

## Chapter III

### **Shankar Painter: Dalit Struggle and the Question of Folk Culture**

Shankar Painter is a Gujarati Dalit poet who while giving expression to the day-to-day social and political issues of Dalit life has used traditional resources culture in very innovative ways. He is one of those Dalit poets who have been composing poetry before the advent of the Dalit Panthers' movement in Gujarat. His songs and satirical poems reveal the social conditions of Dalits and express his concerns in rustic language and folk style. The manner in which he borrows Dalit folk culture makes him a different poet from the whole range of Gujarati Dalit poets. His double-edged songs expose brutal atrocities on Dalits and offer resistance to a caste worldview. Using a folk style, he declares his insolent and rebellious attitude to both modern literary practices and social injustice. His social concern, its understanding and urge for change make him sing his songs to get his people awakened to their human rights as well as their rights as citizen of this nation. For his purpose, he uses folk traditions of his region--North Gujarat--in composing and presenting his songs.

The folk culture of north Gujarat has evident traces of the folk cultures of Kutch, Mewad, Sindh, Marwar and Saurashtra. Geographical proximity and social contacts with these areas and people have influenced north Gujarat culturally. Rajputs, Kolis and Rabaris of north Gujarat have social relations in Saurashtra, Kutch and Rajasthan regions, and Muslim princely states had social and political interactions with the Sindh and Baluchistan region (Chandravakar 1993:13). These social and cultural interactions have created a kind of cultural amalgamation in north Gujarat and its impact on language and style of folk literature can be clearly discerned.

## **Folk tradition and Public space:**

The term 'folk' is derived from Anglo-Saxon word 'folc'. It generally means 'common or uncivilized group of people'. Definitions of folklore and folklife express the values and traditions of specific regional or social groups. Archie Green, an American folklorist, drafted a definition of American folklife for legal purposes (American Folklife Preservation Act sec. 3 (1)) in the following way:

...the tradition expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional; expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, ritual, pageantry. Handicraft, these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction... (Jabbour 2004:17)

In Gujarat, it is commonly argued that folk study can be divided into various groups considering its social aspects. Kanubhai Jani, a folklore theorist, categorizes folk study in four major groups: 1) Folk study related to physical surroundings which includes houses, costumes, food habits, occupations, furniture etc.; 2) a study related to social life which includes customs, rituals, medicines, superstitions, beliefs etc.; 3) a study related to arts which includes festivals, celebrations, games, music, dance, drama, paintings,; and 4) a study related to literature which comprises folklores-epics, songs, tales, *padas*, *bhajans*, ballads, narratives etc. (1992: 2-3)

Folk literature, a part of folklore, is communicated and spread through oral expressions. It consists oral forms of both prose and verse narratives. It comprises poems, songs, historical and mythological narratives, dramas, social and religious rituals, proverbs etc. The authorship of folk material is largely anonymous. The origin of folk literature is believed to be as old as the origin

of human language. The evolution of folk literature or its developments cannot be traced explicitly. Each group of people has treated their folk literature in their own distinct way. It is transmitted from person to person in oral forms. Mostly, all societies have produced some men and women of great natural abilities—saints, sages, rulers, warriors, and social leaders—and from these have come inspiration for creating and listening to folk literature. The effect of folk literature on common men is enormous, particularly as it builds and shapes their vision of life largely through entertainment.

Apart from their entertainment purpose, folk traditions provide a public space where issues of common concern could be expressed, discussed and understood. The various folk genres such as folktale, folk songs, folk drama, and folk dance etc. often focus on social, religious and political issues. They bring ideas, values and issues into a public forum. Entertainment and constructive features of folklore have often been used for instructional purposes. Religion often uses such media to spread its system of beliefs. *Bhajans, padas, shakhis* etc. are such forms of folklore that generally preach religious dogmas and spiritual teachings. Folksongs, folk dramas and folktales etc. have the capacity to address social and political issues in a very creative and indigenous manner, so that the message is conveyed to the lowest of the low. Moreover, folk traditions impart freedom and space to unravel the complexities and contentions of social relationships. In a sense, according to Bhattacharya (2004: x) folk traditions unshackle “inhibitions in a stress-free manner”. Folk traditions are often exploited to put forward certain issues in the public domain for discussion to bring out a consensus or to build up resistance. In a way, folk traditions bring the internal out and share it with larger groups.

Folklore is a group based activity. It emerges not from an individual creative activity, but it is performed before a group of people. It deals with and expresses the value of a particular

group, whether it is based on religion, sect, region, caste or gender. It is a flow that nurtures and stimulates members of a group, who use folklore to express their identity. Alan Jabbour notes that “folklore moves time and space, it constantly crosses group boundaries” (2004: 22). He also argues that folklore is not only an instrument to express contentions but sometimes it also becomes an end in itself. As a vital cultural resource, folklore also helps to shape the alliance among the members of a group or community and make them realize their potentialities, foster their relations, strengthen their solidarity and create a sense of common purpose and dwelling.

The public space, created by folklore, is a kind of social space where generally individuals of the same group and concern gather to discuss, understand and respond to their common issues. The freedom of expression and participation is in built in the space of folklore performances. Being an expressive oral tradition, folklore involves various issues related to the ‘folk’ it represents. But, on the other side, because of its ‘oral’ feature, it acquires the category of the ‘other’ which is often looked at as an opposition to the ‘written’. The ‘oral’ is also stereotyped as uncivil, rustic and inartistic by the ‘elites’. And the community which represents it is stereotyped as illiterate and backward. However, folklore is considered, by its practitioners, as an artistic communication which presents the social and cultural identity of the marginalized communities. Moreover, the folklore or oral traditions have not lost their relevance as a tool in voicing the specific issues related to the marginalized just because the literate society has often excluded and found insignificant what has been immediate and central to marginalized communities. While discussing the role of the binary in the context of folk traditions, Sudhakar Reddy notes that a certain form of modernity premised on the theory of difference tends to categorize the knowledge system into “hierarchical paradigms such as high-low, great-little,

sacred-secular, elite- folk, primitive-modern etc.”(2004: 24). For example, Hans Moser differentiates three forms of folklore: (Reddy 2004:26)

1. Traditionally and functionally determined folk performances outside their cultural context.
2. Playful imitation of folk motifs in another social stratum.
3. Purposeful invention and creation of folk like elements outside the tradition.

The third form emphasizes the purposefulness of the folk tradition by infusing certain elements which are not basically related to its tradition. The blend of inventions and traditions employed in the folk traditions are used here deliberately for specific purposes. Folklore, by altering its content and style is often used to fulfill social and political purposes. Many a time, governments employ the folklore medium to spread their ideology and programmes. For instance, Gujarat government often hires folk drama groups to spread awareness about de-addiction and girl child education. Here, the content of a traditional folk drama is infused with new life through an ‘invention’ and the ‘new’ content is fixed in the traditional form for a particular purpose. Moreover, during the election time, political parties use folk song type jingles to spread their messages. So the new content and the folk form are eventually made to play with each other in order to create a community of supporters across the social spectrum.

