

‘Master, the country is now free’: The Bhajan and Orality in Gujarati Dalit Poetry

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“The untouchables have no Press. The Congress Press is closed to them and is determined not to give them the slightest publicity. They cannot have their own Press and for obvious reasons. No paper can survive without advertisement revenue. Advertisement revenue can come only from business and in India all business, both high and small is attached to the congress and will not favour any Non-Congress organisation. The staff of the Associated Press in India, which is the main news agency in India, is entirely drawn from the Madras Brahmins—indeed the whole of the Press in India is in their hands—and they, for well-known reasons, are entirely pro-Congress and will not allow any news hostile to the Congress to get publicity. These are reasons behind the control of the Untouchables.”

—Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1945)

*If you prick us, do we not bleed?
if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison
us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not...*

—William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice* (III, i),
quoted on the back cover of *Nisbat*, an anthology of Dalit
Literature published by the Gujarati Dalit
Sahitya Pratisthan, Ahmedabad in 2010 and
part of the logo of the organisation.

This quotation from Shakespeare’s play *Merchant of Venice*, spoken by Shylock the Jew is part of the logo of the Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Pratisthan, an organisation that produces, publishes and disseminates Dalit Literature in Gujarat. One of the newer Dalit literary institutions in the state (which also points to the growing fissures in the movement and the Dalit literary community) the words on the logo belie not only the reactionary nature of the movement but also its assertion of identity. The word ‘Dalit’ underneath these lines spoken by Shylock points to such an assertion of identity. The quotation from Shakespeare also indicates the identification with English literature and thereby a rejection to some degree of the Gujarati language and literature.

Let us juxtapose this logo and its implications with that of an earlier dalit literary articulation. In the preface to the very first anthology of Gujarati dalit poetry titled *Aakrosh* (Pent up Anger), published in 1978 the editors Dalpat Chauhan, Praveen Gadhvi, Neerav Patel and Yogesh Dave define Dalit poetry:

Dalit poetry is the silent lament of the dalits arising from ages of bearing pain, insult, atrocity, contempt, disgust, slavery-bonded labour, untouchability, violence, poverty, hopelessness, helplessness, exploitation, discrimination, second-class citizenship, prejudice and an inferiority complex with their innocence, simplicity, courage, self-respect, skill and self-reflexivity. (P. Parmar 5) (Translation from Gujarati mine. Unless stated otherwise, all translations that follow are mine).

As this section of the preface suggests, Dalit poetry is to an extent a reaction, a counter-movement so to speak against ‘ages’ of oppression. Both these articulations, one early and one later in the Dalit literary movement suggest the counter, the oppositional nature of Dalit literature and a rejection of the mainstream Gujarati identity and culture as well as literature.

My larger project is to explore the polyphony and polemics of poetry in Gujarat as separate from the singular narrative of ‘Gujarati’ poetry (‘Gujarati’ both as dominant language and homogenous culture). Written in other languages spoken in the State (Hindi, Urdu and Dehwali, a tribal language of southern Gujarat and northern Maharashtra), this is poetry that creates a challenge to the mainstream discourse and narratives in not just the content but in the language that it creates, and the form that it takes. I attempt to situate Dalit poetry and literature in Gujarat in the wider canvas of the evolving identity of the state, suggesting that Dalit literature is one of the many voices in the polyphony of literatures in Gujarat. In this paper, I posit that Gujarati Dalit poetry, which has come to identify itself as and is recognised as a counter-literature, has roots both in the oral tradition

of the bhajan as protest as well as in the Dalit Political Movement.

Claiming a Dalit spiritual tradition

Toral Gajarawala says of Hindi Dalit literature that its origins may be traced to the "political writings of early caste reformers of the 1920s in Northern India, writings that spurred "untouchables" to self-assertion, but most agree that its modern form appears in the late 1980s, as poetry, fiction, and autobiography." (575) This is true also of Dalit literature in Gujarat, though it appeared in this consolidated form a decade earlier. Efforts to create a literary history of Gujarat Dalit literature emerged recently, like Dalpat Chauhan's literary history of Gujarati Dalit literature titled *Gujarati Dalit Sahitya ni Kediye* (A History of Gujarati Dalit Literature). I will trace here the relationship between early Gujarati Dalit writing (pre-independence and up to the death of Dr. Ambedkar in 1956) and the bhajan tradition in Gujarat that emerged from the impulse of Bhakti.

