

# Plight of Dalits in Dalpat Chauhan's Selected Short Stories

Dr. Pragnesh I Solanki

*College of Agriculture, Bharuch, Navsari Agricultural University*

**Abstract—The Indian social system is diverse in nature, mainly due to the variety of castes, and it is infamously known for the exploitation of the Dalits by the elite caste. Dalit literary texts have therefore developed a voice to protest these inhuman atrocities and injustices inflicted upon them. The present paper highlights the condition of Dalits in society, especially in the state of Gujarat, as expressed through the short stories of Dalpat Chauhan. It emphasises the situations of Dalit farmers, labourers, and professionals working in the government sector. They face untouchability, experience sadistic delight and exploitation from the upper caste, which is illustrated in this paper.**

## I. DEFINING DALIT LITERATURE

Dalit literature is a literature that does not portray aestheticism but emphasises the hard-core social reality as experienced by the lower rungs of the Indian society who have been suffering caste discrimination for ages. According to Limbale, “Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalit” (Limbale 30). The other aspect of Dalit literature that focuses on is that it is a protest literature that raises its voice against atrocities, social injustice, and inequalities. It acts as a whistleblower to the social deformities, as Valmiki argues, “Dalit literature is the literature of the masses. It is a literature of action, based on human values, which wages a struggle born out of anger and rebellion against feudalistic mindsets” (Valmiki XXXV). Limbale considers Dalit literature as ‘a literature of commitment’ to foreground social follies and transform them. Dalpat Chauhan opines, “Dalit literature is essentially resistance literature, which ‘echoes Dalit grievances and the experience of humiliation, exasperation and anger. It deals with the neo-Brahminism of Dalits, focusing on its solutions, repercussion and controversies, and it also ... is the

sum total of Desivad (nativism), Dalitvad (Dalitism), rural sensibility and feminism” (Chauhan xix).

Recognition of the term ‘Dalit literature’ was received in the foremost Dalit literary conference held in 1958. Later on in the sixties began with The Little Magazine Movement, and the Marathi literature found a voice of Angry Young Man with a protest literature. Dalit literature was spurred up with short stories of Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat and Baburao Bagul. The next decade was significant with the initiation of the Dalit Panthers movement by a young breed of writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J. V. Pawar in Bombay in 1972, inspired by Black Panthers literary Movement in the USA. For Dangle “Dalit literature is not simply literature..., Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change” (Dangle viii).

## II. GUJARATI DALIT LITERATURE

Gujarati Dalit literature evolved in the mid-seventies against the so-called modernism of *Re Mat* movement and mainstream Gujarati literature which refers to *lalit* literature. It was Labhsankar who brought change in the form and content of Gujarati poetry in the sixties. The Dalit movement named *Hoon* started a publication with the same title in the mid-seventies, which led to the emergence of Gujarati Dalit literature. ‘Panther’ was a significant publication by Rameshchandra Parmar in 1975, which led to many other publications in the late seventies like ‘Akrosh’, ‘Kalo Sooraj’, ‘Garud’, ‘Dalit Bandhu’, ‘Nayamarg’, and ‘Disa’. The eighties saw the strong outflow of Gujarati Dalit works, making it a robust nemesis to mainstream writing. It flourished in form and aesthetics. Gujarati Dalit writing received strong criticism from their counterparts, with the charges of being propagandist literature. Dalit writers have come out strong against

the criticism and used dialectical slangs and adopted folk-style in their writing. Many Gujarati Dalit writers like Joseph Macwan, Mohan Parmar, Harish Mangalam, Mangla Rathod, and Kishan Sosa have contributed significantly and made a mark on the literary arena (Sherrif 11). Mohan Parmar and Harish Mangalam published the first anthology of Dalit short stories to set up the Dalit sensibility, featuring Dalit setting, dialects, traditions, and the exploitation from the elite caste are hallmarks of dalit literature. The introduction of the anthology has turned out as manifesto of Dalit prose works. Later on, many Dalit short stories and prose works were published in journals like 'Samajmitra', 'Hayati' and 'Sarvanam'. At the end of the twentieth century, formal organisations were set up by the Dalit writers like Dalit Sabha and Dalit Sahitya Academi to establish their identity. Further, Dalit literature confronted criticism from the mainstream organisations like Gujarat Sahitya Akademi and Gujarat Sahitya Parishad regarding the coexistence of lalit and Dalit literature in the mainstream literature. However, there are several Dalit literary texts that are part of courses in many universities, which is a great milestone for Dalit literature (Paul 273).

The Dalit short stories are found in the typical locales of *vas* of several communities segregated, uttering slangs, local dialects, following traditions, social taboos, and practices of socio-economic exploitations of the dalits by the elite caste.

