

## **CHIRAG TRIVEDI AND BHARGAV OZA**

### **From Fine a Balance, to Refine: Dalit 'self', Theory and Literature**

#### **Abstract**

The development of the Dalit identity over the last few decades has been shaped by the revolutionary movements – political and literary. Whatever the term used, being Dalit is a real experience and everyday struggle for the masses living under the curse of the caste system. Over the years, the term Dalit has come to signify the masses that have been exploited and oppressed by the dominant social classes in India.

Dalit theory has been widely misrepresented in Indian academia because of two primary reasons: Firstly, the production of Dalit theory in Indian social sciences has so far been controlled by the elite Brahmins, the legitimate subject who has the right to produce knowledge as per the Dharmashastras and Varnashram. Secondly, the alienation of Savarnas from the 'lived' experience of those who are at the bottom rungs of caste system and face violence. This kind of scholarship requires critical introspection, since it is produced by 'Theoretical Brahmins', not by 'Empirical Shudras' (Guru and Sarukkai). This leads us to certain fundamental gaps

between a 'lived' experience on ground and an elite 'Brahminical' theory produced on top: Is not the social sciences in India, itself a product of the Chaturvarna system? Who are the 'owners', 'authors' of these experiences?

This paper further deliberates upon questions like is Dalithood merely social stratification or personal experience and by constantly comparing select Gujarati and Marathi Dalit literary narratives the paper interrogates if Dalit literature really ensures emancipation. The focus of the paper is on registering how Dalit literary movement, through its cross-interactions with Dalit theory, struggles between 'victimhood' as its stereotypical identity and anti-caste approach as that could ensure movement from margin to the centre space.

**Keywords:** Dalit Theory, Dalit Movement, Empirical Shudras, representation

### **From Fine a Balance, to Refine: Dalit 'self', Theory and Literature by Chirag Trivedi and Bhargav Oza**

Dalit as a general word comes from the word padadalit (slave at one's feet) and refers to people in the underclasses—the ex-untouchables of the Hindu caste system as well as other oppressed communities, including the adivasis, the poor, the laborers, and so on, as Datta Bhagat explains it (Bhagat). In recent times, we can understand the identity politics of Dalithood through various strands. Of all the socio-political movements that

played out in the contemporary history of India; the most profound impact were that which emerged from Gandhian, Marxist and the Ambedkarite politics in making of 'caste' as a conscious social marker in public sphere.

Although Mahatma Gandhi was a well-known critic of untouchability in the Hindu caste system, and he saw a need for reform before people could be united in the struggle for Indian independence, he was often at odds with Ambedkar's ideas for Dalit struggle for human and civil rights. The very term harijan that he used in reference to Dalits was considered patronizing rather than respectful. Ambedkar considered his alliances with capital and upper-caste interests with suspicion as well. Marxism provides yet another very strong rubric for Dalit literary production and has been favoured for systemic analysis as well as political alliances. However, it has often split members in their attempt to define the goals and thrust of Dalit writing and activism<sup>1</sup>. But the politics and activism of Ambedkar and his influence over the theoretical sociology of caste as expressed in his writings; as well as his vision and lifelong commitment towards eradication of caste - changed the discourse of caste politics in India forever.

Both Phule and Ambedkar understood the role of Hindu religious emphasis on Karma and Moksha in the perpetuation of the caste system, so they fought to eradicate its influence. Ambedkar led more than 4 million Indians (most of them belonged to his Mahar caste) into Buddhism in a mass conversion ceremony in Nagpur in

1956. He reinterpreted Buddhism as a religion to emphasize its investment in improving life on earth, in the here and now of the social world. Religious conversion seemed to him significant for Dalits to sever ties from the pressures of Hindu traditions, to forge social and cultural cohesion, and to foster a sense of pride and identity. On one hand, this was a clear rejection of the Hindu social structure based on caste, religious texts, and traditions; on the other, it was an articulation of a nationalist position for a new India based on a reinterpretation of indigenous ideas from India's past. It is in this historical reference point, that an 'anti-caste' Dalit movement; in the political and literary spheres (one serving the purpose of the other) emerged.