In his book *Dalit Literary Tradition in Gujarat: A Critical Study*, M B Gaijan traces the history of Dalit poetry in Gujarat where he includes Dalit saint poets of Medieval Gujarat. He presents a bhajan by Narsinh Mehta, the saint poet of Gujarat, which extols a Dalit community as bhaktas. Besides a mention of the popularity of the bhajans among Dalit communities in Gujarat as gleaned from the Bhajans themselves, there are also Dalit saint poets like Dadu Dayal and Dasi Jeevan. Among other poets in the Gujarati Dalit oral tradition are Trikam Saheb, Ratanbai, Akkal Das and Dev Dungarpuri. In fact, Gaijan claims Kabir's legacy as an important one for the Dalit literary tradition in Gujarat. (Gaijan 39-42) (Bhagat 39-55)

The Ravi Bhan sect, named after Bhan Saheb (a late disciple of Kabir) and Raviram, a disciple of Bhan Saheb, had many followers from Dalit communities in Gujarat. The sect became popular and was active mostly in the region of Saurashtra. The bhajans created by the gurus of the Ravi Bhan Sect like Trikam Saheb, are sung in Gujarat, especially in Saurashtra, even today. Many scholars in Gujarat like Dr. Nathalal Gohil and Niranjana Rajyaguru have worked at tracing the history and excavating the literary output of Dalit saint poets. The textualisation of this oral history and oral literature has been part of the reclaiming of history and creation of an alternative or counter tradition by Dalit scholars. By the words 'textualisation' and 'textual' in this paper I simply mean the existence of this literature in 'written' form.

As opposed to this claiming of an older oral Dalit literary tradition is the complete rejection of the bhajan as a form of Dalit poetry by Harish Mangalam, a Dalit poet and one of the founders of the Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Academy.

He says, "Bhajans are not part of Dalit literature...[in bhajans] there is only worship of Gods and Goddesses which is totally contradictory to the ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. In India, Hindu society is totally based on Hindu religion and Bhajans have been carrying the influence of Hindu philosophy which has not considered an existence of female, untouchables, marginal (sic), vagrants, LGBT etc." (Personal communication dated 7 March 2016)

While bhajans are certainly spiritual in nature and focus on a personal self and personal god, they are also emblematic of the rejection of brahminical religion and religious practice by the proponents of bhakti. Bhakti has been seen in most modern scholarship either as a social movement or as personal devotion. I would like to draw attention here to the performative aspect of bhakti, especially through the act of singing the bhajan. This performance of bhakti, whether personal or communal, is where the power of protest in bhakti also gains traction. The fact that there is an audience, if only God, suggests some form of reception. The audience plays an active role in the singing of the bhajan. It is due to this participation that such performances became sites for rebellion and protest against exploitation. As Christian Lee Novetzke suggests in *Bhakti and its Public*, bhakti "relies on the flow of its sentiment and information about the communal identity of fellow listeners, all communicated visibly, mediated by an audience." (Novetzke 255-56)

In the popularity of communal devotional singing lies this sense of communal identity. This context of audience and communal identity is something that the early Dalit poets take from to craft their poetry. Besides performativity and the audience, another important idea related to the bhajan form is that of orality. The bhajan is an oral literary form. It is transmitted not textually but through singing and performance. Its mass folk appeal lies in its orality and the accessibility that it lends to non-literate individuals and communities. There is power simply in chanting the name of the lord, which the Brahmin and his scriptures cannot interfere with.