To establish a community out of heterogeneous groups, on the basis of common concern, the folklore medium is handy and effective. The Dalit movement, to create a community out of several castes and sub-castes, for an egalitarian purpose, often uses folklore as a tool. For instance, in Andhra Pradesh the Dalit movement used *dappu*, (a folk musical instrument) and folk art to form a community by dissolving different caste and sub-caste affiliations (Reddy 34).

In Maharashtra, Dalits have often used the oral tradition of *powadas* to express their discontent against the feudal exploitations in Akola and Amravati districts. The *Kalapathak* tradition, a folk musical theatre, was used to mobilize the Dalit masses and sharpen their political consciousness in the 1970s Maharashtra (Guru 1997). New folk formations are often created and popularized to address the issues of concern, to assert collective identity and to construct a critical ‘public space’.

Folk literature has historically influenced the written form profoundly. For instance, the Homeric hymns, undoubtedly oral in origin have consistently enabled elaborate plots and have successfully preserved the Greek mythology with its gods and heroes. Many folktales have found their place in literature. The medieval romances borrowed freely from these folk sources. In urbanized culture, the folk literature has been gradually replaced by written literature and audio-visual media. However, it has not lost its importance in the rural culture. There still exist isolated groups that carry on such traditions—old people, traditional folk singers, storytellers, *Kathakars*, researchers, some communities etc. The folk festivals like fairs, community gatherings, special folk programmes etc. have helped to retain folk literature to a certain extent. The speaker or singer often retains a tradition learned from other speakers. The new speaker or singer or storyteller delivers it to an audience who has heard it before, but he delivers it in such a manner that the listeners still retain their interest. The folk literature has appealed to people through the ages, across the world.

Unlike written literature, folk literature is concerned with orality— singing and listening. Thus, it depends on the existence of a ‘living culture’ to carry on the tradition. The folk literary songs and stories exist as long as they live in human memory. In some cultures nearly everyone can carry on the oral literary traditions. It happens that people who are traditional performers

usually remember and repeat. Communities who are traditionally and professionally devoted to folk performances invariably carry on to the next generation a plenty of songs, tales and folk performances. In Gujarat, such communities are *barots*, *nayaks*, *turis*, *charans* etc.

India has a rich tradition of folk literature. *The Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Jatak Tales*, *Tales of Panchtantras*, *Hitopadesha*, *Katha Saritsagar* and mystic *bhajans* and *padas* have been all alive in Indian oral traditions with various versions and variations. India contains a diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and religious beliefs and it is difficult to generalize about its folk traditions. Moreover, every dialect, region, social group has its own cultural traditions.

Much of the Indian folk literature is dominantly religious in its nature but it is quite different from classical Sanskrit religious and literary traditions, in its form and content. The folk literature has its local colours and themes. Along with larger philosophical and spiritual themes, it often deals with local heroes and local social issues with their diverse local manifestations. For instance, the legend of Mayo, a Dalit young man, is a folktale of north Gujarat region which connects the quasi-historical events with its social implications. The tale refers to a historical event that occurred during the Solanki dynasty. The legend tells that when Siddhraj Jaysinh (1094-1143) found the Sahastralinga Pond empty he called upon the Brahmans and asked for its reason. The Brahmans advised the king to sacrifice a man with thirty two exemplary qualities. Later they found a Dalit youth called Mayo with required qualities and he was sacrificed. But before his sacrifice Mayo had secured certain rights for his people from the king. He demanded that his people (Dalits) should not be compelled to live outside the village and wear specific kind of clothes. His demands were met. Thus, in sacrificing himself he attempted to liberate his people from the stigma of being low castes by erasing all caste markers (Shrimali 1993: 3-20). There are many folk songs, dramas and ballads are found presenting this legend of Mayo in the

Dalit folk traditions of Gujarat. They are used for various purposes from political to social, and from purposes of entertainment to valorization.

So, the folklore often becomes both the tool of entertainment and medium of resistance. For lower classes, it is handy and most effective because of their inability to access the written medium. The lower classes and castes in Gujarat, who had no access to Sanskrit or elite literature due to their social and educational conditions, have however developed their own oral literary traditions for entertainment, education and protest. For instance, *Bhavai*, a folk theatre form, has been a form of entertainment, learning and protest.<sup>1</sup> By addressing issues of social evil, historical event, and political affair, it has often created the public space to discuss issues of concern. For example, the *Achhut no Bhavaivesh*<sup>2</sup> (Drama of an Untouchable) was generally performed by Dalit actors from the *targala* community to address the issue of untouchability and the history of resistance to such an inhuman practice. The legend of Mayo; and modern attempts of Gandhi and Ambedkar to remove untouchability are embedded in this play to stir the sensitivity and morality of the audience<sup>3</sup>. *Bhavai* has also been reinvented by some professional theatre groups like

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<sup>1</sup>*Bhavai* is an ancient folk theatre originated in north Gujarat region in 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was also used by modern theatre groups for various purposes. See Sebastian, V. "Cultural Elites and the Discipling of Bhavai." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 49, No. 7.15 Feb. 2014: 59-66. Print.

<sup>2</sup>*Achhut no Bhavaivesh* (1975) a *bhavaivesh* was documented by JashvantThakar from the oral tradition. It was considered as a product of Dalit upliftment movement influenced by Gandhi's thoughts. Jasavant Thakar watched it played by some Dalit performers in a village of Vadodara district. The drama encompasses the issue of untouchability from the historical perspective from Muslim regime to modern democracy after independence. It includes the role of Mayo, Gandhi and Ambedkar as important historical stages and personalities in emancipation of Dalits. See in Thakar, Jasavant. *Achhut no Bhavaivesh*. Ahmedabad: Bharat Natyapith, 1975. Print.

<sup>3</sup>On the legend of Mayo, a famous Gujarati film, *BhavniBhavai*(The Tale of the life) was produced by Ketan Mehta in 1980. Nashiruddin Shah, Dina Pathak, Mohan Gokhale, SmitaPatil and Om Puri played leading roles. The film was dedicated to the inventor of the *bhavai* theatre, AsaitThakar. (See, Srivastava Banerjee. *One Hundred Indian Feature Films: An Annotated Filmography*. United States of America: Garland Reference Library, 1988. p49. Print.) Dina Pathak (1922-2002) was associated with *bhavaifolk* traditions also. She presented a *bhavai*, *Mena Gujarati* at the RastrapatiBhavan in presence of then president, Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1957. See in Vinay Kumar. "From Gujarat With Grace." *The Tribune*. 11 June 2006.

Web.<<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2006/20060611/spectrum/main2.htm>>

Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, Ahmedabad. Darpana organizes training sessions for non-traditional artists to train them to perform *bhavai* away from its region of origin, with modern themes and messages. For instance, Darpana Academy's groups performed *bhavai* shows in Chhota Udaipur, a tribal region of south Gujarat to spread awareness about infant and maternal mortality in 2007-08 (Sebastian 2014: 63).