In this paper, this event is taken as a pretext for understanding why is there a need for a universal 'anti-caste' theory to emerge from the social sciences in India, and why is there a need to take a recourse to the original Ambedkarite position. The epicentre of this theory should be rooted in the daily experiences and life view of a Dalit. In doing so, this paper looks at two important aspects: First, who produces the Dalit theories in Indian social sciences and how it is produced. Second, this paper examines how the personal experience of a Dalit is represented in Dalit Literature through comparative analysis of Gujarati and Marathi Dalit literary narratives in the context of Dalit literary movements in these two states. The paper argues for the case that the Dalit theory,

as envisioned and produced in the Indian social sciences is – represented by the upper-caste and the form of such kind of theory is therefore Brahminic<sup>ii</sup> and upper-caste. On the other hand, Dalit narratives as expressed in Dalit literature, can serve as a base for construction of a self-representational Dalit theory. It is these two prisms – i.e. the urgent need for a Dalit theory emerging from self-experience and is self-representational; and narratives of Gujarati and Marathi Dalit literature which are vehicles through which one can peek into the trajectory of Dalit experiences; through which we can pursue towards building a new Dalit theory.

### **Why is there a need for establishing a Dalit social theory?**

Gopal Guru in his essay *Egalitarianism and the social sciences in India* stresses the need for introducing the principle of egalitarianism in Indian social sciences (Guru). He argues, “As the last fifty to sixty years of academic experience with Indian social science shows, social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy, dividing it into the vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and the privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity that makes them intellectually superior to the former. [...] Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras.”(Guru). This kind of power structure observed in Indian social sciences is reflective of how the chaturvarna

system, embedded in the political history of India, is reproduced in the modern context within the social sciences paraphernalia. The present nature of Indian social sciences has remained a privileged affair for the upper-caste, while those at the bottom rungs of the society who have been systematically excluded from the epicentre of this power are hardly represented. The lack of egalitarian balance “would crush the confidence of the marginalised [...], lower their self-esteem and humiliate them through epistemological patronage or charity.” (Guru). In a more general sense, this perspective has also been observed by Kancha Ilaiah who notes: “Hinduism constructed its own account of Dalitbahujan knowledge systems [...] While the Dalitbahujans live labour as life, the Hindus inverted the principle and privileged leisure over labour.” (Ilaiah).

The theory/empirics divide between Brahmins and Dalits, also lead to a production of theory where Dalits become an ‘objectivised’ subject of a Brahmin’s research. The theory produced is an account by an ‘outsider’. By extension, this kind of theoretical practice is much similar to that preached by the colonizers who treated its subjects as savages which needed to be tamed and civilized. Since these theories are not self-representational, they are therefore epistemologically unreliable because of the absence of the ‘essence’ – the ‘lived’ Dalit experience. A theoretical ‘Other’ has no moral-ethical right to theorize an empirical ‘Self’. In other words, notions of Dalit ‘self’

cannot be epistemologically constructed by an 'Other', a Brahmin in this case. A Dalit theory should therefore emerge from the ontology of Dalit 'self', expressed and articulated through their lived experiences and realities. In the absence of this category i.e. the absence of Dalit 'self' in the theory, the theory produced is by default, Brahminic in its fundamental form/nature.

How it is then that one can understand the sociology of lived realities of Dalits, while culturally not identifying with the lived realities and everyday experiences as that of a Dalit? How can the category of 'lived experience' of Dalits in the Dalit theory be included, while the identity of author sharing (or not) the same socio-cultural sphere as that of the Dalit subject? While these are some of the fundamental questions<sup>iii</sup> that should be answered before we think of producing a universal Dalit theory, there is at least one alternative which can build the foundation for this kind of Dalit theory. Dalits' day to day experiences are rooted in the historical and political significance of Dalit Movement and the political consciousness of Dalits about their identity. Dalit movement reflects Dalits' historical struggle for self-pride and self-respect. It is a Movement which has as much significance in the literary sphere as it has in the political sphere.<sup>iv</sup> The subsequent part of this essay reflects upon how specific instances and narratives from Gujarati and Marathi Dalit texts, in the larger backdrop of Gujarati and Marathi Dalit literary movements have provided us with an already established body of

scholarship which reflects the 'lived' experiences. It must be noted that Dalit literature emerged as an ideological opposition to the mainstream Sanskritized literature, and therefore the Dalit literature is that of protest. One can therefore argue that Dalit literature is self-representative then the mainstream Indian literature, since its essence is rooted in the everyday struggles faced by Dalits. The following section of the paper looks deeper into this aspect.

### **Reflections of 'Dalit-self' in Gujarati and Marathi Dalit narratives**

The development of the Dalit identity over the last few decades has been shaped by the revolutionary movements – political and literary. Whatever the term used, being Dalit is a real experience and everyday struggle for the masses living under the curse of the caste system. Over the years, the term Dalit has come to signify the masses that have been exploited and oppressed by the dominant social classes in India.