In the context of the performance of asceticism, Antonette DeNapoli writes about the singing of bhajans:

As we will see, the sadhus view sannyās as a glorious awakening to the power and presence of the divine, rather than as, in the dominant Brahminical model, "dying" to the world. To become a sadhu means to celebrate, in the company of other "good people," the precious power that chanting the divine name bequeaths. That power, the sadhus say, is present everywhere in the world. (DeNapoli 262-263)

Thus, in the orality and performance of bhakti through the singing of the bhajan lies the revolutionary power of bhakti, making it a living tradition.

The Gujarati dalit poets of the early 20th century having migrated recently to cities and had an education in British run schools tend to use the bhajan form or other more oral forms of verse like songs. While it is important to note as many scholars like Karen Pechilis Prentiss and David N. Lorenzen¹ have, that the Bhakti Movement as we know it did not bring about radical social change on the ground, it was certainly as Rohini Mukashi-Puneekar writes “revolutionary in spirit” and it is this that we shall focus on. (Mokashi-Puneekar)

Movement from city to villages, from orality to literacy

In 1881, following the recommendations of the Hunter Commission the Government of India de-centralised primary education, transferring it to the charge of municipalities and district boards. (Venkatanarayanan) Through a circular in 1880 the British government gave dalits the right to education. Another circular followed, which threatened government action against schools that refused to admit ‘untouchable’ students. Special schools for dalit students were established. In 1882, Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad of Vadodara established the first ‘antyaj’ school. He also endowed scholarships and established boarding schools. The state of Vadodara was an exception and other regions in Gujarat did not follow suit. Despite government intervention, the number of schools that admitted dalit students were few in number. (Desai 247) (Yagnik Dalit asmita...) While the immediate effects of this education were felt in Gujarat at large and many literary figures emerged during the period that followed, there was not much writing by Dalits that emerged. While we do see scattered literary activity amongst the Dalits and attempts at creating a Dalit Literary sphere, the first full length written collection of Gujarati Dalit poetry appeared only in 1982, a hundred years after the first Antyajaya vidyala was established by the Maharaja Sayaji Gaekwad of Vadodara in 1882.

From 1924, under the influence of Ambedkar several dalit magazines were published in Gujarati. These include *Nayuvak*, *Dalit Unnati*, *Antyajaya Patrika*, *Savdhani*, *Bhereubandh*, *Dalit Gujarat*, *Challenge*, etc. (Gaijan 92) With increasing literacy, more writing was produced by dalits in Gujarat. The oral tradition however was strong and it is in the late 1800s that we see figures like Dasi Jeevan and Akkal Das emerge and gain popular following.

Mills and Migration: From Oral to Textual

Besides education, modernization was making its way into Gujarat in many ways. The economic order was

changing and Gujarati businessmen realized that they must industrialise. The first textile mill was established in Bharuch by James Landon in 1854, followed by mills in Surat and Ahmedabad. With the establishment of the first textile mill in Ahmedabad by Ranchhodlal and Chhotalal in 1861 Ahmedabad became a centre of the textile industry in Gujarat.

The expansion of the railways made migration easier. However, upper caste passengers refused to sit with ‘untouchables’ and so in princely states like Junagadh special coaches called ‘dhed na dabba’ were attached to trains to accommodate them. (Yagnik and Sheth, *The Making of Modern Gujarat* 131) This ease in migration brought many villagers to the cities. In particular Dalit communities like the vankars (weavers) gained employment in the mills. Almost all the vankars were assigned to the spinning department. When the tread broke during weaving they had to be joined together using saliva. The other workers would not touch the ‘polluted’ cloth woven by the vankars and so they were not employed as weavers despite weaving being their traditional profession. This segregation prevailed other areas as well: Dalits did not share the same spaces for eating food or vessels for water. The Dalit mill workers lived in challis or chawls. The segregation followed them here too, with the dalits living in their own pols in close proximity with the chaalis of the muslim workers. The chaalis were situated outside the city of Ahmedabad in villages like Saraspur, Rakhial and Gomtipur, which were later included in the city limits of Ahmedabad. (Yagnik and Sheth, *Ahmedabad* 165-70) It is no co-incidence that the pioneer poets of Gujarati dalit literature came from the same areas of Raikhal, Rajpur and Gomtipur. By Gujarati dalit literature here I mean specifically post-independence literature that emerge in the late 1970s and 1980s in Gujarat. (Patel xii)