Dalpat Chauhan is an important literary as well as social figure who is actively involved with Gujarat Dalit Panthers (1974) and Dalit Sangharsh Sangh (1982). He worked significantly for the Dalit Literary Movement in Gujarati. He published literary works in different genres that criticise the cruelty inflicted on the Dalits by the elite caste. According to him, Dalits are not subjugated by the elite caste through barring education, but also manipulate the hegemonic power hierarchy in their favour and make the Dalits suffer. Therefore, Dalit writing is a potent weapon to dismantle the hegemonic structure and establish true humanitarianism. He, hence, proclaims "I want to chronicle our history and our resistance..." Dalpat Chauhan, in his short stories, narrates all the typical features of Dalit sensibility. (Chauhan xix)

Chauhan's story "Home" is a portrayal of the Dalit submissive character of Kalu, who has a dream of building a pucca house for himself; therefore, he

pleads for the permission granted from the village head. Pani, his wife, grudges Kalu "how long - within these crumbling walls and on this blasted cow-dung floor?" (1) She is tired of living in a mud house. Kalu tries to explain that their caste people have to live in such a house only. It is destined by the upper caste. It is the norm set by the so-called social system. It is a harsh reality that caste of dhe... cannot live in a pucca house as Kalu tries to convince his wife, "We are dhe..., and the village resents the idea of us having a pucca house, with brick walls and all. Why blame them when our own destiny is rotten?" (1) The social taboo is that the dhe... caste cannot have the same standard of living which the elite caste people have. In order to have a pucca house, Kalu has to take permission from the village head. When Kalu expressed the desire to build a pucca house, it was disdained, "Now these dhe... too aspire for a pucca house. They want to throw dust over time-tested tradition and spit in the face of the entire village. Where would we be without decency and decorum dictated by convention?" (3). Kalu had to bribe Hartanji to convince the village head, Pathubha, to allow him to build a pucca house. Though he gets approval for building a pucca house but the design and size has to be according to the guideline set by the village head. Even the bricks cannot be transported through the village's main road via cart, and they must be transported through the bypass road. Despite all the unjust terms and conditions, Kalu agreed to all. Hartanji demanded a goat kid and five rupees as a fee for convincing the village head. Kalu had to pay huge price for not giving the kid a goat, as his house was set on fire just for disagreeing to give the goat kid. The house, which was like 'a baby bump of Mother Earth', was destroyed due to not fulfilment of demands. Kalu remains helpless to this tyranny and can do nothing to save his house. He "remained where he was, in his bed, dumbfounded and deranged." (19)

"The Invasion" is a story that dictates the atrocity experienced by the Dalit character named Natho, who is the only exception in his family to have land, that too 'a slim patch of government waste land, a shred...'. Being hard working labour, he had worked for the upper caste so far; now he has his own, and he has worked hard to have a good crop of pearl millet. His crop is hurting the upper caste village head, who had intervened in getting Natho the ownership of the land. The point of anger felt by the village head and

the upper caste is that “The land meant for the grazing of Mother Cow had been shredded and transferred to none but an untouchable? How terrible a sacrilege! What an act of blasphemy! That Mother Cow would go hungry now just because of dhe...”(27) Liliyo, the village head’s nephew, couldn’t tolerate the progress of Natho because of the good yield of crop, he says, “Uncle, I can’t bear to look at the bumper millet crop in Natho’s field. The line dividing a landlord and dhe... is being smudged... Do something- and if you can’t, give us a free hand.” (29) Liliyo plotted a trick to destroy the field crop in Natho’s village by driving the cows to graze in Natho’s field intentionally and destroy the crop, which was grown with hard work on which Natho’s family had to rely. It was his bread and butter, which is destroyed by Liliyo out of jealousy. Natho is not a submissive character, when he realized him being scapegoat, he shows his vigour. He argues, “Damn you, my shred is a government land ... the village well is also on government land.” (34) He boldly puts a pitcher in the village well, which was used by the upper caste people and gets it filled. He takes up physical battle with the village head and his nephew. Before any duel, the cops come and the matter is averted. Thus, Natho, unlike Kalu, displays a rebellious and sturdy character who fights against injustice and faces the challenge boldly. Natho is therefore a Neo-Dalit protagonist, unlike tame Dalit characters.

