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Title

**Dalit Gujarati Poetry in English:
Influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**

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Summary

Chapter – 1 (Introduction)

The first chapter deals with the origin of the word 'Dalit' and Dalit literature. The chapter gives a detailed analysis of the word 'Dalit' and its political and social implications. The chapter also juxtaposed various definitions and meaning of the term 'Dalit'. Besides that it deals with the chronological detail of the Dalit literature. It reveals necessary facts regarding history of Dalit literature in general and Dalit poetry in particular.

'Dalit' is a self designation for group of people who were regarded as the untouchables. The term 'Dalit' has acquired a great deal of political and social connotations. 'Dalit' is a more inclusive term than Gandhi's 'Harijan'. 'Dalit' has 'a greater ability to reach out to the large sections of the people' (Guru 67). It includes, as the Dalit Panther defines, 'members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (Omvedt *Dalit Visions*, 1995:72). The term 'Dalit' offers us a revolutionary meaning to a specific category. It is, as Gopal Guru says, 'not a mere linguistic construction but on the contrary is constructed through the revolutionary struggle of the Dalit people' (Guru 67). Gandhi's 'Harijan', a euphemism for untouchable was not so inclusive and not radical in its sense but it has rather an odour of sympathy not a revolutionary one. The term 'Harijan' has already lost its political vigour and it is no longer used in its original sense by politicians, academicians or social activists except some Gandhians. 'Harijan' includes only the untouchables whereas by 'Dalit', both Dalit and non-Dalit Indians see the term relating to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The term 'Harijan' was imposed whereas

'Dalit' has emerged after a long struggle by the dalit people. However, nowadays many dalits who have achieved a considerable socio-economic upward mobility don't want to identify themselves as dalits because they think that the term has derogatory and undesirable connotations. Many of them changed the names of their castes or sub-castes to save themselves from undesirable attitude from others. The new generation of dalits is quite unaware of the past atrocities and humiliations that their grand parents suffered in the village life. The dalits who have shifted to urban places rarely look back towards their ancestral localities where still there are traces of age old traditions of humiliation and oppression. Even modern parents do not tell stories of their suffering to their children or grand children. They want to forget the past and make their children free from it.

Prof. Gopal Guru in his article *Understanding the category 'Dalit'* tried to establish the category Dalit in terms of 'its hermeneutic function, its epistemic roots and its ontological basis' (Guru70). He firmly believes that the category of Buddhist can not be in opposition to Dalit and Dalit to Bahujan. He is of the view that the category Dalit is 'historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted' (Guru 76). Though it is 'discursively constituted', the dynamics of politics requires constant amendments and manipulations in its meaning and implementation. Mayavati's shift from Dalit to Bahujan and Bahujan to Sarvajana is an example of political compulsion or a strategic manipulation of the category 'Dalit'. Here for her political purposes, the Dalit Panthers' definition of 'Dalit' is useful because it is quite inclusive to serve political purposes. But when we concentrate on a specific mode of expression, especially literature, 'Dalit' has certain implicit meanings. It conveys the revolutionary fervour that has emerged through a long struggle.

Chapter-2

The second chapter deals with the history of Gujarati Dalit poetry. It gives interesting analysis and account of Gujarati Dalit poetry of pre- Independence era. The pre independence era was mostly dominated by religious and secular poetry by various Dalit poets.

Gujarati Dalit literature had spiritual and folk literary tradition before the independence. It began right from the medieval age and remained active till today. The tradition of religious songs, bhajans, folk song and duha-chhand was predominant in the dalit literary tradition. In the 14th century, in the region of Kutch many Dalit bhakti poets preached spirituality by their poetry. Gujarati dalit poetry has also a rich folk tradition. Nakar,Badal, Savo and many served the poetry in simple dialects of the local people. The tradition of bhakti poetry of Kabir, Raidas and Dayal was also prevalent among the Gujarati Dalit poets before the independence. Kabir's influence on Gujarati Dalit poetry is immense and far reaching. They in their poetry preached for the humanitarian aspect of the society. Impersonality and spirituality were the dominant characteristics of the Dalit poets in the pre-independence period.

In the 18th century, in Gujarat many Dalit poets used to sing Kabir's bhajan. They also transformed these Hindi bhajans in Gujarati tone to reach to the mass. Swami Tejanand, Trikam Saheb, Dasi Jeevan, Nathu Ram and many other contributed remarkably as far as the Dalit devotional poetry is concern. Narsinh Mehta, a 15th century poet, visited Dalit localities and accepted Dalits. He often arranged bhajan programmes in Dalit mahollas. Ratanbai, a Dalit poetess, was his disciple. She also composed and sung many bhajans. She is often considered as the first Dalit poetess in Gujarati Dalit literature. Minor Dalit poets in oral tradition were numerous.

Chapter- 3

After the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political sphere; Dalits, the people of 'Shudra Varna' found a stronger reformer and advocate of their cause. Gandhi, from his early political life, believed in social equality. He considered all human beings equal. He also wanted to establish his principle of equality in society by his deeds. He had to face many obstacles in doing so but it seems that his efforts were whole-hearted. He was misunderstood by many but his aim was to reform society. He wanted to remove untouchability. He gave the same importance to all manual labour, whether it was sweeping or drafting a letter. By the spinning wheel and weaving activity, he consciously or unconsciously gave importance to the work of *Vankar*, a *shudra* caste. As a consequence, spinning and weaving were done by many people in India, whether *Brahmin* or *Baniya*, who joined the freedom movement actively. In any Gandhi Ashram sweeping was done by the inhabitants of the Ashram without any caste discrimination. After 1915, Mahatma Gandhi became a major inspirational force behind Gujarati Literature. His approach in the freedom movement was quite different from that of earlier leaders. He showed keen interest in social issues along with political issues. He harmonized social, intellectual and political movements. His impact was so powerful that he got enough responses from various strata of society. During this period, Gujarati Literature was not paying attention to the issues of the downtrodden. Gandhi's movement brought in the realism which addressed the issues of 'dumb', downtrodden people. We can find his influence on each form of literature. He identified himself with downtrodden people. He talked with them in their language and wished Gujarati writers to write literature which the common man could understand.

Mahatma Gandhi, at the convention of Gujarati Sahitya Prishad in 1936, advised the creative writers 'to start writing for our dumb population'. It is clear that by 'dumb' population he meant the miserable masses of society. Gandhi inspired and guided an idealistic generation of writers to look towards the direction of the 'dumb.' Gandhi wanted the learned writers to use

literature as a means of reform and awareness. Gujarati Literature during the Gandhian age aimed at raising a voice against the problem of social exclusion. So, the issues which were of value to Gandhi like truth, non- violence, peace, anti-untouchability and love towards the oppressed etc. became major themes of literary creation. The Dalit, oppressed, suppressed, peasants, illiterate, untouchables and women found their place in literary expression. Gujarati writers such as Kishorilal Masharuwala, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Mahadevbhai Desai, Swami Anand, R.V. Pathak, R.V. Desai and Dhumketu were some of the major Gujarati writers of the Gandhian school of thought. Poets like Sundaram, Umashankar Joshi, Snehrashmi, Karshandas Manek, Zaverchand Meghani and Indulal Gandhi show influences from Mahatma Gandhi's ideology. Dalit characters and their feelings from an upper caste perspective can be witnessed in poetry for the very first time during this period.