The Dalit Panther poets all came from the *chaalis* of the Ahmedabad mills. Their fathers or relatives had worked in the mills and they grew up in the *chaalis*. It was in the *chaalis* that their political education and mobilization started. The mill workers had made efforts to organise themselves since 1895 when the first recorded strike in the Ahmedabad mills took place. This mobilisation was labour related not caste related and led to the formation of the textile workers union or the Majoor Mahajan in 1920. The chaalis also saw the presence of the Marxist and communist unions over the next few decades, which spread political consciousness amongst the workers. Poets like Sahil Parmar and Dalpat Chauhan recount their encounters with Marxist thought in the chaalis and their subsequent Dalit consciousness. (Personal conversation with the poets, April 2014) With independence and the

setting up of schools and colleges that were inclusive, these pioneers of Dalit poetry in Gujarat also gained access to higher education.

Neerav Patel, one of these pioneer writers writes in his introduction *Gujarati Dalit Kavita* about the establishment of the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat and the related movement in literature, which started with the publication of the magazine *Aakrosh* on 14 April 1978. He calls *Aakrosh* an announcement by design of a movement called 'Gujarati Dalit kavita', Gujarati Dalit poetry. (Patel, *Gujarati Dalit Kavita* xii) With these poets began a textual (what may be called written or literary) and conscious Dalit poetry.

Anjali: challenging the textual/written

Besides the scattered poetry that we find in early Dalit magazines of the 1920s and even post-independence, attempts at a textual poetry had been made earlier. The most noteworthy among these was the spontaneous publication of pamphlets of poetry written in memory of Dr. Ambedkar on his death in 1956. Rameshchandra Parmar of the Gujarat Dalit Panthers, compiled poems from 175 of pamphlets into a commemorative collection titled *Anjali* in 1987. Ashok Harsh, who judged a poetry competition held alongside this publication, said that though the poems were weak in terms of literary merit, they were important in the feeling and meaning that they conveyed. The poems in *Anjali*, textualised versions of verse in an oral mode, did not meet the standards of 'literariness' in Gujarati literature.

Anjali was path-breaking in both its content and intent. It presented a challenge to the language of literary writing in Gujarati and the very construction of language. Parmar uses the *deergha* 'ee' instead of the *hrasva* 'i' to spell 'anjalee'. In an editor's note he writes:

Gandhiji declared that after the publication of the *Sarth Gujarati Jodani Kosh* (Sarth Gujarati lexicon of orthography) no one can spell according to their fancy any more.

If the valour-seeking Gujarati population can brazenly flout Gandhiji's teachings through caste wars motivated by self-interest the why should Dalit poets not write 'Anjalee' instead of 'Anjali'? (R. Parmar, *Anjali* iii)

He questions who is allowed to use the language and in what ways. Parmar makes language itself a site of contestation and negotiation by asking who has ownership of the language. The *deergha* (longer/ greater) instead of the *hrasva* (shorter/ lesser) phonetic sound also implies a movement to the centre from the margins through language. Writing poetry instead of singing it, as many of the poems in the collection are meant to, also means being tied down to the injunctions of written language. Written language imposes the structure of

the upper caste people who have made it their own. Through the simple change in phonetics Parmar sought to challenge this very structure, both of literariness/textuality and social structure.

The poems collected in *Anjali* are hagiographical in nature and as said earlier, maybe lacking in literary qualities but not in feeling. In the poems collected in *Anjali* one sees Ambedkar commemorated as a nation-building figure and it is a particular kind of nation that is imagined here: where the constitution has bestowed equal rights on the Dalits, where Ambedkar is the creator of the Hindu code bill. It is a nation where the marginalised have hope. It is an inclusive nation.