Dalit folklore in Gujarat has undergone certain changes and has been influenced by contemporary social and political changes. As it can be explained that Folklore, as a compound term expresses two ideas, 'folk' and their 'lore'; Folk expresses their identity through 'lore', and 'lore' exists on the basis of 'folk'. Dalit folklore, in its social dimension, presents the continuity of resistance to the hegemonic forces and reaction to the socio-political changes at the individual level and also takes the shape of a tool to create a desired 'public space' at the collective level.

Since Dalits were not allowed to participate in mainstream spiritual activities, they founded alternative Bhakti sects as a parallel to the mainstream Bhakti tradition in Gujarat. Many Dalit saints have sung their resistance songs to the mainstream traditions; and have eventually strengthened the Dalit folk traditions by articulating its resistance dimension alongside the spiritual one. In Gujarat, Dalit traditions are related to occupations, folk performances and most recently with literary movement. Art of weaving and making leather goods, art of singing, acting and playing musical instruments are related to Dalit cultural traditions. The recent emergence of Dalit literary movement has also created a significant folk literary tradition and has made a mark alongside the mainstream literary activities.

Dalit castes like *turi*, *nat*, *bharathli* and *targala* are traditionally engaged with folk performances like playing musical instruments, singing, performing *bhavai* etc. Dalits folk traditions have both social and spiritual dimensions. Dalit spiritual tradition in Gujarat has its

root in the Bhakti movement of the fourteenth century. Many Dalit saint poets were influenced by the pioneers of the Bhakti movement -Ramanada, Raidas and Kabir and spread the Bhakti cult in Gujarat among the lower castes. There is no doubt that the Dalit folk traditions, both in their social and spiritual aspects, have influenced the modern Dalit literary movement. Nathala Gohil's *Saurashtrana Harijan Bhakt Kavio* [Harijan Saint Poets of Saurashtra] (1987) and Dalpat Shrimali's *Harijan Santane Loksahitya* [Harijan Saints and Folk Literature] (1989) have documented Gujarati Dalit folklore traditions and presented them before the modern audience. By bringing the folk from the oral to print and from scattered to compiled form, these publications have certainly provided a chance to literate Dalits to ponder over their rich folk traditions. These works have also paved the way for many researchers and scholars to study the Dalit folk traditions with the context of socio-political development in Gujarat. Works like M. B. Gaijan's, *Dalit Literary Tradition* (2007), and Rajesh Makwana's *Uttar Gujarat nu Sant-Panth Sahitya* [Saint- Sect Literature of North Gujarat] (2015) have also brought into light some important features of Dalit folk and literary traditions in Gujarat.

During the medieval period, literary activities were confined only to limited people, particularly the Brahmins and very few upper caste people. Literature was mainly oral, and was hardly in written form. The storytellers, *Bhajan* singers and *Kathakars* mostly belonged to the upper caste communities. Access to the mainstream religious activities was limited to the three upper castes- *Brahmins*, *Vaishyas* and *Kshatriyas*. *Shudras* were strictly denied entry into the premise where such activities were organized. It was hardly possible for untouchables to avail the oral traditions of the upper caste Hindus. It was considered as an offence for a member of Dalit community to speak or use a 'cultured' language of upper caste community (Rodrigues 2009: 326). Further, on account of untouchability and illiteracy, the written literature was also

not within their reach. However, in spite of adverse social conditions of insulation and segregation, the Dalits had enough potential to cultivate and nourish their own singers and listeners. The bhakti movement in India created an atmosphere of spiritual interaction through various oral forms like *bhajans*, *padas*, *chopais* (quatrains), *chhappas* (six line satirical verse form) etc. The influence of the saints of untouchable community such as Kabir and Raidas on Gujarati untouchables gave unique identity to their spiritual oral literature. Gaijan notes, “Gujarati spiritual literary and folk-literary traditions, which began right from the medieval times, remained alive up to the end of the twentieth century. The tradition is mainly expressed in *bhajans*, *padas*, folk-tales and folk-songs”. (Gaijan 2007:25)

Dalapat Shrimali (1993:35) notes that much of Raidas’s spiritual literature is preserved in Gujarat among Dalits in their oral traditions. Raidas was a disciple of Saint Ramanand, one of the pioneers of the Bhakti movement.<sup>4</sup> He was known for communicating in vernacular and

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<sup>4</sup>Narrating a meeting between Ramanand and Raidas, Rabindranath Tagore composed a poem, “Sweet Mercy” which was published in *Harijanon* 20, May, 1933. He wrote:

Raidas, the sweeper, was tanner by caste  
Whose touch was shunned by the wayfarers  
And crowded street were lonely for him.  
Master Ramananda was walking to the temple  
after his morning bath,  
.....  
.....  
Master took him to his breast  
Pouring on him his lavish love  
Which made a storm of songs  
To burst across the heart  
Of Raidas, the sweeper.

accepting disciples from all religion and castes. As a later development, particularly, in Uttar Pradesh, Raidas's followers started the Adi Hindu movement and reversed the Aryan 'Theory of race' and attempted to establish the notion that the Untouchables were civilized and peaceful original inhabitants of the country who were subjugated and enslaved by the Aryan invasion. Swami Achutanand (1879-1933) made Raidashis his base and tried to bring various Dalit castes under one roof, under the Adi-Dharma. Later, the *Raidas Katha* was proposed to replace the *Satynarayan Katha* of brahminical Hinduism as a sign of detachment from the brahminical traditions. In 1956, when Ambedkar converted to Buddhism by rejecting Hinduism totally, many Dalits all over India followed him, but those Dalits who were connected with different Bhakti sects, it seems, did not feel any need to convert to the Buddhism. They found many similarities between Buddhism and the Bhakti sects, particularly in the notion of *nirgun* tradition; and they were already occupying an anti-brahminical position in following the Bhakti sects (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007). For example, in Maharashtra, some Dalits who were engaged actively in the bhakti sect of Raidas were reluctant to join the movement with Ambedkar. Zelliott notes:

...the Chambhar of Maharashtra, a smaller ex-Untouchable caste which works with leather, did not join Ambedkar's movement en masse and continue to celebrate the Chamar sant of the Hindi-belt, Rai-das, or Ravidas (or Rohidas), as their patron saint. (2010: 13)

The impact of the bhakti movement was so enormous that it was, as it seems, rather a difficult task to draw the followers of these various Bhakti sects into active social movements.

The influence and impact of the Bhakti movement was apparent on both upper and lower caste spiritual literature. The bhakti movement gave rise to various spiritual schools and sects. In

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Gandhi started *Harijan* in English in February 1933 to carry out propaganda work for the removal of untouchability. It was the time when Gandhi was running anti-untouchability movement, and devoting the pages of *Harijan* chiefly for it. Thus, Tagore's poem can be read in this context also that he was invoking Dalit-Brahmin (Raidas-Ramananda) spiritual intimacy to persuade the caste Hindus to get rid of from the evil of untouchability.