Sundaram, a well known Gujarati poet of the Gandhian age, experienced poverty and social inequality himself. So, he presents such experiences in his poetry. On the other hand, Gandhi's social movement ignited certain emotion in him to write poetry to address social issues. He wrote- '*Koya Bhagat Ni Kadavi Vani*' (*Bitter Talk of Koya Bhagat*) to bring harmony into society. '*Farewell to God*', '*An Untouchable Woman*', '*Three Neighbour*', and '*Tintodi*' are his main poems which give expression to the feelings of the downtrodden classes. His poem '*Child Vishnu Guilt*' expresses love towards the Dalit community in particular and humanity in general.

Inspired by Gandhi, Umashakar Joshi, a poet, spoke aloud for the cause of the oppressed people in his poetry. In poems like '*Panchali*', '*Simada na Paththar par*', '*A Tree Near a Bank*' '*Flute Seller*' he gave voice to the pain and sufferings of the Dalits. Joshi's *Gangotri*, an anthology of poetry, shows his bent towards Gandhi's social philosophy. Zaverchand Meghani also waged his war to break the wall of inequality in his folk songs. 'Poet, how

(why) do you like?', 'Ghan Re Bole' etc are the poems composed by Meghani which seem to show the influence of Gandhi. These poems raise issues related to the poor.

Snehrashmi's poetry shows his love toward the Dalits. In two anthologies of his poetry; Ardhya and Panghat, he tries to spread social awareness of various social issues and he preaches Gandhi's social doctrines. Krishnalal Shridharani conveys his strong dislike to social and economic inequality in his collections, Lamp and Punrapi(Once more). Karashandas Manek in his poems like 'I can't understand why it happens' satirizes discrimination between the poor and the rich and between the low and the high. Indulal Gandhi, a minor poet of the Gandhian era, shows his inclination towards Gandhi's concept of social equality in his poems like 'Niece' and 'A Letter from a Blind Mother'.

Chapter-4

India became free and accepted the constitution a portion of which was drafted by Dr. Ambedkar and his team. However, the social situation has not changed substantially. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar attempted to establish equality by law. However, mere equality before the Law can not achieve social equality and it has not been achieved yet. But the Law has, to some extent, given some social security to the Dalits. Many Dalits consider Dr. Ambedkar's interventions more important than Gandhi's endeavors for social reform. From 1920 to 1956, Dr Ambedkar played his role actively as a social and political reformer. He believed that there would be no end to agony and humiliation of the Dalit community, if the caste system should continue to exist.

The exclusion of Dalits is because of birth into a particular family which they have not chosen and cannot escape until their death. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was against the caste system. He wanted to bury it, with its ugly byproduct of untouchability. He looked at the problem of untouchability as a problem of the class struggle. It is not the injustice committed by one

individual against another but it is by one class against another class. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in making the upper class Hindu realize the value of dignity and equality for all human beings. This anguish of hopelessness can be witnessed in Dalit literature along with of the utter helplessness from which it results.

Three major events in the year 1920 are landmarks responsible for Dalit literary activities in Maharashtra. (1) Dr. Ambedkar was the president of a public federation of untouchables in Mangaon (Maharashtra).(2) Muknayak, a daily, was started by him and (3) he organized Akhil Bhartya Bahishkrit Samaj Parishad in which people from all over India were invited to participate. These three incidents provided the platform to Dalit ideologues to propagate their rationale. The inspired heart and mind began to revolutionize the field of Marathi Dalit literature. In 1946 Dr.Ambedkar established 'The People's Education Society' and started Siddhartha College (Bombay). The educated Dalit youth established 'Siddharth Sahitya Sangh' in 1950 which later on transformed itself into 'Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh'. Magazines like Muknayak, Bahiskrit Bharat, Janata and Prabuddh Bharat played a major role in the motivation of Marathi Dalit Literature. In 1958- 1959, two 'Dalit Literary Meets' were organized in Mumbai and the third was held in Poona in 1961.

During and after the 60s, Marathi Dalit Literature witnessed a drastic change. Poets like Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Keshaw Meshram, Vaman Nimbalkar, Yashvant Manohar, Arjun Dangle etc. began to compose poetry to oppose an obnoxious social structure of Hindu society. A militant organization called the Dalit Panthers was established in Maharashtra. Arjun Dangle and Vaman Nimbalkar, the leading members of the Dalit Panther Movement in their collection of poems Chhavani Halte Ahe and Mahayuddha respectively, reveal the spirit of revolt against established social inequalities.

In Gujarat, after the establishment of a Dalit Panthers' unit, literary activity flourished. Akrosh and Panther, the two magazines of the Dalit Panthers, ignited the literary spirit among the Dalits of Gujarat. In 1978, few years before the reservation agitation in Gujarat; Akrosh, a mouth piece of the Dalit Panthers, published a special issue on Dalit Poetry. Moreover, Maharashtra is a neighboring state and Gujarat was a part of the Bombay State before 1960. So, a significant influence of Marathi Dalit literary movements can be found on Gujarati Dalit literary activities.

Dr. Ambedkar emphasized the importance of education for the Dalits and because of his political and social efforts, some Dalits got a chance to get education. He has been an inspirational force for many Dalit creative writers. In Gujarat, the Ambedkarite movement had started from 1924. The reports of Dr. Ambedkar's social and political activities were published in various Gujarati magazines. As literacy increased among the Dalits, they began to give expression to their anguish in creative writings. Dr. Ambedkar advised the creative writers; "One should not forget that in our country marginalized, Dalit and poor have their own world. Understand their pain and their suffering and devote your creative power to uplift their life. Real humanity lies in it only". (Patik Parmar(2004)pg.1 and Shabd Srusti: A Literary Journal Published by Gujarat Sahitya Akadami, November 2003:145).

In 1956 after Babasaheb's death, many Dalit poets paid tribute to him in verse form in various languages which were published in many magazines. It seemed like the beginning of Dalit poetry by Dalit Poets. Dalit Poetry, by Dalit social and political activists began in Maharashtra because it was the center of Dr. Ambedkar's socio-political movement and poetry was the handy weapon. In Gujarat Dalit Literature by Dalits flourished after 1975. The Publication of Dalit Magazines like Aakrosh, Kalo Suraj, Garud, Dinbandhu, Panther,

Dalitbandhu, Ajanpo, Muktinayak, Deesha, Naya Marg, DalitMitra, Dalitmukti, Samanta, Abhyuday, Pragati Jyot, Taras, Axay, Hayati, Awasar, Dalitchetna etc. have played a prominent role in the establishment of Dalit Literature.