“Cold Blood” is a story depicting an identity concern of a dalit doctor who changes his name from Dayo Parmar to Devendra Parikh to identify himself as upper caste nevertheless, the shadow of caste never disappears “Can Bhalu’s Dayo morph himself into Devendra Parikh? Or is he doomed forever to the life and identity of Dayo?” (118) It is a pathetic reality that caste identity is labelled by the elite caste and the lower caste had to suffer the inferior status due to their birth in that caste. The tag of caste is an indelible mark in the Indian social system; even if one tries to remove it is not possible, as experienced by Dr Devendra Parikh alias Dayo Parmar. For the protagonist, he has not committed any serious offence by changing his surname as he feels “What bloody shame that I changed my surname from Parmar to Parikh” (124). It is irritating for him to be identified by his fellow villagers by his real social identity. For every staff member in the hospital he is “Bhalabhai’s Devendra. Everybody knows, respects that name. For them, I am

Dr. Parikh ... even for that Brahmin cook. And these bloody *uncivilized*, ignorant chaudharis...” (124) However, his father had to face the consequence of the change in identity from the village head as the village head sarcastically remarks “So, you guys have turned bania, haven’t you? No more a dhe... now eh? Come over and sit with us in the village square sometimes. I will spread out a special cot for you, sir.” (125) despite such humiliation face by Dr. Devendra’s father, he urges the other doctor “... this is my case. From my village. *Take special care.*” Dr Devendra donates his blood to Hemraj’s son, which transforms the heart, which was ‘burning with the fire of revenge’. Hemraj had no objection to a lower caste donating blood for saving the life of a chaudhary. Hemraj expresses his gratitude to Dr Devendra for his efforts to save his son’s life. However, when everything turns fine Dr. Devendra offers a glass of water with his hand to Hemraj, he refuses, saying “No... we are not thirsty ... yes, not thirsty” (128). This brings the social reality in play that one cannot be ignored under any circumstances. Despite donating blood, having a glass of water matters most to Hemraj. The climax restores the caste consciousness.

“Darbar” is a story of a tactful school teacher named Mafatlal who belonged to a weaver caste, is transferred to Motipura Primary School which brings sadistic pleasure to his colleagues who belonged to upper caste as they do back biting “Now, the dhe... will come to his senses... ,he will be straightened up, like a tight rope.” (130) but Mafatlal believes “The world is good to one who is good himself.” (130) He was warned to deal with Gobarji, the influential and vigorous figure in the entire village from Darbar community. Mafatlal used diplomatic skills while dealing and communicating with the Darbar instead of running away and hiding any of his identity. He offered a Taj brand cigarette. He plainly and fearlessly communicates with Gobarji without concealing any identity about his native and caste. He tactically convinced the Darbar in avoiding the tradition of wearing headgear or at least a kerchief on the head, and the Darbar gave him permission to go without a *topi*. He developed friendly relations with the person everyone respects and is afraid of in the village. The relation grew so strong that the Darbar invited the master for a cup of tea despite the inferior caste status, “I sat down, had tea in a pair of bronze cup and saucer...” (140). Usually, the lower caste is given

beverages or food in different vessels; however, though the Darbar belongs to the superior community, he made friendly relations with the master Mafatlal. The village head, who once followed untouchability by dropping the daily newspaper from above, now held it to the master's hand, and the reason is Gobarji. And friendship between the two turned into a strong tie. The Darbar offered liquor to the master, and they enjoyed together. Finally, when Mafatlal received the transfer order, the Darbar felt heartbroken. Mafatlal tries to appease him by expressing gratitude, "Arre Darbar! Don't lose heart like this. Like an elder brother, you have given me love, protection, respect and what not. I'll remain indebted to you for the rest of my life". (149) The story has a strange end where two odds gets united despite separation. Gobarji outpours his emotions: "I'm just repaying what I owed you in our previous births. Otherwise, a rajaput and a weaver make strange bedfellows; such a strong bond of love between the two is unheard of" (149). The character of Mafatlal is a very diplomatic who handles the strong elite caste people tactfully and makes strong relations with them. He, unlike the character of Dr Devendra, doesn't hide his identity to any one, neither at work place nor with Gobarji. Through his soft skills, he manages to change the heart of the Darbar. Thus, the selected stories of Dalpat Chauhan display contrary characters in Kalu, who is meek, tame and submissive, while Natho is strong, rebellious and aggressive. Dr Devendra is kind-hearted but conceals his identity for his reputation. Mafatlal is a school teacher who is tactful and manages relations softly and diplomatically. These stories delineates the rural picture of caste discrimination where the caste consciousness is highly observed.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Chauhan, Dalpat, Fear and other Stories, Translated by Hemang Ashwinkumar, Penguin Books, Haryana 2023.
- [2] Dangle, Arjun, Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature. 1992. p. viii
- [3] Limbale, Sharankumar, Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations, Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Longman, 2004. p.30
- [4] Paul, S. K. "Dalit Literature: A Critical Overview" Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration, Edited by Prasad, Amar Nath, M. B. Gaijan, Sarup & Sons, New Delhi, 2007. p.273
- [5] Sherrif, K. M. "Gujarati Dalit Literature An Overview." Indian Literature, vol. 37, no. 1 (159), 1994, pp. 9–11. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23339727>. Accessed 7 May 2026.
- [6] Valmiki, Omprakash, Joothan : A Dalit's Life, Columbia University Press eBooks, translated by Arun P. Mukherjee, Columbia UP, 2003. p. xxxv