujarati Dalit short stories in the last two to four years.

The collection *Gujarati Dalit Varta* jointly edited by Mohan Parmar and Harish Mangalam has been instrumental in providing a real platform so to say to writers of Dalit short stories. Critics have appreciated the stories published in this collection for diverse reasons and readers

have hailed it with equal admiration. It is worth noting that the fifteen stories in the collection have been evaluated by fifteen different critics. Critical remarks on the collection have also appeared in various journals. Jayant Gadit notes in his essay “Dalit Varta Aetle Dalit Jivan Ni Varta”:

Most of the stories lean heavily on events, but it is the writers’ efforts to portray human emotions in the context of events rather than a mere narration of events which is complementary. The depiction of details, word choice, symbolic expression of thoughts or emotions, the focus on the characteristics of the Dalit Community more than on grassroot facts of Dalit life is an evidence of the awareness of the writers. Mohan Parmar’s ‘Nakalank’, Dalpat Chauhan’s ‘Badlo’, B. N. Vankar’s ‘Vilopan’ and Harish Mangalam’s ‘Dayan’ are really commendable.

Earlier the Dalit stories were published in different magazines. Soon appeared as a collection stories of individual writers and anthologies of stories by various writers. They are : Joseph Macwan’s *Sadhana ni Aradhana* (Worship of the Discipline of Devotion) and *Aagalo* (The Bar), Hairsh Makwana’s *Sapano no Ujagaro* (Sleeplessness of a Dream), Shirish Parmar’s *Thiji Gayeli Rat* (The Forzen Night), Raghavaji Madhad’s *Zalar* (The Gong) and Narsinh Parmar’s *Vaitalika* were the earlier published collections. But the earlier published of different Gujarati Dalit short stories by Dalit writers was published in 1987. It was the beginning of a new era in Gujarati Dalit stories. Harish Mangalam has individually edited the collection titled *Pratinidhi Dalit Varta* (The Leading Dalit Short Stories) in 1997.

Mangalam’s individual collection, *Talap* (The Desire) is published in 2001. *Vanboti Vartao* is the second celebrated collection of Gujarati Dalit stories. Dalpat Chauhan has edited the collection and it is published in 2000. Dalpat Chauhan’s individual collection *Munjaro* is published in 2002. Mohan Parmar’s *Kolahal* (Clamour), *Nakalank* (The Spotless), *Kumbhi* (The little pot) and *Poth* (The Sack-load) are noteworthy collections. B. Kesharshivam’s first collection, *Janma Divas* (Birth day) was published in 2000. *Rati Rayan Ni Ratash* (The Redness of Red Rayan Fruit) and Dr. Seema were published in 2001 and 2003 respectively. Macwan has published *Pannabhabhi* (1992), *Fari Aamba Mahore* (1998) and *Aagalo* (The Bar) in 2001. B. N. Vakar’s collection *Vilopan* (Cessation) is published in 2001. Dharmabhai Shrimali’s *Narak* (Hell) (2003) and Mavaji Maheshwari’s Story collection *Adrashya Divalo* (The Invisible walls) are noteworthy collections.

The writer has also given other novels *Amar Chandalo* (The Immortal Mark of Bindi) in 2000, *Aajanma Aparadhi* (Guilty Throughout Life) in 1995, *Dariyo* (The Sea) in 2002, *Bij – Trij Na Neh* (Love sprouted From The Second and Third Nights of the Moonlight Nights) in 1995, *Manakhani Mirat* (The Treasure of Human Life), *Mari Paranetar* (My Wife) in 1998 and *Mavatar* (The Parents) in 1996.

In Gujarat, Dalit autobiographies are scarce in comparison to Marathi Dalit autobiographies. The only eight autobiographies have been published till today and the most notable among these is *Purna Satya* by B. Kesharshivam. However, Joseph Macwan's character sketches has placed Gujarati Dalit writing on new heights. Since publication of his *Vyathana Vitak* his women characters have become classics. Dharmabhai Shrimali has written a memoir, *Bhandariyun*. *Samajmitra* has published a special issue on autobiographical writings edited by Nirav Patel. A collection of memoirs about Dalit mothers *Madi mane sambhare re!* edited by Chandu Maheria. Similarly, *Pitrugatha* edited by Balkrishna Anand are memoirs about Dalit Fathers.

Drama is less often written genre: *Bamanvadni barakhadi* (The Alphabet of Brahmanism) by Raju Solanki and *Ek Rakabi Futi* (A Saucer Broke) by Sahil Parmar are the two plays which have been staged. The first one deals with social injustice and reservation as one limited remedial measure, while the second deals with domestic violence. Dalpat Chauhan has given plays like *Anaryavart*, *Harifai*, and *Patanne Gondrethi*. *Bahishkar* (The Boycott) is a play by Mohan Parmar. This play is based on the boycott of a safai worker.

Late Tikesh Makwana, Chandu Maheria, Raju Solanki and Joseph Macwan have written reports which touch Dalit life; they are noteworthy for their penetrating research, sensitivity and vision.

Thus, the two anti-reservation agitations of 1981 and 1985 gave birth to many young Dalit writers. These writers –Dalpat Chauhan, Neerav Patel, Pravin Gadhvi, Joseph Macwan, Sahil Parmar, Raju Solanki, Harish Mangalam, Kisan Sosa, Shankar Painter, Jayanti Makwana, and Mohan Parmar – gave literary response to the violence faced by their fellow beings. These were activist writers, the oppressed themselves writing about themselves and writing to an unusual extent. The motive of these writers was clear. They were not prepared to keep silent anymore.



To conclude it is apt to mention Vidyut Joshi here who has noted, “If the 1981 reservation riots took place twenty years before then the Dalits could not have retaliated the way they have in 1981. It is because there was a small group of Dalits who have empowered them with knowledge and thus able to react against the oppressions (80).”

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