



PROTEST AGAINST RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AS EXPRESSED IN THE SELECT GUJARATI DALIT POETRY

Vijay D. Mangukiya, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor, Shree J.D.Gabani Com. Coll. and Shree S.A.S. Coll. of Mgt., Surat

Abstract

Since the birth of Hindu Varnra or caste system, Dalits have been segregated from the rest of community through the inhuman and arbitrary practice of untouchability. The ancient Hindu religious scriptures have been responsible for the ageless and endless pain and sufferings of Dalits. The theological world view justified the desirability and utility of this kind of social structure as it sought legitimacy from religion and its ancient scriptures. All those scriptures and their interpreters recommended absolute faith in them and in the interpretation that Varna or the caste system was willed by God or it was one of divine creations. The state power and organized religion imposed on them social, cultural and mental restrictions through superstitions, myths and punishments. The literature produced by Dalits revolt against the religious discourse of their respective countries. Therefore, the Dalit literary figures have lost faith in the religious ideologies and struggled hard for carving out some breathing space for their brethren. Some writers have made their poetry as a vehicle of propaganda against the hypocritical Hindu value system. The present research paper studies some selected Gujarati Dalit poetry where such protest against religious discourse is observed.

Keywords: *shudra, varna, varna system, Manusmriti, Dharma*



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The history of mankind has been a record of a constant struggle between the two opposing forces: between the powerful and powerless, the exploited and exploiters, the colonizers and colonized, the rulers and the ruled, the oppressors and oppressed. The constant conflict between the oppressor and oppressed, between the Black and the White and between the low caste Dalit and high caste Savarna Hindus is the distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary world. Since the birth of the Hindu *Varna* or caste system, Dalits have been segregated from the rest of community through the inhuman practice of untouchability. Dalits have been addressed as *Shudras*. They have always been at the lowest rung of the Indian social ladder, as they are the most unfortunate members of human community in India.

It is appropriate to investigate the reasons and the objectives that were used to justify the practice of untouchability in the ancient Hindu social system that has been responsible for the endless pain and sufferings of Dalits. The four *Varnas* based on various occupations were at the centre of the Hindu social structure. The Hindu scriptures prescribe specific occupation

for each caste. Accordingly, the class Brahmins (priests) was assigned the vocation of performing the religious activities. The class of Kshatriyas (warriors) was entrusted with the job of protecting the society from the forces of invasion or aggression. The class of Vaishyas (traders) was supposed to undertake economic activities. The class of Shudras (laborers) was required to do the menial kind of work. In that rigid and orthodox social structures the Shudras have been deliberately and permanently pushed to the margins by the higher castes and deprived them of any possibility of upward mobility. The Shudras were prohibited from performing the functions of the higher castes.

Along with this, the theological interpretation of the ancient Hindu world view justified the desirability and utility of this kind of social structure as it sought legitimacy from the religion and its ancient scriptures. All those scriptures and their interpreters recommended absolute faith in them. According to that interpretation, caste system was willed by God or it was one of divine creations. The ancient text of *Manusmriti* was often used for the justification of the exploitation of lower caste people in India. It recommends an extremely rigid and prohibitory code of conduct for the untouchables. In the tenth chapter of *Manusmriti*, Manu writes about Shudras:

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

(Manu)

This expulsion of the untouchables from the centre of the social life of the village to its periphery deprived them of their dignity and self-respect. For Dr. Ambedkar the text of *Manusmriti* was a very deceptive and dangerous aimed at the absolute marginalization and suppression of a class of people through a strong network of social, cultural, economic and political forces. He did not acknowledge Manu and *Manusmriti* as the progenitor and his text. It was simply a historical process crafted to marginalize a large section of humanity by depriving it of its rightful claim to the natural resources of the land.