The Anjali poems: Orality and Performance

Most of the poems in *Anjali* are oral poetry in the textual mode and meant to be sung. Many have a note stating which tune they are to be sung to. At least three of the poems are meant to be sung to the tune of the folk song 'Jasal ni chitti' (Jasal's letter) and three to the tune of the bhajan '*kanthji kyare bhegaa thasho*' (Lord, when shall we meet?) and one to the tune of the Hindi film song '*Man dole mera tan dole*'. This suggests that the primary mode of poetry that the Dalit mill workers were familiar with was the oral mode. While the song was a very popular lyrical form in Gujarati poetry at the time and retains its popularity, the form that the Dalit poets of *Anjali* employed was not the same as the song in Gujarati literature.

Besides *Anjali*, Rameshchandra Parmar also published other poems by some Dalit mill worker poets in the collection *Shramik Kavita* (Labour Poetry). The Dalit mill worker poets also used the bhajan form of the bhakti tradition. In the hagiographical poems in *Anjali* the figure of Dr. Ambedkar replaces that of the personal god of the bhakti tradition. This is evident even in the titles of the poems like *Hu to khodi rahyo* (I am seeking), *Bhimrao kyare bhega thasho?* (When will I see you Bhimrao, modelled on the bhajan *Kanthji kyare bhega thasho?*), *amare ek e nathi adhaar* (We have no refuge), etc.

The *Anjali* poems are laments of a loss that is both personal and collective. Privately published and circulated after the death of Dr. Ambedkar, they mimic the collective singing of the bhajan addressed to a personal God by the bhaktas. The orality of the bhajan lies in performance for an audience and also in collective singing. Another characteristic of orality in some poems in *Anjali* and *Shramik Kavita* is the use of voices. For instance, the poem '*Mill ane mat ni chokdi*' by Alaji Bhagat in *Shramik Kavita*. This poem, which is to be sung to the tune of '*Kachba Kachbi nu Bhajan*' a popular bhajan by Bhojo Bhagat, a disciple of Trikam Das, is a poem in three

voices: the speaker, the mill worker husband and the wife. The bhajan tells the story of a tortoise couple who have been captured by the hunter and are being cooked by him in boiling water. The bhajan relates the dialogue between the two, and also with God. The *kachbo* tells his wife to climb onto his back so that she can escape the boiling water. They tell Vitthal (Krishna) that if he does not save them he will be reviled and his name will lose its power. Finally it rains and the two are saved. It is obvious that the device of the conversation between the *kachbo* and *kachbi* has been employed by the poet in the poem 'Mill ane mat ni chokdi'. We observe orality in the poem not just through the device of the dialogue but also in the language, which is oral-demotic.

These early poems indicate a move towards textuality from orality with an almost direct transposition of the oral into the textual, like the poem discussed above. A further examination of Gujarati Dalit poetry suggests an exploitation of a more radical orality in textuality. Parmar in his editorial note to *Anjali* displays an awareness of the possibility of restrictions the textuality of literary Gujarati may impose on dalit poetry. In fact, one of the criticisms that Gujarati Dalit poetry has received is that it is not literary enough. Another is that Dalit poetry has no aesthetic and is not aesthetic (lalit). I would suggest that the 'literariness' that Dalit poets create is distinct from Gujarati 'lalit' (literally beautiful but also canonical, established) literature. The Dalit aesthetic is forged in this distinctness that springs mainly from the orality in textuality that becomes the primary mode of poets like Neerav Patel, Sahil Parmar and Shankar Painter. Before we talk more of orality in/ and textuality a little more about the Dalit movement and Dalit literature in Gujarat.

The Dalit movement and Dalit literature in Gujarat

The Dalit movement in Gujarat is said to have begun with the establishment of the Dalit Panthers of Gujarat in 1976. While there have been other conscious efforts at mobilising Dalit communities especially in the form of caste associations like the Mahyavanshis in 1907-08 (Yagnik and Sheth, Ahmedabad 156) and many pre-independence efforts under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar and the movement in Maharashtra, we will concern ourselves only with the movement as it identified itself and grew from the late 1970s onwards in Gujarat.