Gujarat, there were various spiritual schools and sects like *Vaisnav*, *Swaminarayana*, *Nath Sampradaya*, *Pranami*, *Kabirpanth*, *Shakt Sampradaya*, *Swadhyay Parivaretc*. These sects attempted to oppose Brahmanical values in spiritual activities. Many of these sects attracted people across the caste line. For instance, the originator of the Swaminarayan sect, Sahjanand came to Gujarat along with Ramanandi sadhus in 1804. His followers were mostly recruited from the lower castes and his teaching spread the message of equality to destroy the rigidity and domination of the caste system. As Yagnik and Sheth note that “They became powerful and prestigious at home and attracted a large number of OBC, Dalit and tribal middle-class families to their fold” (2005: 262). Hindus of all castes, Muslims and Dalits were allowed into his spiritual activities (Commissariat 1980: 980-985). Later in 1970s, along with the Swaminarayan Sect, Swadhyay Parivar and Asharam Ashram also flourished. However, due their Western connection, mostly due to the Gujarati diaspora, the Swaminarayan sect became more powerful, even though the other sects also had their share of dominance.

Medieval Gujarati mainstream poets like Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, Bhalan, Gangasati, Premanand, Raje, Hariram, Pritamdas, Bhojabhagat, Raghunathdas and Dhirabhagat were some of the major *bhajan* singers and they belonged to the upper caste communities. Many of them were highly influenced by the bhakti poets and saints of north India. They were also influenced by different sects like Gorakh, Ramanujacharya, Ramanand, Kabir, Nanak, Namdev, Jaydev etc. The upper caste *bhajan*-singers and their groups perform their activities generally in the *chowk* of a temple or at the home of a devotee.

The major torchbearers of Bhakti movement in Gujarati Dalit spiritual traditions are Dudo Shah, Ratanbai, Orasiyo Meghval, Tejanand Swami, Trikam Saheb, Bhim Saheb, DasiJivan etc. and in the folk traditions are Badmal, Nakar, Devayat, Man Bhatt, Savo, Moti,

Alraj and Nathu Barot.<sup>5</sup> These saints and poets provided spiritual poetry to the illiterate masses in the regional as well as in caste dialects. They composed many *bhajans*, *padas*, *dohas*, *rasas*, *arjas* etc. they also sang with traditional musical instruments like *ektara*, *tamburo*, *majira*, *kartal*, *tablas*, *bhungal* etc. However, *Bhajan* was the most preferred form for all the Dalit bhakti poets.

*Bhajan* or *pada* (short *bhajan*), a kind of hymn, is a poem meant for worship to almighty. Generally, it deals with themes of devotion, spiritual wisdom, renunciation and dispassion from worldly affairs. The composers of *bhajans* “do not care to realize the brilliancy of style and diction, yet as their language has realized the touch of the basic truth and beauty”(Dave 1970:

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<sup>5</sup>Nakar was a saint poet of North Gujarat region. He was born in Dabhadi near Patanin the fourteenth century. His *arajas*, verses on astrology, are popular. Badmal was a Dalit saint. He was born around 1847 A.D in Ranpur, Surastra region. He was famous for his *dohas* and *rasas*. Savo, a dalit saint poet was born in Brahmanwada village in north Gujarat around 1747 A.D (1800 V.S). He was famous for his *bhavai* performances, bhajans, and padas. Moti was a Dalit brahman, born in Radhu village of Keda district but he stayed in chuval region (Area encompassing Ahmedabad, Kadi, Bahucharaji and Kalol regions) during the eighteenth century. He was famous for his *chhappas*, six line verses. Alaraj was also a Dalit brahman saint poet of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was born in Adariyana of Vadhavan region. He was famous for his devotional *padas*. Dasi Jivan (around 1749-1824 A.D) was born in Ghoghavadar village of Saurashtra region. His devotional poetry is concentrated on Krishna bhakti. His lyrical poetry, along with devotional, is peculiar in its rhythm and metrical composition. Trikam Saheb (around 1635-1725 A.D) was a Dalit saint born in Chitrod in Kutch (Vagad) region. He composed many *bhajans* and *sakhis*. Bhim Saheb (around 1700-1770) was a Dalit saint poet from Morbi region. He was a disciple of Trikam Saheb.

Vel Saheb was a disciple of Trikam Saheb. He was born in Unjha. Nathuram was a disciple and nephew of Trikam Saheb. He was born in Radhanpur in a Dalit brahmin family around 1647 A.D (1704 V.S). He was famous for his *padas*, short *bhajans*. Balak Saheb was born in Chathiyarda village near Mehsana. He was from a Dalit brahmin family. He wrote *bhajans*, *prabhatis* (bhajans meant for singing in the early morning) and *garbis* (ballads). Akal Saheb, a dalitsain-poet was born in NaniHirwani village near Kerala. He went to Kutch and became the follower of Bhan sect. He composed *bhajans* and *sakhis*. His disciple, Haridas published a volume of his devotional poetry, ‘Shri Akal Saheb ni Vani (1966). Tejanad was born in Zinzuwada near Surendranagar. He composed *chopais*, *dohras*, and *padas*. His verses are still sung by people of the Zinzuwada region. Men Bhatt (around 1843-1903 A.D) was born in Varahi near Radhanpur (one legend says that he was born in Ambergrah in Rjasthan). His *bhajans* and *chappas* are popular and sung in *bhajans mandalis*. His work, *Batrisnarninar* (Tongue or Speech), is popular for its worldly wisdom. Savo, a Dalit saint poet was born in Brahmanwada village in north Gujarat around 1747 A.D (1800 V.S). He was famous for his *bhavai* performances, bhajans, and padas. (Haridas 1966) (Sadhu 1973), (Shrimali 1993), (Shrimali 2010). (Makwana 2014).

For more detail see Shrimali, Dalpatbhai. *Harijan Santa ne Lok Sahitya* [Harijan Saint and Folk Literature]. (1989). Ahmedabad: Gurjar Granth Ratn Karyalay, 1993.110-388. Print.

61). *Bhajan* is not suited to the written form; it is basically an oral form.<sup>6</sup> To write a *bhajan* is considered as a lower kind of activity than singing. It is often figuratively said that ‘to write a *bhajan* means to stick a living butterfly with a pin on the paper’. The tradition of singing and listening of *bhajans* in Gujarat developed among both upper and lower castes with some linguistic and thematic differences. The singers of different sects and spiritual schools express different content in this devotional form of poetry. The group of singers and music players is generally called *bhajans mandali*. It is believed that till the 17th century, *bhajan*-singing was not a group activity, but later it acquired a form of a collective singing-listening activity with chorus and various musical instruments. Generally, such *bhajan mandalis* perform their traditional singing in the silence of night. *Bhajan mandalis* also visit different places when they are invited to perform. Generally, the *bhajan mandalis* perform on the auspicious occasions, on full moon days, on the event of death rituals etc<sup>7</sup>. The content of their *bhajans* or *padas* is mostly spiritual but many saint poets also address social issues in their spiritual songs. For instance, Tejanand sings:

Being Brahmin, don't know *Brahm (soul)*,  
 Futilely applying *tilak*, he argues too much,  
 Without knowing *karma*,  
 And wandering in the world, wearing the holy thread,  
 How he will work with Tejanand?  
 He married with lust, anger, and treachery,  
 And not retired yet from it.

