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# Namdeo Dhasal: A Radical Voice of Dalit Protest

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**ABSTRACT**

Namdeo Dhasal's voice of Dalit protest emerged onto the Maharashtrian literary scene in the early 1970s and succeeded in fracturing Marathi literature's tranquility while giving birth to a political movement for Dalit voice. Born in 1949 into the Mahar caste, Dhasal is the only Dalit poet to have received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the country's apex literary institution, the Sahitya Akademi. Though a Mumbai poet whose poetic sensibility emerges from the underbelly of the city — its menacing, unplumbed Netherlands — the vitality and vivacity of his expression is so sublime and exquisite that he deserves to be ranked among the radical voices of protest in India. This paper examines Dhasal's poetry through the lens of Dalit consciousness, tracing his engagement with caste discrimination, urban poverty, the politics of Dalit Panther, and his abiding reverence for Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

***Keywords:*** *Namdeo Dhasal, Dalit Panther, protest poetry, Golpitha, Kamatipura, Ambedkar, Dalit consciousness, Marathi literature.*

Namdeo Dhasal's voice of Dalit protest emerged onto the Maharashtrian literary scene in the early 1970s and succeeded in fracturing Marathi literature's tranquility while giving birth to a political movement for Dalit voice. Born in 1949 into the Mahar caste, Dhasal is the only Dalit poet to have received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the country's apex literary institution, the Sahitya Akademi. He is, though a Mumbai poet whose poetic sensibility emerges from the underbelly of the city — its menacing, unplumbed Netherlands — the vitality and vivacity of his expression is so sublime and exquisite that he deserves to be ranked among the radical voices of protest in India. If we delve deep into the history of protest movements of regional literatures in poetry in India, we will find few names — Malay Roy Chaudhary (who led the Bhorki Peedi Aandolan, also known as the Hungrialist Movement), Sunil Gangopadhyay and Pritish Nandy in Bangla, Muktibodh, Kedarnath Singh, Dhumil and Rajkamal Chaudhary in Hindi, Siddhilingaiah in Kannada, and Namdeo Dhasal in Marathi — who created an 'alternative poetics' and, with a deliberate use of

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subversive language and diction, 'challenged the middle notions of decency'. Namdeo Dhasal deserves peculiar focus because his Dalit Panther (an organisation founded in 1972) played, in its long-standing struggle with higher castes, both ideological and physical, a major role in the protest movements of India.

The journey of Dhasal's life commences from his humble hamlet Purkanersar of Maharashtra to his maturing of talent in 'Dhor Chawl' on the fringes of Mumbai's red-light area, where he formed his vigilante organisation, the Dalit Panther, in 1972. Named after the U.S. Black Panthers to indicate independence and militancy, the Dalit Panther grew into a movement of educated young men. Laurie Hovell observes this Dalit organisation as follows:

> Dhasal is both poet and Panther, and his poetry and that of the larger Dalit movement cannot be separated from its historical, political and social context. The poetry of this movement has a purpose; the poets speak about and for a community. Some of these poets say that if their political and social goals were met tomorrow, they could stop shouting and writing. (Hovell 7)

Another renowned dramatist, Vijay Tendulkar, looks at the world of Golpitha (Dhasal's first poetry collection in Marathi), which is about Mumbai's underbelly Kamatipura, as follows:

> This is a world where the night is reversed into the day, where stomachs are empty or half-empty, of desperation against death, of the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages, of diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighbourhood tough guys and pimps… (Deshpande 72)

Dhasal is a potent voice of Dalit protest who feels a close relation between literature and politics. His collection Golpitha (named after a red-light district in Mumbai) depicts the tough life of a Dalit and is marked with the raw energy exuded by each of its words — an energy entirely unfamiliar to the established literary circles of its time. Rakshi Sonawane says:

> The book scandalized the Marathi literary world, which had always been dominated by upper-caste writers. Golpitha was initially attacked for not being a literary work worthy of the name. Taking artistic liberty with free verse, Dhasal lashed out against the system, using words that had never been printed. (Sonawane)

After *Golpitha* (1972), several poetry collections have been published in Marathi: *Moorkha Mhatarayane Donyar Halavile (1975), Tujhi Yatta Kanchi?, published by Ambedkara Prabodhini*, *Mumbai (1981), Ambedkari Chalwal*, published by Ambedkara Prabodhini, Mumbai (1981), Khel (1983), *Gandu Bagicha (1986), Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi (1995), Andhale Snatak*, published by