The literature produced by Dalits revolt against the religious discourse of their respective countries because it is in favor of dominant classes and gives religious sanction and legitimacy to exploitation and marginalization. The organized Hindu religions are completely indifferent to the sufferings and victimization at the hands of the powerful casteist forces. Therefore, the Dalit literary figures have lost faith in the religious ideologies and struggled hard for carving out some breathing space for their brethren. Some writers have made their poetry as a vehicle of propaganda against the hypocritical Hindu value system. The present research paper studies some selected Gujarati Dalit poetry where such protest against religious discourse is observed. The anthologies by Gujarati Dalit poets are filled with the unique expression of their life-experiences and social evils that they have suffered since time immemorial. The widespread Hindu social structure was mainly targeted. The Dalit poets thus channelized their anger against orthodox prejudices and discriminating religious ideologies of upper caste Hindus.

Pravin Gadhvi is one of the most prolific poets in Gujarati Dalit literature. He made poetry a vehicle of propaganda against the hypocritical Hindu value system. He considered *Manusmriti* as the root of all social and cultural humiliation and sufferings of Dalits. In his famous poem titled *Brainwash*, Gadhvi bitterly criticizes *Manusmriti* which has divided man from man on the basis of caste:

“Please give me a cake of detergent.
I want to wash each cell of his brain.
I want to remove thoroughly the rust from his consciousness
Deposited since centuries. This is his center of hearing.
Along with the hymns of Vedas,
Meters of Valmiki, Verses of Upanishadas,
The stanzas of Manusmriti are also taped here.
Dear Bhudev, you are allowed to chant Upanishadas on the bank of
the Ganges in the early morning,
But, there is no need of venomous curses of Manusmriti,
This is centre of vision which gave me Black identity since centuries.”

(Gadhvi, 39)

Here the persona of the poem openly revolts against the authority of Brahmins who according to him are responsible for their exploitation. He believes that it is because of caste system Brahmins are considered to be superior and *Shudras* as the inferior of all. Because of the

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Varna System the Brahmins are worshipped and reverend. The Dalits consider the Brahmins as the root cause of their suffering. The persona in the poem is so much frustrated against the dominating caste that he desires to wash off the age old conventions prevailing in the mind of people belonging to upper caste. The anger among the Dalits and the sense of revolt is observed at the end of this poem. The same revolutionary fervor is found in the poem by Dalpat Chauhan titled *The Others*:

“Come, O my heart...and you too my love.
Let’s fling these ubiquitous places of worship
into whirlpools. Let’s toss our naked children
into the abyss. Bloody Shankaracharyas call them cursed...
“Better off in trenches”, they’ “than in this life”.
Why huddle in Ghettos away from the town?
Let the caste-mongers burn our shanties and get scorched a
little in
return. Let these flames distend beyond the sky...and reach
across...
better of ashes, than being untouchable.”

(Chauhan, 201)

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

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

“Is this a reality or fable? To say: ‘don’t touch him,
he is untouchable’ We, sophisticated human beings!

Cannot love the man we see, and claim to have a sight of
disappeared lord How can it possible be!!!

Can your Christianity name ADAM-EVA’S caste?

or

Can your Hinduism of BRAHMA-VISHNU-MAHESH?

or

Can your Islam of any KHALIFA?

“A MAN IS NOT CONSIDERED as MAN”

Why after such reformation of our culture?

By birth, he has not been stamped as Brahmin or Shudra has
been?

oh 33 crore complex forms of *Devas!* Why don’ you give
justice to

man? If you know caste-ism, who will break the chain?

Rama couldn’t recognize Shambuk Krishna couldn’t
recognize

Karna Then how can I recognize you as GODS?”