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<sup>6</sup> A *bhajan* is often composed into a traditional rhythm as practiced by a saint, or a spiritual guru. Rajyaguru defines *bhajan* as, “ it is a verse-composition evolved during medieval period, connected with religion or spiritual contemplation, embodying a tale or elements of preaching and looking like a lyrics” (Rajyaguru 1996: 31). It also presents various types of *rasa* like *bhakti* (devotion) *shringar* (erotic), *vir* (bravery), *adbhoot* (wonder), *shant* (peace). The major themes of *bhajans* are devotion, spiritual wisdom, and renunciation. *Arja* is a verse related to astrology, and *Ras* is a kind of ballad.

<sup>7</sup>However, during each span of time such as early morning, evening, and night, the singer sings specific type of *bhajans*. For example, *prabhatiyu* is sung in the morning with specific raga and *Paraj* is sung at late night.

He will lose his wealth on stones,

How he will help others? (Makwana 2015: 53)

Here, one could see how Tejanand has criticized the contemporary Brahminical practices and exposes its degraded state through the medium of the bhajan..

### **Legacy of Dalit spiritual and folk tradition and Shankar Painter's Poetry:**

Gujarati Dalit folk culture is rich in its literary traditions. Many Dalit saints composed *bhajans* and *padas* in Dalit dialects. The North Gujarat region is also rich in its Dalit folk and spiritual traditions. Saint and folk poets like Vel Saheb (Unjha), Nathuram (Radhanpur), Balak Saheb (Chathiyarda) Akal Saheb (Kheralu), Tejanand (Zinzuwada), Men Bhatt (Varahi), Savo (Brahmanwada) etc. acted as advocates of the Bhakti movement and had enormous influence on the Dalit spiritual traditions particularly in north Gujarat region. Dalit spiritual tradition is also known as 'Saheb tradition' (Makwana2014). Untouchables used to gather at a square of the *maholla* for singing and listening to *bhajans*. This activity provided them entertainment as well as it satisfied their spiritual and devotional urge. They used to sing their *bhajans* with *ektara* or *nargas*.

Gaijan notes, "Gujarati Dalit literary tradition and folk literary tradition is mainly expressed in *bhajans*, *padas*, folk tales and folksongs" (2007:25). He adds that the composers were not poets but they were mostly saints. The literature produced by these saints was naturally spiritual in nature and was meant for preaching and devotional purposes. Many of these literary pieces are still sung by rural *Bhajan mandalis*, groups of hymn singers. Many Dalit communities or castes were traditionally engaged with singing and playing musical instruments. The Meghaval community, the Brahmins of Dalits gave many songs in oral tradition related to daily routine work in the field like sowing and harvesting. Dhadhis, Mirs, Malsadiyas and Turis were also

traditional singers (Gadhvi 2002). However, as a result of fast urbanization in Gujarat, many folk singers left their traditional profession and migrated to urban localities or modernized it to build alliance with modern musical presentations.

Gujarati Dalit poetry often derives inspiration from the folk traditions. Many Dalit poets like Shankar Painter, Raju Solanki, Harish Mangalam, Yashvant Vaghela, Kisan Sosa often used the folk tradition effectively. They draw from their family or community background or from the folk traditions in general. But among all these poets, Painter depends most heavily on the folk traditions. In this context, Sheriff (1999:08) writes:

Gujarati Dalit poetry has drawn sustenance extensively from the folk literature of Gujarat. The rustic rhythm and tunes of folk songs give many of the poems a unique strength and vitality which are difficult to reproduce in translation. Shankar Painter's poetry relies heavily on them.

Painter's mastery over folk song is inherited by him from his father and from his spiritual *guru*. He was highly influenced by his family's spiritual *guru*, Laxanandji<sup>8</sup> who migrated into India from Pakistan during the partition. Laxanandji had composed many *bhajans* on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1942, collected in a small booklet called *B.R. Sangit Suman* (1957)<sup>9</sup> which consisted of famous *bhajans* like "Uthodalitviro", "Milakar Uthaye Zanda", "Baba ke gun bol" etc. The transformation from spiritual movement to the political movement was witnessed in the north India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh among the Dalits. The followers of the Raidas sect were actively involved in the socio-political activities of the Samata Sainik Dal, the youth organization

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<sup>8</sup>Laxanandji fought for Dalit's rights. He started an Ayurvedic Hospital, Siddharat Ayurvedic Aushdhalay in Dhima village (North Gujarat) in 1947. He also took active interest along with Karshanbhai Ukabhai Parmar (Member of Parliament) in putting Ambedkar's oil painting in the Gujarat Assembly Building (Mehta 2015).

<sup>9</sup>After Ambedkar's death on 6 December 1956, Laxanandji's disciple, Narsinhbhai Sonara collected all these *bhajans* from oral traditions and published in a small booklet, with Ambedkar's photograph on the front page, on 12 January, 1957 in Ahmedabad.

founded by Ambedkar (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007: 2180). It was an attempt to bridge different Dalit caste under one roof. So, the bhakti traditions and spiritual activities got an active turn towards the political. During the Raidas *julus*, Bellwinkel-Schempp notes: “Gates were erected in the names of Ambedkar, Achutanand, Ravidas, Kabir, Balmiki, Supa” (2180). So, Ambedkar thus got linked to the bhakti tradition along with other Dalit saints. Ambedkar’s socio-political outlook got an entry into the Dalit spiritual sphere in 1940s. Laxanadji’s bhajans on Ambedkar can be linked with this development of Dalit spiritual activity. However, Ambedkar was quite skeptical about the bhakti movement in bringing the social equality in its true sense. Keer (2013:109) notes:

It was Ambedkar’s view that saint poets of Maharashtra (1300-1600) belonging to Bhagavat Dharma did not preach directly against the caste system which stood for the domination of one caste over others, for social inequality and social injustice. The efforts of these saints-poets were directed to establishing equality, not between a Brahmin as an individual and a Shudra as an individual, but between a Brahmin and a Shudra devotee of God. In this struggle, the saints succeeded, and the Brahmins had to accept the superiority of the devotee irrespective of caste.

Sharankumar Limbale also shares the similar view. He writes (2010:26):

The saint did not struggle against caste discrimination and for the deliverance of the untouchables. Moksha seemed more important to them compared to social problems... Though in theory, the Dalit saints were equal at the doors of the gods, in practice, they were confined to the age-old lowest rung of the ladder.