On 14th April, 1978, on the occasion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, Akrosh, a Dalit magazine, published a special issue on Dalit poetry. Ramesh Chandra Parmar, the editor of Akrosh and member of the Dalit Panthers comments, "Its (Dalit Panthers') poetry journal Akrosh and mouth organ Panther has contributed immensely in defining Dalit literature and keeping young generation of Dalit writers engaged in the literary pursuit" (Patel Neerav (1987): Preface). The first anthology of Gujarati Dalit poetry, Dalit Kavita was published in 1981, edited by Ganapat Parmar and Manishi Jani which contains one hundred and thirty nine poems by sixty nine poets. It was followed by Visfot (1982). Many Dalit poets as a part of Ambedkarite Movement composed poetry of social awareness. Dalit literature created a new atmosphere in main stream Gujarati Literature. Dalit poets have established their presence in main stream literary production by their pens. Dalapat Chauhan, Harish Manglam, Nirav Patel, Manishi Jani, Mohan Parmar, Shankar Painter, Chandu Maheriya, Kisan Sosa, Sahil Parmar, Arvind Veghada, Shyam Sadhu and many other poets have already contributed considerably to enrich Dalit poetry. Pravin Gadhavi, a non-dalit poet, has been very actively participating in the creative endeavour of Dalit Poetry since the commencement of Gujarati Dalit Poetry.

After the anti-reservation agitation and riots (1981 & 85), we can witness a different voice in Dalit poetry. Dalits passed through a direct and violent experience during that agitation, so they found new raw material and environment 'helpful in evolving a Dalit Literary Movement which was up to then largely scattered and disorganized' (Rita Kothari: EPW: November 30, 2001). Their anger and anguish, transformed into collective protest and urge for social dignity, can be found in the poetry after the anti-reservation agitation. Many Dalit

poets have published collections of their own poems during and after the period of agitation, such as Neerav Patel's, *Burning from both the ends* (English) (1980), K. B. Pandya's *Chingari* (1982), Dalapat Chauhan's *To Pachhi* (1983), Sahil Parmar's *Vyatha Pacchichi* (1984), Babaldas Chavda's *Atyachar Thavado* (1984), Sankar Penter's *Bungiyo Vag* (1984), Pravin Gadhavi's *Bayonet* (1985), Padchhayo (1986), and Asavdvi (1996), Harish Mangalam's *Prakamp* (1987), Nilesh Kathad's *Eklavya no Angutho* (edited) (1987), Ganesh Sindhav's *Vishidita* (1987), Kisan Sosa's *Anauras Surya* (1991), Yaswant Vaghel's *Ame Andhare Ughela Padachhaya* (1991), Vinodchandra Boricha's *Nasur* (1995), Priyanka Kalpit's *Hanshiyama Hu* (2000), Chandraben Shrimali's *Ovarna* (2000) and Mizaz (2001), B.N. Vankar's *Overbridge* (2001), Pathik Parmar's *Bahiskrit* (2003), K.K. Vaisnava's *Ankh* (2003), Vegada Arvind's *Pageru* (2003), Sahil Parmar's *Mathaman* (2004), Bhikhu Vegada's *Apano Paras Aap* (2006) etc. Moreover, Chandu Maheriya, Manish Parmar, Balkrishna Anand, Pursotam Jadav Madhukant Kalpit, Raman Vaghela, etc. have also published their own collections. They recall Dr. Ambedkar's teaching and mould their anger and pain in a more creative way to alert the marginalized to their rights.

We can also find non-Dalit Poets during this period who give appropriate voice to the agony of the Dalits in their poetry. Poets like Labhsankar Thakar, Priyakant Maniyar, Philip Clerk, Hemant Khatsuriya and Meghanad Bhatt identify themselves with the pathetic conditions of the Dalit and compose poetry to reveal their inner self.

Chapter- 5

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R Ambedkar with their radical social ideology influenced the Dalit and non- Dalit poets who deal with Dalit issues in their poetry. During the Gandhi era, when the freedom movement was at its peak, many Guajrati poets got their inspiration from Mahatma's social thoughts and moulded their poetry to spread that ideology among the

common people. The desire for social reform as suggested by Mahatma was their main issues which they often addressed in their poetry successfully. But it is reasonable to say here that the Dalit issue was not their utmost concern. It was more or less a subordinate topic to deal. The bigger issue was the freedom movement.

In the poetry of Sundaram, he addressed the issue of human suffering in general with his 'bitter tongue' poetry. Sundaram was impressed by Gandhi's economic and social thought. He realised the importance of economic and social equality. His poetry 'very poignantly presents the contrast which makes the social inequality painfully clear to us'. Umashankar Joshi was the most gifted and leading poet of the Gandhi era. He raised question of untouchability and criticised it on the humanitarian ground in his writings and poetry in particular. Zaverchan Meghani, a poet who wrote extensively related to the folk literature was highly influenced by Mahatma's philosophy and emphasis on social equality. He was a staunch disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. Meghani's poem *Last Salute* is in a 'form of confession of and repentance for the sins of our forefathers'. Indulal Gandhi, one of the major poets of Gandhi era, also dealt with various issues related to the downtrodden in general and Dalits in particular. His poetry volumes *Idhana*, *Unmesh and Pallavi* conveys his Gandhian views in terms of the poor and Dalits. There are many minor poets who also composed poems to raise the issue of social inequality and untouchability. The poets like R.V Pathak, R.V. Desai. Sridharani, Mansukhlal Zaveri, Karshandas Manek. C.C. Mehata, Jugatram Dave, Sundarlal Botai etc gave voice to the issue of untouchability and social inequality. Modern Dalit poet, Praveen Gadhvi wrote a whole volume on Gandhi. He acknowledges Mahatma Gandhi's work for the Dalit and urges other to follow his footsteps.

The influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in Gujarat was quite late and was not so deep till 1970s. After 1978, through the Dalit Panther's activities Ambedkar's ideology spread in Gujarat among Dalits. Many new Dalit poets came out to give voice to the Dalit issues. Many Dalit

magazines, periodicals and newspapers gave it boost. Marathi Dalit literature has also influenced Gujarati Dalit poetry and its poet. Contacts with Marathi Dalit poets and activists indirectly influenced Gujarati Dalit poets with Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy. The poets like Dalapat Chauhan, Harish Manglam, Praveen Gadhvi, Shahil Parmar, K.B. Vanakar, Neerav Patel, Kishan Sosa, Shankar Painter, Pathik Parmar, Chandrikaben Shrimali etc composed many volumes of poetry related to Dr. Ambedkar philosophy. For them poetry is a means of social awareness and weapon to bring social equality. Their poetry reminds us of an age-old history of segregation, exploitation and discrimination of the Dalit. Though Dalit poetry is a bit deficient in its artistic value, it serves the purpose of the poet. The Dalit aesthetics emphasises on the realization of justice rather than on artistic perfection. Many non-dalit poets after 1970s left the Gandhian ideology and followed the Ambedkarite way in literature. The non-dalit writers in the modern era took a different stand than the Gandhi era. They often compose poetry not as sympathisers but as co-suffers. They identify themselves with Dalits and their predicament.

Thus, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R Ambedkar, by their ideology and direct work have exercised a significant influence on Gujarati Dalit poetry.