It would not be misplaced here to discuss the emergence of the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat. It is widely accepted in Gujarat as well as in Maharashtra that the Dalit movement in Maharashtra is the older and more robust one and that it has provided guidance, direction and solidarity for the movement in Gujarat. For instance, it was the visit of Raja

Dhale, the Dalit Panthers leader from Maharashtra that marked the establishment of the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat. While the movement in Maharashtra is influenced heavily by the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar, the movement in Gujarat did not initially have such a thrust. Unlike Maharashtra, Gujarat has lacked a continuous movement for social reform and protest, epitomised in Maharashtra by Phule and Ambedkar. (GPD 61-62) Unlike Maharashtra, Gujarat has been influenced by Gandhian ideology. Till the 1980s the Dalit communities in Gujarat had not organised and agitated in Ambedkar's way.

On 14 April 1974 the birth anniversary of Dr. Ambedkar, politically active Dalit youth from Gujarat invited Raja Dhale, one of the founders of the Dalit Panther to Ahmedabad. A large rally was organised on the day.² Subsequently, Dalit activists of Ahmedabad Nagindas Parmar, Dalpat Shrimali, Valjibhai Patel, Bakul Vakil and P. D. Vaghela organised public meetings to propagate the Dalit Panthers. They were joined by members of the Republican Party like Ramesh Chandra Parmar and Naran Vora (Franco, Macwan and Ramanathan 376). The Dalit Panthers became an active party with a political agenda in Gujarat. The agenda of the party was to reach the remotest village in the state and help victims get justice. The Dalit Panthers established themselves as a powerful and militant organisation. They played a significant role in bringing the case of the Jaitalpur burning to light and turned the incident into a full-fledged Dalit agitation. This fed into the anti-reservation agitation beginning to sweep Gujarat at the time. During the period of the anti-reservation agitation the Dalit Panthers were very active and organized.

Writing about the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra Janet Contrusi quoting Lata Murugkar states:

The Dalit Panthers, organized in June 1972 in Siddhartha Nagar, Bombay, were rooted in the Little Magazine Movement and were inspired by the Black Panthers of America, with whose militant literature, community service, and political struggle the Dalits were familiar. They called themselves "Dalit," meaning downtrodden or ground down, because it was a casteless term that both acknowledged and challenged their history of caste oppression; and "Panthers" because "they were supposed to fight for their rights like panthers, and not get suppressed by the strength and might of their oppressors."

(Contrusi 325-326)

Contrusi draws our attention not just to the militant ideology of the Dalit Panthers but also their rootedness in literature and its relationship with a political movement. This is important to note as the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat, in the footsteps of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra were also involved in the creation of literature engaging with issues of Dalits and the Dalit cause. In fact, according to Arun Dangle the Dalit Panthers came to be established

through the Dalit literary movement. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers... This was probably the first time that creative writers became politically active and led a movement.

(Dangle xl-xli) This literary genealogy is true of the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat as well.

The first publication of Gujarati Dalit literature, *Panther* was started by Rameshchandra Parmar of the Dalit Panthers in 1975. Following this, a number of periodicals devoted to Dalit literature sprang up during the second half of the seventies: *Akrosh*, *Kalo Sooraj*, *Carud*. (Sheriff 9) In fact, like the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, the members of the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat were also poets.

In April 1981 the Dalit Panthers poets published a special issue of *Akrosh*. The issue commemorated the killing by burning of the Dalit youth Shakraabhai Pochabhai in Jaitalpur village 18 kms from Ahmedabad just days before the anti-reservation agitation began in Ahmedabad. We shall return to the Jaitalpur Burning later. The issue was banned by the authorities and the houses of the Gujarat Dalit Panthers' president Rameshchandra Parmar, and Manishi Jani, the Secretary of the Gujarat Lok Adhikar Sangh were searched without a warrant on April 26. Two other poet contributors were arrested on charges of spreading communal disharmony and defaming the police through their poems in the April issue of *Akrosh*. Five other poets had to secure anticipatory bails. In all, two dalit and five upper-caste poets of *Akrosh* were harassed. The April issue also included poems of Cherabanda Raju and Muktibodh. (Conversation with poets Sahil Parmar and Dalpat Chauhan in Gandhinagar, July 2013) (Yagnik 553-554)

I describe the *Akrosh* incident in order to illustrate the close links between the Dalit movement and Dalit poetry in Gujarat right from the inception of both.