Shankar Painter, attempts to create ‘public space’ to make people understand social and political issues related to Dalits not by getting himself absorbed in the bhakti ideal of *Mokhsa* or by seeking some spiritual experience but to articulate his concerns over the social and political condition by creatively exploiting the medium of the folk. It seems he remained conscious about his social role even while participating in spiritual activities. Painter’s father, Sawajibhai was

also a *bhajanik*, a hymn composer and singer. He used to sing Dasi Jivan's *bhajans* with the accompaniment of *nargas* and *manjira*. He was also a good *tabala* player. Painter in his childhood listened hymns on Dr. B.R Ambedkar composed and sung by Shri Laxanandji and his father that influenced him profoundly (Painter: 2010). Thus, the art of singing and composing, he inherited from his spiritual guru and from his father, which he later developed to mobilize Dalit masses for their rights.

The Dalit protest movement could hardly be intensified only with impressive speeches and grand rhetoric. It required some creative intervention. One of the ways as Shankar Painter conceived it was to articulate the Dalit cause through the use of folk music or folk performances before large audiences. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. had allowed folk singers to participate in their movements with their music and songs. Joan Baez (1941), an American folk singer, song writer, activist in the field of human rights, peace and justice was with Martin Luther King. Zaverchand Meghani (1896-1947), a Gujarati folklorist and folk singer was with Gandhi particularly during his Gujarat stay. Many activists composed songs and sang during the freedom movement. Some of those songs are still sung in Gandhian institutions to spread Gandhian ideology and help visualize the freedom movement. The unity of people is important in any movement, and to achieve such a unity, folk music and folk songs can be a powerful medium. It was believed that the folk performance and people's identification with folk music and melody easily engage them as they get drawn into what is actually a protest movement.

Shankar Painter, particularly in late 1990s, was focused on his collection of tales related to local Goddess, Juhuma. It is easy to dismiss this phase as a leaning towards the spiritual and away from the sharply political writings of the Dalit movement. However, a reading of the legend of Juhuma points to both the rich spiritual life of Dalit as well as the underlying social

agenda of this spirituality. By tapping this, Painter complicates and enriches the idea of Dalit literary production and makes a claim that folk- spiritual traditions are as much part of what is being put together as a Dalit literary tradition. The legend of Juhuma is quite interesting in the context of Dalit spiritual traditions. Juhuma, a young Kshatriya girl felt celestial pleasure while dancing to the beats of the drum played by Dhuliyo, a Dalit drum player. Her dance as well as the rhythmic beats of Dhuliya's drum created a unique spiritual unity. Later, revolting against her family traditions, Juhuma left her father's home and came to live near Dhuliya's *maholla*, a *Valmiki vas*. Dhuliyo asked Juhuma to rethink her decision:

Sister, the ruler of this village, the officer of the *Ogad Math* , the priest will not allow me to live. He will kill all of us, he will burn us alive. He is a powerful priest. Please for our lives sake, change your decision....Please go back to your village.

Juhuma replied:

I will not leave you and your people. Don't worry, brother. I am with you, nobody will harm you.

Dhuliyo was still reluctant, he said:

Our relation is not possible in this era... You are from upper caste; you will not be able to bear the hardships here. (Painter 2007:9-10)

However, Juhuma was determined and she stayed with Dhuliyo, building a hut near the *vas*.<sup>10</sup> She protected Dalits from upper caste atrocities. Her guru Manchhanathji was happy with her decision. Now, the Dalit drum player Dhuliyo and the upper caste woman Juhuma, with their relationship as spiritual brother and sister, brought a different kind of alliance to Dalit spiritual tradition in north Gujarat. In fact, there are various folk-tales related to Juhuma protecting Dalits

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<sup>10</sup>See in Painter, Shankar. *Shri Juhuma niJukti*. Mehsana: Self-published,2007.p9-10

from the upper caste atrocities.<sup>11</sup> Painter as a worshipper of Goddess Juhuma, collected various tales and songs related to her and published them as *Shri Juhuma Ni Jukti* (2007). These interests of Painter have been deeply criticized by some Dalit activists. They have considered Painter's involvement with the Juhuma legend as going away from the active Dalit literary movement. On the contrary, it can be said, that by collecting *bhajans*, folksongs and folktales related to the efforts of Dalit emancipation in folk spiritual traditions, Painter has attempted to look into the Dalit spiritual sphere, breaking new ground. By collecting the tales related to Dalits' adventurous expeditions, he tried to relocate Dalits' vitality and trust on the self. He has brought to center stage the violence that has dogged Dalit lives, their craft and also complex negotiations with upper-caste— negotiations that refuse to be slotted into easy categories. His famous Dalit song “*Dhuliyo Dholi*” is partly based on this folk-tale of Juhuma and Dhuliyo. He also published two *bhajan* collections, containing 80 *bhajans*, *Shankar Suman I* (1968) and *Shankar Suman II* (1979). He has collected folktales in *Ujaliyat* (2014) from oral tradition related to Dalits' bravery and other virtues. His folklorist activities are also hailed by renowned writers and poets like Sahil Parmar, Harish Mangalam and Raghuvir Chaudhari. He is often called the ‘Dalit Meghani’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In a folk tale, when Dhuliyo was not at home, an upper caste person came and shouted “ Dhuliya, come and fetch away a dead dog from our math ( priests maholla). Juhuma told that person “Dhuliyo is not at home”. The man taunted her “if you are his sister in real sense, come and fetch the dead dog”. The legend says, Juhuma went there, as soon as she touched the dog with her stick, the dog became alive and ran away. The upper caste Hindus got astonished by the miracle. (Painter 2007:16)

<sup>12</sup> Zaverchand Meghani (1896-1947), was a notable Gujarati folklorist and folk singer. He actively participated in the freedom movement and attempted to mobilize masses through his folk songs. Moreover, Savaji Bhagat, Painter's father, a weaver by profession, used to sing *bhajans*, as a leading member of local *bhajans mandali*, after finishing his work at looms. He also used to play drums and often performed in a *natak mandali* (drama group) as an actor. He was also known as *Lok-Sahitya no khajano* (a treasure of folk literature), due to his ability in remembering and singing many folk songs and tales.

Painter came into contact with Jethalal Buddh,<sup>13</sup> a member of Maharashtra based *The Samata Sainik Dal*<sup>14</sup>, in Ahmedabad during his school days in 1961-64, and from him he began to engage with Ambedkar's message. He started his literary journey by writing a poem, "*Ame Bhim Kera Banda*" [We are the Children of Bhim] in 1964 for a magazine called *Jyoti*. Painter also composed occasional poetry on certain incidents of atrocities on Dalits between 1974 and 1980. Later, after the death of his spiritual Guru Laxanandaji in 1980 and with beginning of the anti-reservation agitations in 1981, he drew his attention towards Dalit social issues more deeply. His contact with Dalit poets and activists like Raju Solanki, Kardam Bhatt, Bharat Vaghela, B. N. Vankar, Harish Mangalam, Manishi Jani, Sahil Parmar etc. brought him actively into the Dalit literary and social movement.

While living in Ahmedabad, he witnessed brutal atrocities of government machinery and caste Hindus during the anti-reservation agitation in 1981 and in 1985. He himself says; "Looking at the condition of Dalits I threw away *ektaro*" (Painter 2015:89)<sup>15</sup>. From that period he left *bhajan* singing and began to compose and sing songs for the Dalit movement.