(Bhadresariya, 237)

Here is a great quest to God and the believers in false religious ideologies. In the first part of this poem it is found that the poet vehemently criticizes the hypocritical nature of the people of our nation. They believe in invisible God whom they try to search in temples, but they do not believe in living human beings. Moreover, all Gods be it Hindu, Christian, Muslim are casteless and divine in nature. Even no one comes into this earth with a stamp of any caste on any part of the body. But it is Hindu social structure that has divided man from man. Further in the poem, the poet makes a plea to God for justice. And he asks an over-whelming question to Almighty if He himself follows this evil design (caste system), then who will be their savior? Who will become their Messiah? Who will hold their hands and keep them away from this devilish social structure? If Rama could not recognize the innocence of Shambuk, if Krishna could not identify the purity and nobility of Karna, then the poet angrily proclaims that how can he recognize them as ‘GODS’? He thinks that if the designer of the system is so apathetic towards the torment of the oppressed then from whom the Dalits expect their
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welfare? At the end of the poem, the poet's voice becomes more defiant and bold. His protest is not against any individual or a group but society as a whole.

A note of protest against the contemporary order is also quite apparent in the poetry of Shamat Parmar. Injustice done and atrocities committed against Dalits filled his heart with pain and agony for the sufferer. His bold voice is heard in the poem titled *The Volcano*:

“Yes, now you stop your claim to be human being,
Stone is in everyone's hand, neither *Geeta* nor *Quran*?
As many religions different, Gods different too,
So a man is different from his fellow being.”

(Parmar, 85)

The poet in this poem is found rebuking everyone including God also for their indifference. The poet is also satirizing the hypocritical nature of human beings. They, according to him, are not holding religious scriptures in their hands but stones. Had they lived *Geeta* or *Quran* practically in their lives, they would have been generous human beings having sympathy and humanity in them.

Harish Mangalam has contributed to give a voice to the silent sufferers in the society. The publication of his anthologies gave a new direction to the Gujarati Dalit poetry. He is aware that his community is yet not respected by the caste Hindus. His anger is reflected in his poem titled *I will Hang Him*:

“Someone please bring down the scorching sun
From the top of the coconut –palm-lush gree.
Burning it is from years. My green, green oceanic blood;
My green, green grass keeps boiling.
Immunity it has developed against injections of consolations...
Here or there coming or going if I happen to meet God,
I will perhaps in a similar fashion, Hang him before the sun.”

(Mangalam, 17)

So the revolt is there but it is not only against the supremacy of Brahmins in Indian Hindu society, but it is also against God. The Dalits have been bearing all kinds of miseries since time immemorial due to caste order. The ‘sun’ seems to be scorching to the downtrodden people. Due to this anarchy, the Dalits have been the victim of abject penury, unrequited labor, starvation, deprivation, humiliation, desperation, helplessness, sexual exploitation and so on. All these vices have become synonymous with the status of Dalits. For this reason, the

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poet becomes vehement to the ‘Creator’ of this segregated earth. So the revolt is reflected in the poetry of Harish Mangalam. A celebrated Dalit poet Arvind Vegada in of his popular poems, *Dharma*, attacks on the Vedic classics in the following way:

“This darkness is stifling shrieking and wailing among
charred human bones the hypocritical *Shrutis*
continue to torment the darkness in the name of the sun.
Bundles of unfulfilled desires caught in the darkness of
flames
to anoint stone idols whirling in the beads of Manuvian
chaplets
continue to lash with whips.

(Vegada, 230)

Through these lines, the poet expresses the idea that the God created this earth with a noble purpose, made everyone equal. But some people became more equal than others. They became power-hungry like Aryans who wanted to expand their horizons at the cost of the suffering of marginalized section of the society. The *Dharma* of the Dalit poets is to pierce these kinds of power-crazy people in the society.

In this way, the Dalit ideology denounces the notion about religion and God. Most of the famous Gujarati Dalit writers record their protest against orthodox Hindu religion and its scriptures in their writings. They have made their writing a vehicle of propaganda against the hypocritical Hindu value system. They have put across their point of protest through their poems as poetry is a dominant form of Gujarati Dalit literature. Their poetry is a voice of protest against this unjust system. They believe that the roots of all ills faced by his community lie in Vedic epics, Hindu scriptures. Therefore they have subjected these classics to a severe test in their poetry.

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