*"All in all, 'caste' is a lived social experience in India more than a prescribed mode of social classification." G.N. Devy in his introduction to The Outcaste (Sonkar).*

According to Arjun Dangle,

*"Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society."(Dangle).*

Baburao Bagul in his essay *Dalit literature is but human literature* states that Dalit is synonymous with the revolutionary philosophy that the Dalit movement has come to espouse over the last half a century.

*“Dalit’ is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate”(Dangle).*

‘Dalit’ has, thus, evolved from being a ‘prescribed mode’ ordained by the dominant classes to a revolution by the oppressed in India – the evolution from the condition of being yoked to a system of oppression to a revolt working for emancipation from this oppression. Whereas in Maharashtra people were calling the movement ‘mahayudha’ (epic war) and ‘revolution incarnate’, Gujarat was rather placid on the Dalit revolution front. That is not to say that there were no people who were concerned with the caste issue at all. It was just that it did not reach the activism and epic proportions Maharashtrian Dalit writing and revolution took.

Gujarati poet named Akho – whose thought-provoking couplets hold a special place in the Gujarati literary tradition writes,

*Unchkhara re unchamjaan, neechteno e  
neechnirman,*

*Unch ma Ram bamno nathi bharyo ane neech  
pindthalo nathi karyo...*

*(What is high in the high-caste; what is made low in  
a low-caste,*

*Neither the high-caste has double the Ram in him  
nor is the low-caste made of nothing!)*

As early as 1861 Sorabsha Dadabhai Munshaf translated a novel from French to Gujarati, *Hindustan Madhye nu Ek Zunpadu*, which contains almost all the elements of a Dalit novel. The protagonist in the novel who belongs to Pariah community saves a Brahmin widow from surrendering to Sati and lives with her in his small hut. And then we get Sopan's *Prayashchit*, Gunvantrai Acharya's *Karal Kal Jage*, Snehrashmi's *Antarpatand*, R V Desai's *Divyachakshu*. Gandhi inspired Gujarati literati and Gandhian values upheld the drive against untouchability; rural upliftment started getting attention through various literary expressions.

But above all these and even among earlier expressions of Dalit writing in Gujarat, *Angaliyat* (Macwan) marks a perfect turning point – owing it all to the social, political and literary background in Gujarat what had laid the platform for a novel like this and –to become the launch pad and guiding light for the flourishing Gujarati Dalit literature that followed thereafter.

Strong political backing and Ambedkar's ideology was a cause for the emergence of Dalit writers earlier in Maharashtra than most other states and their growth as a form of revolt against social oppression. Marathi Dalit literature emerged out of a larger political movement against the upper castes but on the contrary Gujarati Dalit literature, which in a way was an echo of the movement happening in Maharashtra, grew as a response to upper caste's strong opposition of the reservation policy in 1981.

The two agitations – in 1981 and 1985 – had made the divide between the upper castes and the Dalits clear and wider. The upper caste violence against Dalits all over Gujarat was an important trigger for the beginning of Dalit literature in Gujarat. The first Gujarati collection of poems by a Dalit author, Lokayan, was published in 1981.

A few of the many political and literary movements that gave momentum to Dalit literature in Maharashtra are mentioned here. A Marathi weekly *Mooknayak*, was started by Ambedkar in 1920 to champion the cause of the Dalits. In 1924, the *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* was formed to convey Dalit issues to the government and redress their problems. It had illustrious members like Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur apart from Ambedkar himself. The Republican Party of India was established in 1957, a year after Ambedkar's death. It later split into various factions. Some factions of this party are active in India even today. The *Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh* held the first ever conference of Marathi Dalit writers in 1958. *Asmitadarsh*, a landmark publication on the Dalit literary scene, is a magazine which began in 1967 is active even today. Many short stories by major Marathi Dalit writers first appeared in *Asmitadarsh*. Dr. Meera Ghandge has published a work called *Asmita darsh Suchi*, a compilation of all the publications in *Asmitadarsh* till the year 2007. Dalit Panthers was a political organization founded in 1972. Major Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal and Arjun Dangle were among its founding members. Apart from these,

there were a host of other periodicals and magazines publishing literature by Dalit writers. Most of the Marathi Dalit writers were associated with political movements and organizations and used their works as an instrument of social change.

In Gujarat, in a poem titled *Antarvedana* (1929), the poet Manor Jivram Gangera writes,

*Haddhut thai halwo padyo jivan pashu na tulya  
chhe,*

*Avtar lidho Hind maa ne shun mari bhool chhe?  
(Hayati,)*

(Life of a low caste, full of insults is as bad as one of an animal, is it my mistake that I was born in India?)