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Research Papers

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Reading of Caste in Neerav Patel's Poetry

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On 14th April, 1978, on the occasion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary, *Aakrosh*, a poetry journal by Dalit Panthers, Gujarat, published a special issue of Dalit poetry. It is difficult to track the commencement of Dalit writing in Gujarat but that issue of *Aakrosh* is often considered as a significant moment that marks the beginning of Dalit poetry in Gujarati. Neerav Patel was one of its editors along with Dalpat Chauhan, Pravin Gadhvi and Yogesh Dave. Before that in 1974, on 14th April, the Ambedkarite youths invited a Dalit Panthers' leader from Mumbai, Raja Dhale to Ahmedabad and organised a large procession to celebrate Dr. B.R Ambedkar's birth anniversary. Thus, 'the seeds of the Dalit Panthers were sown in Gujarat' (Franco: 376). The Dalit Panthers gave shape to the dalit identity and magazines like *Garud*, *Panther* and the newsletter *Dalit* also contributed significantly. Later, the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985 consolidated made the Dalits aware of their rights and through creative literature they began to express their agony and anguish.

Neerav Patel, during his study in Ahmedabad, came into contact with the Dalit Panthers activities and its leaders –Rameshchandra Parmar, Narayanbhai Vora and Valjibhai Patel; and also with many creative writers. His involvement in Dalit Panthers' programmes nurtured his creative power towards social concern and provided him a new identity 'dalit'. Later the Dalit Panther published of his two anthologies of poetry in English, *Burning from both the ends* (1980) and *What did I do to be so Black and Blue* (1987). He also edited 'Swaman', 'Vacha', and 'Kalosuraj'. His Gujarati poems also are published in

various magazines like '*Naya Marg*', '*Ahvan*' and '*DalitMitra*' etc. He, as an activist, worked for 'Swaman Foundation for Dalit Literature'. (Vankar: 2003)

Neerav Patel has changed his caste name and changed his personal name. Earlier he was Soma Hira Chamar, now he is Neerav Patel. He belongs to the Chamar caste, the Rohit community which is considered low in the social hierarchy. The Rohits were mostly engaged in their traditional occupations of leather work. His changing of caste name and personal name has proved to be an 'empty signifier' for him. Neither 'Patel' nor 'Neerav' is able to discard his caste identity and these names fail to serve as a 'non-signifying face'. People often dig up his caste identity. Patel expresses his anguish in a poem, 'The vestige':

Who was the Satan sculptor
Who carved my name upon my forehead?
O Why do you deep in my veins to revive my name
Like tattooing into the bark of the tree
With a knife?
I wanted to forget my name-
And at midnight
I migrated to the city
Leaving my hut and hamlet behind
.....
You like the vulture
Why is the bill of your eyes
Pecking the carcass of my name perennially?
Alas! I am doubtful –
My name will survive even after I die. (Patel: 1980:05)

His choosing of new caste name 'Patel' was not an idle choice. There may be some reason behind it. Actually Patel community, whose caste name Neerav adopted, in Gujarat is a tiller community and now they are dominant in each and every field; economic, politics, religious, and education etc. The vertical mobility has been achieved by the Patidars or Kunabis, as they were earlier called. In the 18th century they were considered as shudras, now they enjoy,

by and large, upper caste status. They have mostly benefited from land reforms and the milk revolution in Gujarat. Their early access to modern education ensures them chances to settle in America and many other European countries. It is their economic power and caste solidarity that has helped them to achieve both political power and upward social mobility. The same thing has not happened to the Dalits.

In the 70s and 80s Vankars (weavers), Chamars (leather workers) and Bhangis (sweepers) were working together in cotton mills in Ahmadabad and other places. They were mostly allotted the same work in the mills, weaving or spinning. They were drawing 'higher salaries than those on offer at that time in other trades' (Breman: 2001). Their economic condition provided them chances to liberate themselves from severe deprivation. They could spend on their children's education. They could take the benefit of government schools earlier than the other Dalit castes. It is rightly observed by a group of researchers:

It was a promise of release from conditions of extreme wretchedness, both economic and social, in the villages, of possible if partial anonymity from crippling caste identities that held them down in their homes. Work in the textile mills of Gujarat is strenuous and hard, and yet waves after waves of Dalits have left their villages and gone to the mills of the town and cities. (Franco: 144)

The jobs in mills conferred on them a new identity and promised them a significant horizontal mobility. They were no more engaged in the occupations which were considered polluted. They were working along with upper caste workers and though their works were different they shared a common identity, the 'mill worker' (Breman: 2001). Moreover, working in mills and in urban locations offered them 'an escape from enforced drudgery and humiliation, and the chance of better life and opportunities' (Franco: 168).

But after the closure of mills in the late 80s and in the 90s, the Vankars and Chamars both had to face an equal state of economic crisis. The Bhangis, who were mostly engaged in low jobs in mills, could be absorbed into sweepers' jobs in government offices or in private firms, which was their traditional occupation but Vankars and Chamars had to face a more acute challenge because they could not fall back upon their ancestor's occupation of weaving or leather work in that changed economic and industrial atmosphere. Moreover, they did not want to go back to their villages where caste

discrimination and atrocities were a matter of everyday business. Consequently, they had to work in various industrial units or they started their small businesses with the compensation they got from the mill owners. Their children largely concentrated on education and this made them qualified enough to exploit the reservation policy benefits and government welfare schemes. Thus, the next generation has reaped such fruits. A significant number of Vankars and Chamars are in government jobs. They are also politically active and often work as pressure groups. However, their economic progress has not led to upward social mobility.

On the other hand, the Bhangis that is Valmikis are there where they had been a century before. They haven't changed their occupations 'because they feel powerless to resist, and because alternative occupations are either not available or not remunerative occupations and secure. In some cases, the weight of oppression also means that they may accept their caste role without any resistance' (Shah *et al* 2006: 110).

The 1892 report of the Bombay Revenue Department gives a close picture of the condition of what we today call Dalits a century ago:

The condition of the out-classes, the Bhangis, Dheds and Chamars is the most hopeless. They are ignorant as they are superstitious, as indolent as they are filthy; they are generally dependent on the charity of their richer neighbours. They show no signs of improvement but seem to sink lower and lower. (quoted in Lobo: 19)

The report mentions three major castes of Dalits, but after a century we can witness a drastic change in socioeconomic conditions of Vankars and Chamars but the Bhangis are still lagging behind very far in each and every field; social, economic and educational. Moreover, the sub-caste consciousness divides the whole Dalit community 'vertically and horizontally'. (Chinnaiah: 2009).

Patel often expresses joys and sorrows of such neglected Dalits. At one level, he does not miss any chance to celebrate all positive incidents which may encourage the 'Dalit' spirit and subdue the sub-caste consciousness among dalits. He writes in his poem 'Kalchakra'

.....
At the gate of Jodhpur castle,
King Gajarajsinh is standing with garlands,

To welcome the vice chancellor Dr. Shyamlal

.....

The statue of Manu is burning with shame-
a valmiki has become a vice chancellor
a chamarin has become the queen of ayodhya
(and) a dalit, Narayan is the king of nation.

(Patel: 2003: 24; translation mine)

Patel acknowledges the progress of Dalit which they have achieved amidst adverse social and economic conditions. Dr. Shyamlal, Mayavati or the president K.R. Narayanan are the representatives of that a long struggle has achieved for the Dalits. The image of the Kshatriya king standing with garlands to receive a Bhangi vice-chancellor is a pleasing and soothing symbol of gradual transformation that a long battle has brought.