*Ambedkara Prabodhini, Mumbai (1997), Mee Marale Sooryachya Rathache Ghode Saat (2005)*, and Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee (2006). Dilip Chitre, another renowned award-winning poet, critic and translator, has selected, introduced and translated Dhasal's poems from Marathi (from the period 1972 to 2006) in the volume entitled Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underground. The book carries photographs by Henning Stegmuller, poems from eight of Dhasal's collections, three introductory chapters by Dilip Chitre, and a self-note by Namdeo Dhasal himself. Chitre is among the foremost persons who has introduced Dhasal to the English-speaking literary world (though others like Vijay Dharwadekar have also translated a few poems of Dhasal for his anthology Modern Indian Poetry in English, co-edited with A.K. Ramanujan), and he has been translating Dhasal for a considerable length of time. One is astonished when he says:

> I have been translating Dhasal's work for the past 40 years. When I read a piece of poetry or prose in Marathi, and if it's something that bugs or haunts me, I share it with others, to take it beyond the Marathi-speaking identity. Over the years, I've taken this task on myself. Translating the works of Namdeo Dhasal became part of my general agenda. (Lobo)

Chitre and Dhasal have looked at the life of Dalits, the prostitutes and pimps, hijras, loan sharks, corrupt cops, drug addicts, petty criminals, street urchins, victims of sexually transmitted diseases, physicians and general practitioners, gangsters, contract killers, singers and mujra dancers, folk balladeers, tamasha artists, coolies, immigrant labourers, food vendors, paan shopwallahs and all other types of people of Kamathipura — the underbelly of Mumbai. Unlike the multicultural, multiethnic, plurilingual, multireligious and multi-communal population of Mumbai's high-rise buildings, malls and the glamorous world of Bollywood, Kamathipura, the slum, is a tiny but glaring example of the lives of Dalits who reside throughout the nation. Besides being a poet, Dhasal is also a political activist equally known for his poetry and for the protest movement he raised under the banner of Dalit Panther. He remained under the influence of Acharya Narendra Dev, Ram Manohar Lohia and India's socialist ideology, but he later realised that the Samajwadi Party worked within certain class limits. He also felt that he would have to target untouchability first. He says:

> I had to prepare ideological ground for my political commitment to Dalit Panther. We would have nothing to do with the so-called progressive and left parties as long as the problem of untouchability was not their topmost political priority. Around 1968–69, I gradually came to believe that untouchability would be our prime target. (167–168)

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For him there is no difference between poetry and activism, and his poetry is only the literary form of his activism. Chitre is right when he says:

> …Namdeo's universe is untouchable too. It is a loathsome and nauseating universe; a journey into it is a journey from the sacred into the profane. Or, if we were to see it in purely secular and material terms, it is a journey from the clean to the dirty, from the sanitized to the unsanitary, from the healthy to the diseased. (11–12)

The poems of Namdeo Dhasal collected in the volume Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underground are the result of Dilip Chitre's forty years of arduous labour of translation. In the first poem of the collection, Dhasal, in a high crescendo of protest, says:

> Man, you should explode
> Yourself to bits to start with
> Jive to a savage drum beat
> Smoke hash, smoke ganja
> Chew opium, bite lalpari
> Guzzle country booze — if too broke,
> Down a pint of the cheapest dalda. (38)
>
> X X X
>
> Launch a campaign for not growing food, kill people all
> And sundry by starving them to death
> Kill oneself too, lest disease thrive, make all trees leafless. (36)

But this high-voltage current concludes in a mild and positive vision:

> After all this, those who survive should stop rubbing anyone
> Or making others their slaves
> After this they should stop calling one another names —
> White or black, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra;
> Stop creating political parties, stop building property, stop committing
> The crime of not recognizing one's kin, not recognizing one's mother or sister
> One should regard the sky as one's grandpa, the earth as one's grandma
> And coddled by them everybody should bask in mutual love. (36)

And in a didactic tone, he says:

> Man, one should act so bright as to make the sun and the moon seem pale
> One should share each morsel of food with everyone else;
> One should compose a hymn
> To humanity itself, man, man should sing only the song of man. (36)