Immediately after this, Lallubhai Makwana started a magazine called *Navyuvak* in 1930 which is considered as the first expression of Gujarati Dalit identity. This was followed by *Sudharak* (1931), *Dalit Unnati* (1932), *Harijan Samachar* (1934), *Antyaj Patrika* (1937), *Dalit Adhikar* (1938), *Jay Bhim* (1946), and *Dalit Bandhu* (1955) till it reached its culmination in 1956 when elegies were written all over Gujarat after Ambedkar's demise. Many monthly and quarterly magazines continued setting the stage for formal Gujarati Dalit literary movement till remarkable ones like *Deshbandhu* (1963), *Garud* (1972) *Muktinayak* (1980) and *Kalo Suraj* (1979) kept attacking Manuvadi ideologies in the state. Also, socio-political movements like setting up of Mahagujarat Dalit Samaj in 1925, passing of the Hotel Entry Act in 1938, Motor-bus Pravesh

Satyagraha in 1938, Temple entry movements in 1941 and 1948 also kept the caste debate alive in Gujarat. But all this in Gujarat was most of the times a carry forward effect of what was happening in Maharashtra. Expressions of Social and literary Dalit movements kept coming to surface but sporadic till 1981 when anti reservation riots in Gujarat made the lower castes really internalise the need for a conscious, well-charted and unswerving drive.

In a language that breaks off from the traditional literary prose, Joseph Macwan narrates the story of chiefly four representatives of the Vankar community of Gujarat. If one scouts through Gujarati literary histories, all of them unanimously hail *Angaliyat* in the series of novels written by Macwan's contemporaries, as the novel most representative of 'Dalitness'. Its achievement lies in setting the trend of the extent to which Dalitness is confidently delineated and in marking the turning point in the history of politics of representation in Gujarati literature.

*Akkarmashi* (1984) is a Dalit autobiographical work by Sharankumar Limbale. It made an impact on the Marathi literary scene, for use of the language of the Mahars, intense and disturbing images of everyday Dalit life. Its most distinguishing feature was that it was the autobiography of a half - caste, looked upon by other Dalits, disowned by his father, struggling with the dilemma of his identity.(Limbale).

Another theme which recurs in our reading of the lives of Dalit writers and activists, both in Gujarati and Marathi, is religious conversion. Joseph Macwan was a vankar converted to Christianity. Ambedkar and almost all of the major Dalit writers in Marathi are Buddhist. The difference in the mode of conversion in these two cases is that the Dalits of Gujarat became Christians through missionary activity in the area whereas in the case of the Marathi Dalit it was a case of mass conversion to Buddhism, to follow the footsteps of Ambedkar whom the Dalit considered their messiah. Be that as it may, the fact that there was an element of discontent with the Varna system within Hinduism, causing oppression, discrimination and ostracization among Dalits all over India cannot be disregarded. . “The tradition and culture of ancient India does not contain anything which a Dalit can own with pride”<sup>v</sup> says Dangle in his introduction to *Poisoned Bread*, an anthology of Dalit literature. Shanta Gokhale speaks of this feeling of alienation in her article *Inextinguishable Fires*: “To be denied water is to be denied life. So when Dalit writers say their literature is about life, they are talking about a bitter and humiliating struggle for existence. How then are they to feel belonging for this land and its gods?”(Gokhale).

The importance of present day Gujarati Dalit literature lies in a radical departure from the mere representation of Dalit victimhood and the focus on the nature and function of caste in Gujarati society. This new approach, along with

the theoretical developments taking place within Dalit studies, demands a reading of Dalit literature not simply as 'literature on Dalits', but as a critique of the Hindu social order. This approach involves two levels of reading/representing the problem. First, as R. Azhagarasan suggests in his introduction to Bama's novel, *Vanmam*,

*"The problem is located in its proper cultural setting. Second, new possibilities of reading into the problem have been suggested. Seen from this point of view, Ambedkar's writings on separate electorate become part of his alternative vision of nationalism, rejecting Gandhian (Hindu) nationalism which privileges political democracy. 'Caste' as a cultural category thus becomes central to an understanding of Indian culture. This way of re-situating Ambedkar in the present theoretical context may help us trace the anti-caste framework found in the Dalit intellectual tradition and in also what emerges today as Dalit literature."<sup>vi</sup>*

Similar resistance to stereotyping of Dalit literature can be seen in some of the recent Gujarati and Marathi Dalit writings. In the introduction to *Vanmam*, it is postulated that despite the attempts of Dalit writers to dwell on the anti-caste approach, the construction of victimhood has persisted, allowing us to study 'about' Dalits, thereby silencing a critical debate on caste. According to Ambedkar, any attempt at silencing the debate on caste is anti-social in spirit. Many current scholars on Dalit writing, though, claim that the representation of victimhood has lost its relevance in today's times, whereas the anti - caste approach is being brought to the fore much more than

before, especially an evaluation of the apparent 'emancipation' that has happened among Indian Dalits in the last few decades. Has this upliftment percolated down to all levels of Dalit society, or is it limited to the urban areas and a few select 'classes' of Dalits, giving rise to a new 'Dalit elite'?