At another level, Patel does not forget to express his deep sense of agony for a Bhangi woman, a symbol of severe deprivation, inequality and suffering. She represents those who are deprived of the benefits that a modern democracy offers. A Bhangi woman is still there, where she has been since ages. In the journey of economic mobility she is still most deprived and wretched of all dalits. Patel in his poem, 'My Lord' expresses his concern for such conditions:

My lord honoured my hundi-
How shall I perform Gagli's wedding ceremonies otherwise?
My oath to deity chavanda bore fruits
And the young garasani died.
They draped her corpse with a shroud of red gavan.
Flames of her funeral pyre are burning red
And the red gavan is waving at the akda bush!
Gagli's mother is smiling bitchy!
Let them turn their back
And I shall run to the funeral ghat.
My lord honoured my hundi.

(Patel: 1987:08)

Patel here expresses a horrid and stark image and makes us think by juxtaposing two pathetic scenes, a death of a young Kshtriya lady and the life of a destitute Bhangi woman. Generally in a small village, the death of a young lady is a matter of sorrow for all villagers but here, this death becomes an opportunity for a deprived woman to get a red saree used as the shroud for the use of her daughter. She is smiling, may be laughing at all humanity. Her emotions are complex. A reader is torn between two different human conditions, a pathetic death and a pathetic life. Thus, his poem addresses both upper caste Hindus and the Dalits who have already achieved a considerable economic progress. He compels the elites of Dalit to look at those who are lagging far behind.

In Gujarat, the hierarchy within the Dalits is very sharp and narrow. It is a major hindrance in achieving unity to wage war against the larger evil, the caste system. The identity 'Dalit' has not been able to eradicate the sub-caste consciousness. It has just remained a political identity. At the social level, it has lots more to do. The main castes which constitute the Dalit community are Vankar, Chamar and Bhangi. The Vankars consider themselves higher than the other Dalit castes. Their traditional occupation, weaving was not considered as impure or polluted as that of Chamars' or Bhangis'. Vankars are at the top of the Dalit caste hierarchy. They are elites among the Dalits. Most of the leading Gujarati Dalit writers, such as Dalapat Chauhan, Mohan Parmar, Harish Manglam, Ganapat Parmar, B.N.Vanakar etc., come from this community. Neerav Patel opines, while discussing on novels by five Gujarati Dalit novelists: 'The dalit experience portrayed in these novels can hardly be considered as complete. All the five novelists incidentally belong to one gender and come from the predominant vankar caste which is at the top of the dalit pyramid and more backward castes like chamar and bhangi and many others are yet to articulate. One shade cannot create rainbows: let hundred flowers bloom to bring the spring' (quoted in Kothari: 2001). Here Neerav clearly indicates the prevailing graded inequality among the Dalits. The fruit of education is still a dream for many. Their voice in literature is yet to be articulated. Like Bhangis, the Toories, Ravaliyas, Vagharis and many more have not got any opportunity to bring any significant progress in their socioeconomic spheres.

Dr. Ambedkar was also against such type of 'graded inequality' within the dominated castes. He argued that the dominated who remain divided cannot fight effectively against the oppressors. Dr. Ambedkar analyses the graded inequality and warns:

“In a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level [...]. In a system of grade inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). The high wants to over-throw the higher who is above him but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal.”(quoted in Jaffrelot: 21)

The condition, which Dr. Ambedkar described still, exists. The elites of the Dalit in Gujarat are the Vankars and Chamars. Their attitude towards the other downtrodden caste is not justifiable in any way. The ‘graded inequality’ or sub-caste consciousness has proved to be a curse on the lowest of the low castes. They have been facing multilayered discrimination. This caste system, as Dr. Ambedkar puts it, ‘has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and it has made common action impossible’.(Jaffrelot: 22). It was his introspection and deep study that he put before his people with concern.

Umashankar Joshi, a well-known writer and Gandhian gave voice to this sub-caste consciousness in his controversial play, *Dhed na Dhed Bhangi* (1933) (Bhangis, the Outcast even among the outcasts). Joshi wrote this play in 1933 when the nation was discussing the relation between upper castes and the Dalits after the Poona Pact event in 1932. By publishing this drama, Joshi tried to locate the argument within the Dalit domain by indicating sub-caste consciousness within the Dalit community. His intention and time of writing this play is debatable. Around 1933, Gandhi started an anti-untouchability movement. Joshi might have been influenced by that movement. But as Dr. Ambedkar noted about that movement, ‘Removal of Untouchability had only a nominal place in the programme’ (Ambedkar: 366) Joshi also, it seems that, moves away from the social reform motives and indulges in petty caste politics by showing Dalits their faults instead of looking within. In the play, a Bhangi character named Balo complains:

These Vankars have dug out a well within ten days, but these big brothers! they consider themselves even purer than Brahmins. It is possible to fetch water from

the pond but if we take water from these Vankar's well their well becomes polluted! (Joshi: 153)

The scene reveals the existing distance within a community where Bhangis are discriminated by the Vankars which shows vertical and horizontal layers within the community. In another scene, an old Brahmin named Omkar justifies the Vankars' position and reveals his fear:

If the distance between Vanakar and Bhagi decreases it will certainly decrease the distance between the upper caste and the Vankars. That is why I say the Bhangis have touched Banakars' well, it has become polluted so now make new well and let the old well be filled. Go and tell this sermon to all in the early morning. (Joshi: 160)

Joshi gives a picture of the time by stating the relation between the upper caste and the Dalits at one level and between Vankars and Bhangis within the Dalit community at another level. Indirectly he advises the Dalits to overcome the sub-caste consciousness. It is true that some specific castes have been benefited disproportionately from the reservation policy and it has created a rift between those who are lagging behind and those who have achieved some upward mobility but it seems that his critique offers an excuse to the upper caste Hindus to justify their position towards the low castes. Moreover, it is also seen that this faction among the Dalits is often exploited by the non-Dalits and political vested interests. As of now, in Gujarat, it has not emerged as conflicts between Mahars and Matangs in Maharashtra, Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh.

The democratisation of education provided an opportunity to some of Dalit castes to progress. Many others could not benefit from it. The benefited few have created a new Dalit middle class which is torn between mainstream ethos and their past. The urge for identity leads them mostly to change their names, occupations and localities. However, all these practices have been proved futile efforts for the Dalits. On one hand, Dalits, tired of segregation and humiliation; try to hide their caste identity. On the other hand they want to maintain their relation with their past and caste identity. As Rita Kothari argues: 'Disassociation from the community results in non-participation in building an infrastructure for other suffering members of the dalit community (Kothari: 2001).' Neerav Patel, it seems that, to save himself from being marked as Chamar by upper castes changed his caste name and personal name

and shifted to an urban area but hasn't dissociated with his past and his concerns. Instead he has sought to problematize his situation. He reveals his confusion in his poem, 'Mess':

When you call me dher
I am hurt
and wish to kick you in the belly
When you call me an untouchable
I am offended
and wish to slap you on the face
When you call me harijan
I am humiliated
and wish to spit upon you back
.....
When you call me Neerav Patel
I suspect you called me convert
(a crow that dyed his feathers white to be called a swan)
and wish to turn away my face
.....
Yes, it's all mess since beginning
like the tale of seven-tailed mouse. (Patel: 1987: 46-47)

Patel knows well that by any name he or his people carry the load of the past. It has been quite common among Gujarati Dalits to adopt the caste names of the upper caste Hindu. Some sociologists smell it as an act of 'sanskritisation' but it is not so simple as it sounds. The whole process of changing names and surnames requires deeper understanding. Patel in his poem, 'A collegian Shabri', reveals the complexity behind so called 'sanskritisation'. He writes:

What could she do to protect her chastity
Molested by your imprudent ramas in the street?
How could she put aside her indigenous individuality?
By changing name?
By changing surname?
By draping gujarati sari bengallee style?
By converting to Christianity?