Painter wandered from *maholla* to *maholla* to spread Ambedkar's message to make Dalits aware about their conditions. His folk singing ability has helped him to enter into the psyche of Dalits easily. In 2012, Painter got his 18 songs and a drama on Mayo recorded with modern music and professional singers and brought them out in a CD format.

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<sup>13</sup>JethalalBuddh was working in a local mill. He was a commander in the SamataSainik Dal and a member of Majoor Sangh. He used to organize programmes on Dr. Ambedkar's death anniversary every year. As a marker of revolt against Brahmanic forces he kept his sons name, Ravana and Hiranyakasyap. (Shankar Painter gave this information)

<sup>14</sup>SamataSainik Dal (Army of Soldiers for Equality) is a social organization founded by Ambedkar in 1927. It has a women wing also. The organization had an image of militarized masculinity. It was 'formed to protect Dalits from physical attack and intimidation. Members wore khaki hal-pants, a red shirt, and khaki strip around the shins in addition to a khaki topi, signifying their military past.' (see in Anupama Rao 2013: 101 & 321)

<sup>15</sup>In Gujarat, Bhajans, in traditional form, are sung accompanying the *ektaro*, a one string musical instrument. Generally, a singer plays it and the other members of *bhajans mandali* support him with other instruments like *manjira*, *narga*, *khanjari* etc. Here the phrase 'threw away *ektaro*' means he leaves bhajans singing

He also translated *Bhim Katha Amrutam*, written by Ramdash Nimesh, an epic about Dr. Ambedkar, from Hindi–Avdhi into Gujarati and presented it at various places in a traditional *Katha* form during 2012-13. Moreover, the treatise of *Bhima Katha Amrutam* (2012) was placed on the back of an elephant in a procession on Buddha *Purnima* and brought to a hall. Painter recited verses of *Bhim Katha Amrutam* in the presence of a Dalit gathering in Ahmedabad in 2013. From this it would certainly seem as if he wanted to counter the tradition of *Ramkatha* by a tradition of *Bhim Katha*. In *Bhim Katha* he included all the important events related to Dr. Ambedkar’s life. All the biographical details from his birth to demise were covered in it. The events of childhood, education, his stay at Baroda, study in America and London, Vaikom agitations, Mahad Satyagrah, the first Round Table Conference, the second Round Table Conference, and Poona Pact, his role in constituent assembly, his conversion to Buddhism are depicted in *Shloka* form and following every *Shloka*, a brief explanation is given. For instance, the event of the second Round Table Conference is conveyed as:

Doctor has confidence, alone he will fight;  
Educated as he is, will have to do something;  
Will have to show public support to the world;  
Will have to face the press and media;  
It was seventh September, and the third session was started,  
In the land of London, there sat all leaders.  
Gandhi’s personality cannot be depicted,  
Looked like a *tyagi*, worn a lone cloth,  
Wearing wooden slippers, he arrived in the meeting. (Painter 2012: 122-123)

Painter, after reciting every *Shloka*, discusses the event at length. His intervention in this manner is a conscious effort to counter the silence that is prevailing regarding Ambedkar in Gujarat. As Painter has explained, the creation of the *Bhim Katha* is an answer to a Hindu saint, Moraribapu.

Moraribapu promised to perform a *Bhim Katha* on Ambedkar's birth anniversary in a programme at Rajkot but he did not keep his promise and instead he performed the *Ramkatha* on the day.<sup>16</sup> So, Painter thought how he can perform a *Katha* on Ambedkar when the *Pothi* (Scripture in verse form) on Ambedkar's life was not available. Painter translated the *Bhim Katha* from Hindi and he himself performed it. Of course, according to him, the response was not up to the mark but it was a relevant intervention.

In a sense, Shankar Painter's attempt has been mostly to bring the powerful oral aspect back into the political discourse of his time. The *Bhim Katha* renders Ambedkar either as a studious young boy who does not care about his food while studying or as a fighter who confronts the most powerful political figure, Gandhi for the rights of his people or as a 'Modern Manu' who laboriously works to draft the constitution for a new nation. The *Katha* also reaffirms Dalit faith in Ambedkar for emancipation.

Moreover, during this period, *Gandhi Katha* also became popular. It was performed by Narayan Desai, a son of Mahatma Gandhi's personal secretary, Mahadevbhai Desai. He used to tell the story of Gandhi's life and freedom struggle in a traditional *Katha* format. Thus, Painter's attempt to provide an alternative can be seen in this context also.

Borrowing the rhythm of popular folk songs, he created many Dalit songs to reach common people. But his publication of *Shri Juhumani Jukti* (2007) is considered as a deviation from the Dalit cause. Ironically, the recent publication of the Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Academy, *Gujarati Dalit Kavita no Udbhav ane Vikash* (Gujarati Dalit Poetry: Origin and Development) (2015), trivializes his poetry on the ground of his book, *Shri Juhumani Jukti*. The editors write:

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<sup>16</sup>Since Shankar Painter lives in Mahesana near my resident, I have frequently met him. I have interviewed him to know about his life and literary activities during 2010-2015.

There is no place of superstition in the Ambedkarite school of thought. That Dalit poetry which deviates from the Ambedkarite thought loses its value... Shankar Painter's "Juhuma ni Jukti" is a blind bhakti; otherwise he would have been included in this volume. (Mangalam 2014:32)

He, as it seems, from his overlapping spiritual and social activities, has been torn between the spiritual legacy of the Dalits and the demands of the Dalit movement. His journey from the *Ram Katha*, as his father used to recite the *Chopais* of Tulsidas to *Bhim Katha* has not been smooth but it has been revolutionary, reactionary and transformative. From worshipping Hindu Gods-Goddesses to worshipping Buddha and Ambedkar, his journey epitomizes the history of Dalit consciousness in Gujarat.

He left *ektaro* and began to play *bungiyo* with his fiery songs.<sup>17</sup> It is not that he did not expose casteism in his devotional poems, but, like a bhakti poet, he also demands oneness of soul among all human beings. His spiritual legacy is visible in his early works but it is not devoid of social concerns. His poem, "*Lal Bujakkad*" [The Fool] written in 1965, expresses:

Leave the talks of *atama* and *parmatma*,  
In arguments, in words and in shakhi,  
(You) Have broken the string of the *tambura*,  
And broken the *majira*, and *kansa* pairs  
And torn up the *tabalas*.  
You have frighten as through your knowledge, and  
by your fantasy legends.....  
.....  
Is there any difference in souls and over soul  
Of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra? (Painter 2010:91)

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<sup>17</sup>*Ektaro*, (a one string musical instrument, generally played while *bhajan* singing), is a symbol of spiritual activity while *bungiyo* (a traditional drum played by Dalits) suggests the revolutionary spirit.

Painter here criticizes the kind of spirituality which is devoid of social concern. He opines that mere talks and arguments regarding ‘soul and over-soul’ cannot bring social harmony. Though spiritual activities have been part and parcel of majority of people, yet they have not brought social harmony in true sense and the caste system still exists. He urges people to understand the simple truth that the souls of human being are one.