Similarly, in the poem 'Kamatipura', where the 'nocturnal porcupine reclines / … like an alluring gray bouquet wearing the syphilitic sores of centuries / pushing the calendar away / forever lost in its own dreams' (74), Dhasal regards Kamatipura as 'hell, a swirling vortex, an ugly agency' and a 'pain wearing a dancer's anklet'. But all his bitterness turns into tenderness when he says:

> O Kamatipura,
> Tucking all seasons under your armpit
> You squat in the mud here
> I go beyond all the pleasures and pains of whoring and wait
> For your lotus to bloom.
> — A lotus in the mud. (75)

Pain, anguish, abject poverty, deprivation, starvation, loneliness, and the hellish life of men, women, children and almost all the marginalised sections of society have been captured in the poetry of Dhasal. The predicament of a Dalit woman and her exploitation is mirrored in a sarcastic manner:

> Women are merely printed whores of men.
> Men are just pimps of women.
> The relationship of men and women is just like —
> Take a few whores; take a few pimps; take a few chewing sticks to clean the teeth;
> And throw them away after use; and then gargle with the holy water of the river. (58)

In the long poem 'Hunger', the poet personifies hunger and puts several questions to her:

> Hunger,
> A fruitless thing.
> However hard you work, for wages you get paid in stones;
> If one can't build a house of stones
> One can't live in it.
> Hunger, at times, you assume the form of a mouse, at times you become a cat, and a lion sometimes;
> How can we weak ones, face
> This game started by you and dare to play it? (76)

Another long poem, 'The Tree of Violence', mirrors Dhasal's concern for the Dalit predicament and his mature understanding of the social system in which the tree of violence is planted 'like a Tulsi Vrindavan', 'watered' with blood and 'with great devotion'. 'The tree of violence continued to flourish', sucking human blood and dealing 'hammer-like blows' on a 'holy man' schooled in the sophistry of parliamentary etiquette, resulting in his remaining 'in a coma'. The messiah

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somehow recovers and warns the people about the 'ever-growing roots of the tree'. When 'ministers and cronies' attempted to 'chop the tree', the tree could not be broken or sawed off, and people regarded it as a tree of steel. After the government's constant futile attempts to find the roots, there comes a roaring of fusillades from all directions. Dhasal says:

> Finally they found the roots of the tree
> In the Havelis of the Zamindars and in their mehfils
> Finally the roots of the tree were found
> In the safety-vaults of capitalists and monopolists
> Finally the roots of the tree were found
> Under the throne of the Empress
> Hellhounds and hit-men on red alert were summoned in the end
> The tree was cut down. (70)

And later the same tree of violence becomes the tree of love — a Kalpa-taru. The poet weaves chapters of hope and says:

> Really, it cannot die
> But multiply it will — by the hundreds, by the thousands, by the millions and by the billions
> ———————————————————
> It will overflow into rice-fields, and foul up the Parliament, it will run
> Over the ghettos of the untouchables, the mangs and the mehetars,
> The mahars and the chambhars, into the fields and into the factories,
> They will all weave and wave streamers and pennants for the Gate of a new nation
> And the tree of violence will perform the role of the tree of wish-fulfilment
> Yet, it will be a cornucopia for the newborn nation. (71)

Dhasal, like other protest poets, is an ardent votary of Baba Sahib Bhimrao Ambedkar. His poems 'Dedication' (from Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Mee, 2006), 'Ode to Dr. Ambedkar' (from Tujhi Yatta Kanchi, 1981), and 'Ode to Dr. Ambedkar' (from Golpitha, 1972) are his poetic offerings to Dr. Ambedkar. He remembers him and says:

> You are that sun, our only charioteer,
> Who descends into us from a vision of sovereign victory,
> And accompanies us in fields, in crowds, in processions, and in struggles,
> And saves us from being exploited
> You are that sun
> You are that one — who belongs to us. (42)

In the poem 'Dedication' he apologises to 'Baba Sahib' because he 'could not do without writing / the poetry of his achievement', and he is ready to suffer for a lifetime because he says:

In archaic poetry, one has come across many
Who turned cured humans back into their original form.
Babasaheb,
By suffering the punishment given by you
My life shall become pristine again. (134)

Dhasal's raw imagery describes the lives of Dalits who have been victims of exploitation and the savagery of the higher castes. Dhasal lashes out against the system with an armoury of altogether new words and symbols and with an artistic liberty of free verse. He attacks even the intellectuals:

These great intellectuals are roaming with blazing torches in their hands
Through lanes and bylanes, chawls and chawls
Claiming that they understand the darkness in our huts, where even rats die of hunger
They are great like horny whores
Those who don't know that the darkness under their arses
Can exhibit coquettish excellence with ease. (Sonawane)

In the poem 'Orthodox Pity', he complains that the 'feudal lords' have 'locked all light in their vault' and that their 'orthodox pity is no taller than a folk-road pimp'; and that their lowered life, which is imposed upon the Dalits, is without a pavement belonging to them. He continues:

They've made us so helpless; being human has become nauseating to us
We can't find even dust to fill up our scorched bowls
The rising day of justice, like a bribed person, favours only them
While we are being slaughtered, not even a sigh for us escapes their generous hands. (47)

Brought up in extreme poverty in Mumbai's red-light Kamatipura area, Dhasal lived among prostitutes, goons, beggars, and in a place where distinctive stench, leaky drainages, the smell of human urine and faeces, stale food and garbage, sweat, smoke and many subtler aromas abound, where 'its poor inhabitants try to keep it as hygienic and orderly as possible' (150) but fail at last. Dhasal feels alienated, dejected and torn when he says:

This soil treated me as an outsider;
This air turned its back on me;
What took pity on me in the end was the sky that has no limits. (113)

In the poem 'Worry', the poet is worried about the future and remains indifferent even to immortality and spirituality:

I do not wish to get chained to this God-created hell

For me every day brings a smile to the lips of fortune
Whether the ambrosial cloud rains immortality or not
I don't wish to entomb myself here in a trance
As for me I still have to worry
About tomorrow's bread. (107)

And he is bold enough to face death because he wishes to fight for his people and, knowing that 'poets can save the earth from extinction', he wants to sacrifice his life for them. One can observe his boldness when he says:

Death is a better alternative to fear
Rather than get buggered; butcher them back
Then bring them back to life, and then kill them again
I too would like to be martyred
For my people's sake. (111)

Dhasal has an indomitable will power with which he attempts to uproot the tree of casteism, communalism and regionalism. He opposed not only the oppressors of higher castes but also raised his voice against the oppressors of women, children, religion, fascism and fundamentalism. His Dalit Panther played a crucial role in the politics and literature of Maharashtra. Dhasal remained objective from the very beginning. Critic Robert Bohm rightly observes:

> Dhasal of course makes no apologies for his writing. Instead, he is relentless in his insistence that the reader know why he writes the way he does. And so he regales us with the real, detailing a claustrophobic world filled with extraordinary deprivation and garbage that is both literal and spiritual. (Bohm)

The poetry of Dhasal is criticised severely by critics, but he takes delight in shaking the staid and stirring up controversies. Sudhanva Deshpande says aptly: "The more his (Dhasal's) critics are exasperated, the more he enjoys being outrageous." (Deshpande 72)

Dhasal supports this and says: "I have been criticised by many. Whenever I find the time, I read what my critics write. However it does not affect me." And like a genuine protest poet who knows what he has to do, he adds: "Our times are such that we have to move on, leaving the establishment in its own fix." (170)

Although the Dalit movement and Dalit politics are now in shambles, the translator Chitre has concerned himself with his human vision without sharing Dhasal's political views, his strategies and his tactics as a political activist, because at a deeper level of poetic vision of humankind and human equality they meet each other. The readers of Dhasal should also adopt this positive vision

of looking at art and poverty by sharing the human tenderness that originates in one heart and reaches another. According to Dr. S.K. Paul:

> Dalit literature is, ultimately, a declaration of independence. It is impossible to understand the revolutionary quality of Dalit literature without understanding the people to whom it is addressed. (Paul 398)

Dhasal's poetry speaks for Dalits and is addressed to Dalits, so it is more down to earth and realistic than that of other protest poets. One cannot search for sweetness in his poetry, and at the same time one cannot find it missing anywhere. His love for the downtrodden and the people living beside dung heap and hell remains a running undercurrent. As an ideal protest poet, he loves everyone and spares no one. He lashes, but stimulates with a hope to see under it a shining vision; and so his poems, addressed to a peculiar audience and community, carry universality in them and make him a master craftsman and maverick whose poetry is worthy of the highest recognition.

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