By changing her desi culture to hippiesm?

But alas, history can't be changed and poverty can't be banished instantly.

(Patel: 1980:11)

Here, the title of the poem, 'A Collegian Shabri' suggests the dilemma of a tribal girl in particular and the Dalits in general. The poet knows from his personal experiences that changing of name, surname, or religion will not confer Dalits equality in treatment. The untouchability is 'widely prevalent and deeply entrenched' in our society. (Shah *et al* 2006: 14). He believes that a Dalit can progress economically but the curse of untouchability does not spare him.

In his poem 'Anguish', Patel raises few questions and demands answers. He demands equality for the Dalits on the basis of their contribution in the society. The questions which he puts forward are inclusive which represents the Dalit identity as a whole. He writes:

.....

What is our fault?

And what is our folly?

It is our fault

That we scavenged your streets?

It is our folly that we shouldered your dead cattle?

It is our sin that we dressed your adams and eves?

It is fault that we drudge for you from dawn to dusk?

It is our fault that we washed your bottoms?

.....

(Patel: 1987: 36-37)

The Valmikis, Rohits and Vankars can find their voices in his poetry. He enriches the caste solidarity and strengthens Dalit identity. Patel often suggests violent ways to fight against inequality. His anger and pain is expressed in many poems which shows influence of the Dalit Panthers' militant attitude on him. In his poem, 'The Hormones', he declares his intentions;

I am the son of my father-

Why the blood of a panther howls in my veins?

.....

My father was a poor servant in the cemetery.

He buried many a corpse.

I am the son of my father
and will bury them alive. (Patel: 1980: 09)

Before I conclude, let me say, within the Gujarati Dalit writings there are many voices and shades they need enough attention. Neerav Patel is a peculiar voice among the Gujarati Dalit poets. His expressions are inclusive which represent almost all strata of the Dalit identity. Scavengers, leather workers, weavers, tribals and deprived women and many more find their voice in his poetry. He also composes poems, out of 'catholic sympathies', on the issues other than related to the Dalit. His diversion and digression does not take him far away from Dalit causes but on the whole, he successfully addresses other issues of concern in Dalit literary domain. However, for him, the unjust caste system which injures more the lowest among the low is a major area of concern.

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Praveen Gadhvi as Dalit Poet: Authenticity and the Question of Dalit Writing

Iliyas Mansuri

Praveen Gadhvi, a Gujarati poet who is not born in lower caste family, has composed poems thematizing Dalit anguish and pain. By his conscious choice, he has engaged with Dalit socio-economic conditions in the process identifying himself with the Dalit cause. His poetry is considered by many in Gujarat as equal to those of Dalit poets who are born into lower caste families and write drawing from their 'lived experiences.' Although he has written addressing the mainstream themes too, he is also accepted and honoured as a Dalit poet in Gujarat.

Through his poetry we can undoubtedly perceive his understanding and agony of the issues related to the Dalits. His volume, *The Voices of the Last*, translated by the poet himself into English from Gujarati emphatically presents him as a poet who has ample ability to dalitize his creativity. His poetry reminds us of an age-old history of segregation, exploitation and discrimination of the Dalit. Yet, his work poses the question of authenticity: how valid is it for a non-Dalit author to be characterized as a Dalit writer?

As we know, the term 'Dalit' is a more inclusive term than Gandhi's 'Harijan.' 'Dalit' has 'a greater ability to reach out to the large sections of the people' (Guru: 2005:67). It includes, as the Dalit Panther movement in its manifesto defines it, 'members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (qtd. in Omvedt: 2006:72). Baburao Bangul also defines the term by suggesting its inclusiveness. He says, 'the word 'Dalit' does not refer only to Buddhists and backward class people but to all those who toil and are exploited and oppressed' (qtd. in Wankhade: 1994: 317). Sahrankumar

Limbale defines it, ‘...it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included’ (Limbale: 2010:30).

Gujarati Dalit literature is also inclusive since its commencement. Dr. Mohan Parmar, a well-known Dalit novelist and critic divides Gujarati Dalit writers into four distinct categories. In the fourth category of Dalit writers, he includes those non-Dalit writers who are ‘deeply moved by the agonies and torments that the Dalits pass through and are inspired to write about them’ (Parmar: 2000:87-88). In Gujarati literature, many non-Dalit poets have been dealing with Dalit issues in their works since a longtime, even before Independence. On 14th April, 1978, on the occasion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s birth anniversary, ‘Akrosh’, a poetry journal by Dalit Panthers, published a special issue of Dalit poetry. That issue of ‘Akrosh’ is often considered as the beginning of Dalit poetry in Gujarati. It published significant number of poems composed by Dalit as well as non-Dalit poets. Moreover, the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit poetry, ‘Dalit Kavita’ was published in 1981, edited by Ganapat Parmar, a Dalit writer and Manishi Jani, a Brahmin poet; which contains one hundred thirty nine poems by sixty nine poets, both Dalit and non-Dalit. While inviting poems from various poets for ‘Dalit Kavita’, the editors circulated an invitation letter. The letter clearly mentions, “We do not consider *narrow* caste criteria for Dalit poetry, but we believe that the poetry which gives voice to the people who are socially, economically and culturally oppressed, and tries to establish their dignity is Dalit poetry for us”(Jani:1981:183). For them ‘Dalithood’ is not the basic condition for composing a Dalit poem. It means they do not consider ‘lived experiences’ as an inevitable criterion.

On the other hand, Eleanor Zelliot raises a question, ‘Can only Dalits write Dalit Literature?’ and answers it by saying, “Those in the Dalit School would say: Only Dalits can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes’ (Zelliot1992:18). Dr. Pathik Parmar, a renowned Gujarati Dalit critic opines, while

admitting noticeable contribution by the writers who are not born in lower caste families to the Gujarati Dalit literature, that there is a clear difference of intensity and in the use of dialect-language between those who have access of ‘lived experiences’ and those who do not have. (Parmar: 2010:88). In a symposium on ‘Translating Gujarati Dalit Writing’ at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda held on 19th March, 2011, Neerav Patel, a Gujarati Dalit poet, emphatically asserted that whatsoever their affinity with Dalit masses, or concern with Dalit cause, the non-Dalit writers do not and can not present ‘the experience’ that a Dalit undergoes. On the other hand, Sharnkumar Limbale introduces a set of criteria to judge Dalit writing. He writes: “Dalit writers assert that their literature conveys the life that they have lived, experienced and seen” (Limbale: 2010:32). Concentrating on these points raised by noteworthy writers; I attempt here to address the question of authenticity and Dalit writing.

