

EXPLORING CASTE ISSUES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF PRAVIN GADHVI'S POETRY

Vijay D. Mangukiya, Ph. D.

Shree J.D.G. Com. Coll. and Shree S.A.S. Coll of Mgt., Varachha Road, Surat

vijaymangukiya.87@gmail.com

Abstract

Gujarati Dalit poetry is basically the articulation of the experiences and feelings of an entire community. It is this endeavor of theirs through poetry that leads to a discernment of an identity building process. The Dalit poets strive to cleanse the stated values of life and culture. This is how they try to bring progress in the lives of the ignored classes through their poetry creations. In fact, their poetry is a mass movement, a cultural revolution against Brahminic superiority. The versatility of these poets is amazing and originality of theme is the hallmark of their poetry. One of such figures whose poetry has been analyzed in this research paper is Pravin Gadhvi. Like other poets, he is also having definite motive, goal, direction and commitment. He in giving voice to their struggle against discriminating upper castes is exploring caste issues in his poetry. He is committed to the noble cause and thus he is the custodians of the castle of Dalit literature.

Keywords: *Dalit literature, caste system, Varna or Varnavyavastha, Manusmriti, segregation*



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Pravin Gadhvi is one of the most prolific poets in Gujarati Dalit literature. His voice of Dalit protest emerged onto the Gujarati Dalit literary scene in the mid 1980s. He is a potent voice of Dalit protest who depicts the tough life of Dalits. His vitality and vivacity of expression is so sublime and exquisite that he deserves to be ranked among the radical voices of protest in Gujarat. His collections of poetry are *Bayonet* (1985), *Padchhayo* (1996), and *Tunir* (2002), *The Voice of the Last* (2008). These volumes are available into English translation. Pain, anguish, utter poverty, deprivation, starvation, loneliness, hellish life of man, woman, children and almost all marginalized sections of the society have been captured in the poetry of Gadhvi. His poetry speaks for Dalits and is addressed to the Dalits, so it is down-to-earth and realistic. His love for the downtrodden and the people living beside dung heap and hell remain running undercurrent. In one of the poems titled *I am the History of the Nation*, he says the Dalits must not be segregated as they are also a part and parcel in making the history of the nation:

“There are prints of my steps on every stream of this nation

There is fossil of mine under every rock of this nation

The unreadable script of Mohen-jo-daro throbs in my blood,
You cannot bury me as an untouchable.”

(Gadhvi, 13)

The lines quoted above represent a section of Indian society that has been differentiated on the name of caste. The poet says that it is that section of the society which is a class of toiling people, working hard to make the lives of the people easy and comfortable. Cleaning the filth and dirt with their own hands, they themselves have been treated for centuries as filth and dirt. The *Sanatan* stream of Indian society has kept them at the lowest step of *Varna* hierarchy, maintaining an unbridgeable gap between them and the rest of the society. They have to serve the higher ups in the *Varna* system, bearing all sorts of insult and hatred. The poet also represents the plight of the Dalits in one of his short poems:

“I was born on the earth
thinking it heaven,
but what did I see on the earth?
Fiery flames of wars
fathomless oceans of blood,
sky-high screams of atrocities on the downtrodden,
endless deserts of starvation
inexhaustible streams of hot tears...
seeing all this I am forced to be a poet.”

(Gadhvi, 53)

The poem is so straightforward that it does not need more explanation. The earth of the poet's vision must be a place of heaven is nothing but full of atrocities, starvation, violence and miseries. For this reason, he plans to raise his voice on the behalf of the downtrodden section of the society. The poet thinks that he should take initiative to remove the turmoil faced by his fellow beings with the help of his poetic art. He thinks it to be his duty to show his protest and demand for the paradise which has been snatched from their hands by high caste people. In this reference the poet declares this earth as a meaningless revolving planet:

“For one who has a house for shelter,
the earth seems home.
For one who has a slice of bread,
the earth seems sweet.
For one who has a shawl to wrap,

the earth seems warm,
For one who has a sweetheart in embrace,
the earth seems charming.
For one who has a glass of wine to drink,
the earth seems like a dream.
For one who has none of these,
the earth is only a meaningless revolving planet.”

(Gadhvi, 47)

In both these little poems, one will find the poet protesting against injustice and inhuman treatment meted out to the Dalits by high caste people. He raises voice against the small things that are the signs of living not made available to each man inhabiting the Earth, the planet for our common inheritance. The main question the poet has in his mind that why man belonging to particular caste is denied the means of living? Who deprives him of these little things that make up ‘life’? The protesting poet turns to awakening those that are still snoring:

“It is indeed very difficult to wait for sunrise.
When there is deep darkness in the forests,
and the whole sky is cloudy,
one has to climb the mountain alone.
One has to awaken the sea sleeping after
a heavy drink in the cloudy night.
One has to shake the sleeping trees.
One has to kindle the birds in every nest.
One has to fondle the flowers of bloom.
Then there will be some light.
The stars like armed guards will become visible
One has to imbibe the suffering of the birth of the sun.
The birth of the sun is not so easy to enlighten the whole universe.
One has to speak few words to the tormented mother earth.
One has to endure.
It is very difficult to wait for sunrise.”