Orality and Textuality: Dalit poetry as counter-culture

In this section I will examine the poetry of Neerav Patel and Sahil Parmar in order to explore the orality in textuality that Gujarati Dalit poets employ. Both Patel and Parmar belong to the group of pioneer poets who were part of both the Dalit literary and socio-cultural movement in Gujarat. While the Dalit movement in Gujarat is not limited to the city of Ahmedabad and there were many poets and activists in other parts of the state who were part of the movement, I focus here on the poet-activists from Ahmedabad. One reason Ahmedabad is important as a site in the Dalit movement in Gujarat is because of the anti-reservation movement of 1981 that began in the city and spread through the state. The Dalit poet-activists from Ahmedabad played a pivotal role in the movement

against the anti-reservationists. The *Aakrosh* incident mentioned above is a case in point.

There have been many studies on Dalit literatures from various parts of India, most of them focusing on fiction or autobiography. Little attention has been paid to Dalit poetry and its language, and the mode in which Dalit poetry is written. Dalit literature is viewed through the lens of the experiential and realism, what Gajarawala calls 'Dalit realism'. As R. G. Jadhav says: "The tradition of social awareness lends a quality of realism to Dalit literature." (305) In this section I will explore the aesthetic and poetics of Gujarati Dalit poetry with a focus on the work of Neerav Patel and Sahil Parmar. Gajarawala writes in a footnote to "Some Time between Revisionist and Revolutionary: Unreading History in Dalit Literature" that: "...to be Dalit was to be, definitionally, deprived of access to cultural production that required literacy." This is true of the early poets and early Dalit poetry in Gujarat, which while textual and literate, still uses an oral mode. The poets of the 1970s and 1980s despite, and probably because of their education introduce orality in their texts. The discomfort with written, literary language, that Neerav Patel expresses, and which we see in the language of poets like Sahil Parmar and Shankar Painter is palpable. Neerav Patel in his essay "Gujarati my mother tongue, English my foster mother", he says that English liberates him from the labels that Gujarati imposes on him. This Gujarati is the language of mainstream Gujarati literature, with its traditional forms.

Dalit critics emphasise the expression of lived experience. For critics like Sharankumar Limbale this unmediated expression constitutes of authenticity. (10) However Jhadav suggests that "...from the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness. It means that the Dalit writers have to realize their total sensibility towards life from the level of art." (306-7) In relation to this we can also look at Neerav Patel's ideas on Dalit aesthetics:

Some may question the unique aesthetics of Dalit literature. The efficacy of its aesthetics is relative to its successful expression. Where white is a measure of beauty and others colours ugly, the aesthetic of a rebel literature can only be to establish the beauty of other colours. The aesthetics not of 'Black is also beautiful' but that of 'Black is beautiful' must be made current. Dalit aesthetics does not believe in making literature an artefact for the museum but in the principle of urgency in life lived.

(*Sarvanam* 154) The Dalit critics call for a radical departure from mainstream aesthetics and even suggest, if not advocate, the construction of a counter aesthetic.