Certainly a non-Dalit poet does not have to live and experience the Dalit life but he may have a will and emotional faculties that provide a chance and choice to see and feel what is being lived and experienced by a Dalit. So, the empathy that comes into play with the faculties of sight and emotion create a unique experience in a non-Dalit writer. This might differ from the experience of the Dalit in degree but has the potential to find its output in literary expression. During the Gandhi era, the poets like Sundaram, Umashankar Joshi, Snehrashmi, Karshandas Manek, Zaverchand Meghani and Indulal Gandhi thematized Dalit issues in Gujarati Literature. Mahatma Gandhi, as a president of Gujarati Sahitya Parishad while addressing the 12th Convention of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad on 22nd November, 1936, also advised Gujarati writers:

I tell our writers that instead of writing for the people of cities, let start writing for our *dumb* population. *I am the self appointed representative of this dumb population.* On behalf of them I say, enter that sphere with enthusiasm. (qtd. in Gaijan:2007:68).

Although these poets did not have ‘lived experiences’ as a subject they were writing about the subject. They firmly raised their voices against many social evils including untouchability. They often looked at the oppressed with sympathy and wrote against the injustices that the downtrodden underwent since ages. It is needless to say that they were chiefly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and most of them belonged to upper caste Hindu families. For instance, here are few lines from the poems of these upper caste poets who themetized Dalit issues:

Sundaram, a poet of the Gandhi Era was influenced by Gandhiji’s idealism often conveys the theme of untouchability with indignation against the upper caste Hindu. For instance, his poem, ‘An Untouchable Lady’, portrays a customary incident in which an untouchable lady brings down ‘chundadi’, a kind of shroud, from the bier of an upper caste Hindu’s wife and wears it in the marriage ceremony of her son:

The wife of a seth is covered with colourful Chundadi after she dies,
The untouchable woman puts on the same shroud when her son marries.
(Sundaram: 1967:33)

His poem, ‘Three Neighbours’, deals with the theme of social inequalities and segregation:

.....
The pride of the village is the mansion of the seth;
And Ram’s marble temple glitters till late.
Hidden in a corner,
A squalid smelly corner,
The palace of Markorbai stand.

(Sundaram: 1998:01)

Zaverchand Meghani, a staunch disciple of Mahatma Gandhi expresses his righteous anger against untouchability in his poem, 'Last Salute' (Chhelli Salam) in this manner,

We slew, brunt, buried under the earth,
Drove them into forest by calling them demons,
Built, for the living, a hell away from us,
(thus we) kept them forever servile brutes.

(Meghani: 1972:84)

However, Meghani asks a pertinent question to himself in the preface of *Aektaro*. Interestingly, he named the preface 'Atmnirikhan (Introspection)'. He asks, "Whatever I am writing, am I experiencing within myself? Does a poet or artist write only from his own experiences? My answer is 'no'." He further explains that his poems related to the agony of the downtrodden are not the result of his own experiences but they are just saplings he has implanted them in his own land. The creator is not the experiencer but he has imagined the sufferings and agonies of the others. A poet can not make claims as an authentic experiencer always. (Meghani: 1957:11-12).

In Gujarat, after the anti reservation movement in 1981 and 85, there sprung a host of new Dalit poets. They highlighted the issue in a new and unique way taking inspiration from the teaching of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Marathi Dalit Literature. The earlier approach, particularly during the Gandhi era (1920-1970!) to this issue was reformative and humanitarian. But the new generation of poets took a different stance in their works and they exhibited aggression and a kind of rebellion against injustices suffered by the Dalits. Many non-Dalit poets, mostly after the anti-reservation agitations and riots in the 1980s, took a different position from the poets of the Gandhi Era. They projected 'something of other's experience' into themselves and began to compose poetry quite different in tone and

articulations although they ‘do not in any sense have a lived experience of the suffering of the other’ (Sarukkai: 2007: 4044). They stand with the oppressed and mingle their voice with them. It is their experience which they have acquired after empathetic relations with Dalit masses and choose to de-caste themselves and have consciously engaged with Dalit’s socio-economic conditions in the process of identifying themselves with Dalit causes. Gadhvi belongs to this group of non-Dalit poets.

Sundar Sarukkai classifies the experience in two types, ‘one arising from being in situations not of our making’ from which one can not escape and the other ‘arising from situations we consciously put ourselves in’ (Sarukkai: 2007: 4046). Praveen Gandhi highlights the latter kind of experience which provides him a kind of authenticity to deal with Dalit themes. Gadhvi, a poet who is not born in a lower caste family, has composed poems thematizing Dalit anguish and pain. By his conscious choice, he has engaged with Dalit socio-economic conditions in the process identifying himself with the Dalit cause. He himself says:

Although I am not a Dalit by caste but feel their pain as my pain, since my childhood and I write poems and stories. (...) I hope reader would appreciate my labour of love. (Gadhvi: 2010: 05)

He also acknowledges his affinity with the downtrodden in one of his autobiographical poems:

.....
sky-high screams of atrocities on the downtrodden,
Endless deserts of starvation,
Inexhaustible streams of hot tears...
Seeing all these
I am forced to be a poet.

(Gadhvi: 2008:53)

Joseph Macwan, a Sahitya Akadami Award winner and Dalit novelist, hails Gadhvi's endeavor and says that 'his every word shows his commitment and compels us to search within' (qtd. in Vankar: 2003: 35). One can clearly perceive Dalit sensibilities in his poems. His criticism and interpretations of Hindu mythology has a specific Dalit tone to it. Through his poetry we can undoubtedly perceive his understanding and agony of the issues related to the Dalits. His volume, *The Voices of the Last*, translated by the poet himself into English from Gujarati emphatically presents him as a poet who has ample ability to dalitize his sensibility and creativity. His poetry reminds us of an age-old history of segregation, exploitation and discrimination of the Dalit and Gadhvi's affinity with their lot.

Here are some lines of his most celebrated poem 'I am the History of This Nation':

No friends, I am not untouchable.

I have been flowing like beautiful waters of the Ganges and the
Sindhu on the sacred plains of this nation.

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

There is a fossil of mine under every rock of this nation.

The unreadable script of Mohenjo-Daro throbs in my blood.

I am the history of this nation made of my flesh and blood.

You can not bury me as an untouchable.

(Gadhvi: 2008:13)

The poet clearly identifies himself with Dalits and claims strongly his unquestionable historic identity with the nation. In 'Brainwash' he sarcastically criticizes the Brahminical ideology which is responsible for segregation and exploitation of the Dalit. He says:

Please give me little water from the Ganges, and add waters of six sacred rivers.

I want to wash thoroughly the brain hanging from the broken skull

Of this Chitta pavan....

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. (Gadhvi: 2008: (14-15))

He himself wants to wash the rotten brain of the Brahmins. His anger and agony is obviously expressed in these lines. His poem shows his ardent identification with Dalit purpose which provides him a kind of authenticity to allow him to address such themes.

Gadhvi willingly, fearlessly and successfully projects the Dalit experience in his blank verse. As we know, during and after the anti-reservation riots and violent agitations in the 1980s, many Dalit families were facing complete boycott from upper caste Hindus and they had to migrate from their native villages. To leave the ancestral village, get uprooted and struggle to survive is traumatic experience for most people. Gadhvi depicts such emotions in his realistic poem, 'Leaving the Village'. He reads:

We were drinking sweet coconut like water from the river-

Those wolves said:

Don't drink a drop of water; it becomes impure because of you,

They like to eat and drink only raw flesh and blood.