(Gadhvi, 26)

The poet in the above mentioned poem is absolutely right: the Sun that can illuminate the entire universe is not an easy thing when there is too much darkness. But the metaphorical

message the poet intends to give to the Dalits is very clear. To dispel the ignorance, all oppressed are required to get awakened and chant the Ambedkarite slogan: educate, agitate and organize, only 'then there will be some light'. The prosperity and peace is not an easy task: all Dalits are required to work for it. They need to get united to enlighten their lives. It is also being concluded that only the Dalits can unshackle their brethren from the clutches of the upper and ruling classes. For this they must first understand the historical and cultural background of the underdogs and underprivileged masses. All favorable historical records and literary evidences have failed to attract the attention of the chroniclers. For this reason, the disadvantaged were condemned to endure the life of slavery and serfdom in a state of utter negligence. They were denied the dignity which a human-being deserves as being a part of human-community in general. This became a big challenge for the Dalit intellectuals as they could not think deeply but could also translate the pain of downtroddenness into words. This is what this poet wants his fellow human beings to do: "One has to speak few words to the tormented mother earth." He wishes from his brethren to pen down their pain which aroused from such discriminating social handling and appealed to their brothers not to take things lying down, the way their forefathers have done. In fact, he wants them to transfer their thoughts into a concrete shape who should explode the neglected aspects of life. He is of the view that apart from the political leaders and social stalwarts, men of letters should start realizing the concept of Dalitism which implies the harsh circumstances of suppression on all fronts, i.e. political, social, cultural, religious, literary and economic.

In another poem titled *Brainwash*, Gadhvi goes on criticizing *Manusmriti* bitterly 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.

...

I want to wash each and every cell of your brain thoroughly.

Dear Bhudev

Even if curd remains unattended for a long time, it rots, it stinks.

Your brain is as it is since Vedic times.

See it has rotted. It is dirty. It is foul odoured.”

(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 *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 poet's bitterness in this poem is quite understandable. This poem is unique in the sense that it is poetry of protest, voicing its opposition to all that is orthodox, traditional and conventional. Hindu scriptures and social structure prevent the Dalits from receiving education, training and knowledge. The poet is aware of the division of the Hindus into two main groups, the *Dvija* i.e. twice born and the *Advijas* or *non-dvijas* that is, one time-born is man-made and unnatural. Division of the *Dvijas* is into three groups, namely the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas who are supposed to be high caste Hindus. In addition to that, Brahmins were conferred the sole right not only to govern the Hindu people but even gods. In Sanskrit, there is appropriate hymn which describes as to how Brahmins controlled and dominated the gods.

The *Manusmriti* therefore asks Hinduism and Hindu kings to maintain *Dharma* and that *Dharma* means caste system in which Shudras are not allowed to get education and rise to the status of gaining human dignity and honor. This has therefore created a 'Dark Age' of thousands of years for Dalits in the past even though there was no race other than the upper caste Hindus. Because of this inhuman treatment meted out to them, Gadhvi showers curses

on *Manusmriti*. Even in another poem titled *Awakening*, Gadhvi expresses his anger for the composer of *Manusmriti*:

“Let us incinerate with petrol,
The corpses of several Manus,
Who sealed our ears with lead,
Sowed seeds of venom betwixt men.”

(Gadhvi, 31)

The same feeling with same intensity of shame, pity, anger and disgust has been highlighted in his another poem *Don't Enter the Temple*. The poet is seen abusing temples and comparing them with slaughterhouses because their ancestors have sacrificed their lives for the service and safety of the temples but even then they are not allowed to take entry into those temples and thus their sacrifices prove to be meaningless:

“They have covered the bloodstained walls with sheets of gold
They have made the golden peaks of the temple touch the sky,
The corpses of our ancestors are buried under the pillars of
That temple, they groan,
Stop,
Don't step into that slaughterhouse.”

(Gadhvi, 19)

The above mentioned poem is replete with bitterness suffered by the Dalits for more than three millennia. The prevailing social order seems to have crushed these people to an extent beyond repair. The poet here brings the very feeling of dejection that these people suffered from when they were denied their fair share of social justice and human rights. They have been projected in a very derogatory manner. It is because their culture, history and all those essential ingredients which give them existence have been buried under the edifice of Aryan history and culture. Let's take yet another noteworthy example of his poem *We are Black, You are White* in which a pitiful condition of these poor and downtrodden has been depicted by him:

“We suffered the pains of the earth
We were open to the sky,
You were in the graves
So that we are black and you are white.”