Dalit literature is a revolt against centuries of abuse, oppression and oblivion. More than the actual pain and burden of ostracization, what must have galvanized these young, educated Dalits to write was the realization that they had deliberately been kept out of the canonical literature and intellectual discourse. They were aware that if this oblivion continued there was no hope for emancipation from their wretched state. There was an urgent need to record the existence of the marginalized. There is no doubt about the fact that a majority of these works served the purpose of making contemporary society introspect about the state of our oppressed classes and awakening a desire to fight for equality of all classes. G.N. Devy says in his introduction to the English translation of *Akkarmashi*,

*"...this philosophically potent and poetically powerful narrative makes the readers introspect deeply, which is what all great literary works must do."  
(Sonkar).*

In that the Dalit narratives of Gujarat and Maharashtra have made their readers "introspect deeply", they seem to have fulfilled their purpose.

## Conclusion

The need for a social change and a pan-utopian dream of casteless society requires a definite promising philosophy or theory to emerge from the academia. This philosophy/theory needs to be grounded on the sociology of lived experience, and just a glance at the trajectory of how literary movements in Maharashtra and Gujarat can provide a setting for Dalits to articulate their experiences. It can provide a ground to begin an anti-caste discourse. This discourse needs to take recourse to the Ambedkarite sociology of caste and the nature of Hindu (Brahminical) social order (Kamble and Jogdand). In doing so, one needs to be careful in representing the 'lived' experience in the theory. This paper does not try to argue whether only a Dalit should have the moral right to theorize, rather it argues that the 'lived' experience of a Dalit is a necessary empirical category to build a Dalit theory.<sup>vii</sup> The pursuit of building such a theory as self-representational lies in the 'aspect' of Dalits' social and political lives more than the authorship of Dalit theory. In that case, one needs to interpret one's moral compass of one's identity – whether Dalit or non-Dalit – through more radical frameworks. The politics of authorship and politics of representation are two significant elements while navigating the moral compass.

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**NOTES:**

<sup>i</sup> Who this struggle is for, who should be considered Dalit, whether the Hindu caste system should be the primary target, what methods suit best for whom, whether differences and degrees of differences among various oppressed groups should be addressed under the same headings, whether revolutionary violence is acceptable – these are some of the difficult questions that make for disagreements and mark the internal politics of the Marxist organisation.

<sup>ii</sup> The term ‘Brahmin’ used here is metaphorically used for a strategic collective of non-Dalits who are at the locus of power in producing knowledge systems in Indian social sciences. This is not to say that because a Brahmin represents the Dalit, the Dalit theory is Brahminical – but the paper tries to argue that, it is through the constant epistemological violence over Dalits and treating them as ‘subjects’ or the patronage position meted out towards them, the existing Dalit theory is therefore Brahminical.

<sup>iii</sup> In the conclusion, we have tried to address these questions about politics of representation and how can one pursue for a more ethical framework while also being aware of their (author) socio-cultural identity.

<sup>iv</sup> It is really difficult to distinguish the Dalit literary movement from the political movement, since both of them are only aspects of a single revolutionary movement and not separate movements in themselves. As we shall see, the reasons for the movement – whether the literary or the political aspect – emerged from strong sense of consciousness about one’s identity inspired from Ambedkar’s constant pursuit towards eradication of caste, and was directed towards social emancipation of oneself from caste discrimination. There was an alignment of agenda that led the literary and political aspects of the Dalit movement towards social change.

<sup>v</sup> Dangle. *Poisoned Bread*, [p. li]

<sup>vi</sup> Vanmam, introduction by R. Azhagarasan, p. Xxii

<sup>vii</sup> In Sunder Sarukkai's critique to Guru's use of 'lived' experiences, he complicates the idea of 'lived' experience itself, by introducing owner-author binary.(Sarukkai). One can be a legitimate owner of their experience, but the articulation of that experience, its textualization and narrativization, requires an author to 'script' the experience. The author may not necessarily be the owner. Therefore, the author's narrative of the experience is susceptible to politics of representation, text and language. In this respect, the challenge in producing a Dalit theory essentialised around 'lived' experience must be to pursue a methodological ethic, while encountering this inherent politics of representation.

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