Those wolves did not allow us to graze a single blade of grass. We

Are tired, unable to put forward even a step. The river of the village carve that

we don't leave the village

The boundaries of the village restrain us.
But what can we do?
See, how many wolves are barking beside our huts far
away.

(Gadhvi: 2008: 20)

The migration, however, does not make a Dalit free from the stigma of caste. Wherever s/he goes it peruses her/him. Gadhvi presents the omniscient nature of caste-ridden Hindu people and society by and large. Here everybody is recognized by his caste. Every other subordinated to caste identity. Caste confers either power or degradation. For instance in his poem, 'Stigma on the Forehead,' he raises this issue with anger and contempt:

O, you are really omniscient.
You are a scholar of scriptures of Vedas and Puranas.
I may change villages,
I may change country,
I may change dress,
I may change name,
Yet, you recognize the stigma on my forehead
made with a hot rod by your ancestors.

(Gadhvi: 2008: 34)

The same tone also affects in the poems of Neerav Patel and Dalpat Chuhan. Patel, a poet who had to undergo brutal experiences of atrocities as a member of scavenger community, expresses his anguish in his poem, 'The Remains of Name':

Who is the Satan sculptor who has

Inscribed my name on my forehead?
Why like writing letters on the skin of a tree trunk
You are writing my name
Dipping the knife in my veins?
How I wished to forget my name, that's why
Hiding myself in the midnight I had run away to the city
Leaving behind my home and village. (Patel: 2009)

Chauhan, a well-known Dalit poet also shares same feeling with anger and anguish:

With shivering hands I wrote
Not the numeral one on the slate;
But on my pulsating chest
Like the burning sands of deserts
I engraved my caste. (Trivedi: 2000:105)

Traditional thinking suggests that it is the authenticity of those born in lower caste families that can alone give literary expression to Dalit conditions. Undoubtedly, the 'lived experience' is the foundation of Dalit literary output but, of course, there is a certain space and position from where a writer who is not born in a lower caste family can thematize the issue related to the Dalit community. The space and position which a non- Dalit writer acquires come from his conscious 'embrace or an act of love' and from the knowledge and empathetic understanding of the experience which a Dalit undergoes.

Gadhvi came into contact with the members of Dalit Panthers later in 1978. However, before that he had the opportunity to share the pains of his Dalit friends while living very near to the Dalit maholla in his childhood. He also experienced kindness and love from Dalit women who often gave him 'Gundas', a kind of pulpy fruit which he tends to consider as a formative influence on his Dalit attitude. During the period of his study he used to live at Rajpur-Gomatipur in Ahmedabad, a largely Dalit populated area where he had the chance and choice to share pains and agony of Dalit community. Moreover, he belongs to Gadhvi caste, an OBC community which places him between the lower caste and the upper caste social conditions. He himself suffered a specific kind of untouchability. Their community had to suffer segregation and untouchability. Brahmins prohibited them to dine in the same row with the upper caste Hindu. (Vankar: 2003: 35-36). So, Praveen Gadhvi is not observing a kind of insularity which cuts him off from the access of experiences which a Dalit undergoes. He expresses his position from finding himself near to the Dalit experience. He is more at home in expressing Dalit experience. The authenticity which he performs has come from his consciously holding the position and from the space that he has acquired in the Dalit community. His is 'a unique case', as Rupalee Burke puts it, 'of choosing to de-caste and there by welcoming downtrodden mobility in a very different sense' (Burke: 2008: v).

As we perceive, Dalit literature is a part of a protest movement which spreads awareness among Dalits and makes caste Hindu rethink about their atrocities, injustice and attitude towards Dalit. Gadhvi, in his poem, 'Farewell to Arms', puts a formula of reconciliation before the oppressors. What he directly asks the holders of hegemonic caste-Hindu people is that they should de-hegemonize their positions and share the experiences of being Dalit. Take for instance the tone that prevails in these lines:

Let us put aside the arms and hold a round table conference.

We have no nation, to be proud of.
We have no farm to till, no house to shelter.
You did not leave even a blade of grass for us since times of Aryvart.
We are ready to forgive all. Are you ready to remove the walls from the village?
We are ready to dissolve like sugar in milk.
Will you bear should your Darupadi select our son Galia as her husband?
And will your Arjun accept our daughter Raili?
Let us have turns to pull the dead cattle.
We are ready to eat your leftover food; will you eat leftover food at our marriage ceremony?

(Gadhvi: 2008: 17)

Gadhvi here exposes ‘hypocrisy and wiliness’ of those who preach equality on the surface level. Though he often deals with the themes of mainstream literature in both poetry and short stories, he is chiefly known as a Dalit writer and poet.

Gadhvi’s writings as well as status in the Gujarati Dalit Literary establishment lead to further questions: ‘Are all poems written by Dalits, “Dalit poetry”?’ Praveen Gadhvi and many other Dalit poets (Mohan Parmar, Raghavji Madhad, Chandraben Shrimali, and Neerav Patel etc.) successfully deal with both themes, general as well as Dalit themes. Some of their Dalit poems deviate from Dalit themes and embrace ‘catholic sympathies for anyone who hungers, thirsts and seeks refuge’(Burke: vii), as Gadhvi diverges in his poem, ‘Bread’ and presents universal issue before the reader instead of confining himself only to a Dalit theme.

Everybody requires a loaf of bread.
Everyday it is required,
But nobody talks about it.
Poets shy from writing poems about it.

(Gadhvi: 2008: 48)

Even Patel, a famous Gujarati Dalit poet also composes poems addressing issues other than related to Dalit. In a poem, 'For Adults Only', for instance, out of 'catholic sympathies', he deals with the issue of sex workers:

Now I am revolting

On the pitch dark night of Women's Day

I call:

'Sex workers of the world unite.

We have nothing to lose

Except your chastity chains'

(Patel: 2009)

Their diversion and digression do not take them far away from Dalit causes but on the whole, they successfully address other issues of concern in Dalit literature.

Before I conclude the paper, let me point to the fact that no one questions the 'enlightened right' of non-Dalit poets for themetizing the Dalit but the issues regarding their intensity and their socio-political stand remains in the domain of debate. K Satyanarayana pointed out, "Despite their serious commitment, non-Dalit writers miss the dreams, desires and visions of Dalits..." (qtd. in Anand:2011). However, it is clear that Gadhvi, a non-Dalit writer has made a significant impact on the Gujarati Literature, particularly Dalit Literature. There may be a difference of degree in intensity of feeling between an indigenous Dalit poet and Gadhvi. But the above poems clearly validate Gadhvi's claim to represent the Dalit though socially and genealogically he has a non-Dalit identity. In doing so, he draws our attention to the relationship between lived experiences and authenticity. This enables us to examine whether the authenticity of lived experience is the central criterion in the writing and

evaluation of Dalit texts. Perhaps the last word should go to the Dalit writer Meena Kandaswami who writes, in a review of Gadhvi's *The Voice of the Last*, 'Yet, in spite of all these arguments one has to agree that Gadhvi is "Dalit" in so far as the word refers to somebody who stands against caste oppression"(Kandaswamy:2008).

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