One of the primary devices used by Gujarati Dalit poets in order to create this counter aesthetic is language, specifically the dialect of their communities. In Gujarati

this kind of language is called 'talpadi' – folk language. Poets like Harish Mangalm, Shanka Painter, Madhukant Kalpit, Sahil Parmar and Dalpat Chauhan use the dialect of the villages of north Gujarat, around Mehasana. Shankar Painter's poem *chyam lya phati jyu's* (Why, you shit scared?) and eponymous collection are an example. Of note is Sahil Parmar's long report poem '*Ek rakabi footi*' (A saucer broke) about an incident of what is called bride burning, which is written entirely in dialect. The poem is a long monologue. Through the voice of the mother-in-law Parmar reveals the patriarchy within Dalit society and its violent effect on the young daughter-in-law and her little daughter who are burnt to death following the breaking of a saucer and the daughter-in-law's response to the accusation that she broke it on purpose. The poet's critique of the superstition and oppression within his community, not enforced from outside is strong. In his introduction to *Mathaman* (Churning), the collection this poem is part of, he writes about his aesthetics. Parmar says that the period from the late 1970s till 1985 was that of 'stage poetry'. By stage poetry he means poetry that is performed or declaimed. This period was the period for stage poetry due to the political climate of the time against the backdrop of the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat. The Dalit movement was gaining momentum and many of the poets, who were also activists, performed their poetry at rallies and protests. After 1986, Parmar felt the need to move away from stage poetry and 'colloquial language' to reach to a larger more main-stream audience. (23) The churning of the title is also that of struggle between beauty and form. Aware of the allegations of sloganeering against Dalit poetry, from 1985 to 1990 he attempted this difficult exercise in equilibrium. (Jadeja)

Parmar has moved away from the kind of oral language that prevents him from reaching out to a larger audience. Not all Gujarati Dalit poetry is written in the oral mode, predominantly in folk language or dialect. Besides the use of such oral/ folk language, there are attempts to exploit orality in textuality in a different manner as we see in the poetry of Neerav Patel and Sahil Parmar. By orality here, I do not simply mean the representation of spoken language but a deliberate choice of using the oral mode in the textual. This is what Walter Ong calls the "literate orality" of the secondary oral culture (Ong 133). Ong makes a distinction between primary oral culture, where orality is not a choice, and literate culture, which chooses the oral and creates a literate (what I call textual) orality. In Gujarati Dalit poetry this orality in textuality consists of turns of phrases, idioms/ proverbs, names, the form of the song or bhajan and the use of multiple voices, i. e. the use of oral discourse. There is a deliberate-ness to this kind of orality, which we observe in Gujarati Dalit poetry.

Sahil Parmar, besides the use of dialect in his poems employs orality through his use of oral forms like the song (poems like *mill chhootya ni veda*, leaving the mill) and names (like Raghlo in the poem *etluj, vishesh kashu nahi*; just that, nothing in particular). These oral modes are observed also in the poetry of Neerav Patel. In the poem *Tu j mari sahiyar* (Only you are my companion), a poem about the sexualizing of a Dalit woman by both upper caste and Dalit men, he uses motif of the sparrow from a popular oral folk tale. In another poem he uses the expression 'e' which is used in the oral tradition as a form of address that pulls the listener in to the story. In the poem *Premiere of 'Bhav ni Bhavai'* he uses the structure of the opening of the bhavai folk performance (of the title of the film) to begin his poem and makes use of the pattern of repetition used in a *bhavai* performance.

Employing the modes of the oral tradition in the textual/ literate poetic expression allows Gujarati Dalit poets to create a radical aesthetic that is a counter aesthetic. The creation of a counter-aesthetic through orality is has been developed by the Gujarati Dalit poets through the transition from an oral to textual poetry. The Gujarati Dalit poets while they reject tradition, have also taken from the oral tradition, particularly the bhajan, which was an integral form of bhakti.

Notes

1. David N. Lorenzen in his introduction to *Bhakti Religion in North India* discusses the saguni and nirguni movements drawing a parallel with Gramsci's ideas of hegemonic and subaltern or subordinate discourses. (3) Karen Pechilis Prentiss traces the various interpretations of Bhakti as a movement and makes a similar distinction. (26-28)
2. Gail Omvedt suggests in 'Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity' that the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat were established in after the 1980-81 anti-reservation agitation (73). According to Omvedt the rise of the Dalit Panthers gave momentum to the movement. While I agree with her in that, I would date the formation if the Dalit Panthers in Gujarat to earlier in 1974.

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