(Gadhvi, 21)

The state of affairs of these dejected people has not changed in this digital age. They are being deprived of their right to live like the common citizens of India. They have to work in scorching heat under sun and bear all hardships. So their skin becomes black. These are the days when unemployment has been one of the biggest problems and challenges these downtrodden people are facing. The laborers who are brought from villages to lay roads and railway tracks are later used for menial jobs. Even in this digital age, the manual scavengers have been integrated into the sewage and cleaning departments of most municipalities in Gujarat. They still form a recognizable part of every urban space and still live in confined urban areas. They are out of sight and out of mind of most Indians. The lives of these people are more miserable than we can imagine them to be. The words used by Gadhvi in above mentioned lines reflect deep inner pain in the face of poverty, destitution and the humiliation his people suffer from.

Dalits are at the lowest rung in the caste hierarchy based on ritual purity and occupation. They have been oppressed throughout the record history of India, relegated to doing toiling and polluting tasks like agricultural labor, disposing dead bodies, working with leather, cleaning toilets and sewages, etc. their work is for maintaining the purity of the upper caste Hindus and they themselves become impure in the process. This society depends on them for their survival but does not wish to be reminded of them. They have been stripped off their dignity and denied to human rights. They are untouchables- so much so that others would get polluted not only by their touch but also by their shadows. And to avoid this they have been segregated and denied access to community facilities like school, temple, water etc. Centuries of such oppression resulted in severe poverty and its associated problems among the Dalits. Their marginalization is indescribable. For this reason, the poet in the above mentioned lines feels hurt when somebody asks him the details of his caste. Once again, he cries out in one of his poems *My Shadow*:

“O, woodcutter
cut my shadow.
I may be a Hindu,
I may be a Buddhist,
I may be a Muslim,
Nevertheless,
I am not able to cut my shadow.
Now there is no spitting goblet hanging round my neck ,

Now there is no broom on my back.
However,
I am not able to leave my shadow.
I may change my name,
I may change my work,
I may change my place,
I may change my caste,
This shadow does not leave me alone.

I may change my language,
I may change my dress,
I may change my history,
This shadow does not disintegrate,
I may write smriti,
I may write the constitution,
I may enact laws,
I may be in reserved category.
Whatever the circumstances,
I am not able to erase this shadow”

(Gadhvi, 38)

It is not difficult to understand the substance of the poem. An untouchable expresses here his peculiar position in the society, which has not changed even after independence and after arrival of technical advancement. The poet’s identification with the psyche of the Dalit is evident here. It is difficult for him/her to get rid of the shadow of untouchability even fifty years after the independence. If a Dalit converts to Buddhism or Islam, the label of Dalit continues to chase him/her. Among Hindus, he or she cannot escape his/her caste identity because Hindu identity is a caste identity. Even though, the spittoon and broom are removed but the disgrace of being born in a particular caste has not left a Dalit yet. It is a shadow, which Dalit can never overcome. In his another poem, *Farewell to Arms* Praveen Gadhvi tries to destroy the distinctness between Dalits and non-Dalits and puts the universal conditions appropriate to the universal being:

“Let us abolish reservation law from the constitution.
Our Maganiya – Chaganiya Shall ‘Compete Open’,

But will you admit them in your convent schools?
Let us tear away the pages of the Schedule,
But will you let us be Dave, Trivedi or Patel?
Let us say farewell to arms,
and plough the country's fertile soil together,
Will you give us half share of the harvest?"

(Gadhvi, 37)

Dirty game of politics in which marginalized are further oppressed has been criticized by the poet. He is against the discrimination based on caste, religion, *varna*. His poetry is engaged in carrying out two main functions: 'demolition' and 'reconstruction'. On the one hand, it is keen to destroy what is considered as deadwood, the decaying components of the existing social and cultural order; on the other hand, it is anxious to transform the social reality in the direction of total freedom, equality and human dignity. His revolutionary vision is expressed by him in his poem *Awakening* as following:

"Let us awaken friends!
Take the earth by storm, wipe out from its face
Temples untouchable...
Let us drench the soil in red,
With the blod of Huns-
Who swooped down from mid-Asia
Onto our fertile land, green..."

(Gadhvi, 31)

Thus, the poetry by Pravin Gadhvi is seen as a product of this new consciousness. It presages a new caste system, overthrowing the dominance of the so-called middle-class conventional norms and standards. It exposes the foibles and prejudices of the high caste society towards the Dalits. It instills in them a new consciousness and prepare them for a change of heart. Examining in general, Gujarati Dalit poetry has shouldered an immense responsibility. It is not a pleasure giving literature of fine sentiments in the normal sense. It is a purposive, revolutionary, transformational and laboratory literature.

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