He also composed few powerful poems before the advent of the Dalit Panther in Gujarat. His song “*Vethiya Mazur*” [Bonded Labourer], composed in 1968, reveals the poor condition of unorganized labourers and demands unity among them. He says:

Who are the makers of law and who are the breakers of law?

In the country of poor, poor are subordinate,

Politicians- traders are singing in the same tune

Bonded labourers, we are bonded labourers!

Yes, my lord...yes, my lord!

Illiterate, ignorant and unorganized we are,

You are eating by exploiting our labour!

If we awake, revolution will be brought!

Bonded labourers, we are bonded labourers!

Yes, my lord...yes, my lord! (2010: 39)

The song, in a folk tone, is addressed to the exploiters: landlords as well as industrialists. In this, he addresses the question of feudal and industrial/capitalist oppression of labourers. The bonded labourers are here seen addressing their oppressors. The poem operates at least on three levels. The first level is that of direct narration of the plight and exploitation of the bonded labourers. The narration of exploitation always re-enacts the exploitation of the exploited. It also has the potential of showing a mirror to the exploiter as to what he is doing to his fellow human beings. On the second level, the poem attains a threatening tone, especially in the line, “If we awake,

revolution will be brought!” This line can be read as a threat to the exploiters to mend their ways or face revolution. This tone of threatening the exploiter can also have a positive impact on the exploited where they may feel energized by the prospect of revolution. So, this can also be read as a line of hope. The poet refuses to accept the position of servility and hopes to overthrow the oppressor and attain freedom. A third strand can be read in this same line is that of lamentation. Infact, it is strange to say that a line could be read simultaneously as embodying hope and lamentation. But the line does open itself to this paradoxical reading. The tone of lamentation can be explained in the way that the poet laments the fact that the bonded labourers are still not united. Had they united earlier, a revolution could have been brought and freedom achieved. But that has not happened, hence, the tone of lament.

His song, “*Tu Gamade Avje Re*” (Come to my village) was written following the folk-song rhythm of a famous Gujarati folk-song, “*Dhulchi Tari Mane Maya Lagi*”. It depicts the condition of Dalits in rural Gujarat. The folk-song “*DhulchiTari Mane Maya Lagi*” has been sung in folk tradition since long. Painter uses and appropriates the north Gujarati dialect and rhythm of this folk-song in his own song “*Tu Gamade Avje Re*”. The rhythm of Painter’s songs attracts attention and involves people. His experiments with folk form make his poetry melodious and easy to sing. Moreover, his use of *bungiyo* (drum) while singing involves Dalits culturally too. So, Dalits identify not only with the content of his poetry, but also with its language, form, and accompanied musical instrument make them one with his poetic performances. Dalpat Chauhan, a renowned Dalit poet and writer notes: “His use of north Gujarati dialect with its soft and harsh shades, and use of folk rhythm makes his poetry successful in depicting incidents with its unique aesthetics” (Chauhan 1984: 3).

Moreover, Painter's documentation of the contemporary incidents of atrocities is a kind of history writing in the folk poetic form. When we look at the oral tradition of the Dalit bhakti poets we find that they broke the culture of silence and attempted to depict human atrocities, but rather in a more generalized form. Here, by 'generalized form', I mean that Bhakti poets do not use any particular incident to talk about social inequalities and caste brutalities. As against this generalized form, Dalit poets often use particular events of caste brutality and oppression in their poems to expose the social inequalities prevalent in the society. Thus, Dalit poets use particular events to make a general statement which gives us the broad picture of the unequal social conditions and their efforts to change it. The bhakti poets, as Jawaharlal Handoo (2004:59) puts it, "strongly felt that discourse must give attention to human condition and help society change." In a sense, Gujarati Dalit poetry has carved for itself a unique space by articulating Dalit suffering not in some generalized form but in the form of the day-to-day. Painter's endeavor, as it seems, is a step in this direction in so far as his poetry gives vent to Dalit suffering, reaction and resistance in the documentary form. Painter, in order to reach to his fellow Dalits, follows the shared discourse and the shared form of Dalit cultural life, deliberately drawing his inspirations from folk form, folk language, folk music and folk metaphors.

Painter was influenced by the Dalit Panthers' activities before its unit was started in Gujarat. The Panthers' activities of the Maharashtra unit attracted many educated Dalit youth in Gujarat too. To support the Dalit Panthers, Painter composed a song; "*Panther March-Song*" in a reaction to the Worli Dalit massacre. The first major caste riot against Dalits took place in January 1974 at Worli in Mumbai. The cadre of Shiv Sena, the Hindu- Right wing political party attacked the Dalits. Dalits, inspired by the Dalit Panthers, fought back. It was a bitter street battle

against the Dalits who had just organized themselves into Dalit Panthers. As a result of violence, many Dalits were raped and murdered; their properties destroyed by the right-wing cadre.

Bhagwat Jadhav, a Dalit Panther leader was murdered when a grinding stone was thrown at a procession of Dalit Panthers. Agonized by this incident, Painter wants Dalits to walk on the path of Panthers and to teach lessons to the tyrants. He says:

The trumpet has blown, whydo we sleep in homes,  
Blowing sticks; come out in the battle field,  
The mountains will be torn away by your roars,  
Make the people free, who are facing tyranny since ages.

.....  
.....

The land has become red by brothers' blood,  
Ashamed by rapes on mothers, sisters and daughters,  
Pay back them by reminding the martyrs,  
Make the people free, who are facing tyranny since ages.

.....  
.....

Don't leave the tormenters anywhere now,  
Pay back them wherever they meet,  
Now rebel on the path of Panthers,  
Make the people free, who are facing tyranny since ages. (2010: 54)

Dalit attempts to organize and acquire some recognition in the form the Dalit Panthers were brutally resisted by the hegemonic sections, particularly the Shiv Sena. The desire to hold on to power leads the hegemonic groups to counter the emerging groups. The Shiv Sena might have felt threatened by the emergence of the Dalit Panthers and to neutralize it, they used violence as a tool to create fear among the marginalized. It was hardly possible for the elite

groups to accept any mobility on the part of the marginalized. Even though violent confrontations of this nature seem to be inevitable, Dalits could certainly overcome such violence through unity and concentrated efforts. Painter, by creating visual images of the incidents in Maharashtra, attempts to identify himself and the Dalits in Gujarat with the event. He takes it as an opportunity to sensitize the Gujarati Dalit masses for a larger solidarity across regions. The poem thus suggests that Gujarati Dalit poetry should address and relate to the Dalit issues in other regions in order to build an alliance with Dalits in other parts of the country.

Painter, influenced by the Panthers, looks for revenge and calls his brethren to come out into the battle field. Along with the Dalit Panthers' militant outlook, his belief in violence or in retaliation has its roots in the teaching of his spiritual guru, Laxanandaji. His guru often called Dalits to be brave and advised them not to tolerate any inhumanities by remaining goat like. He writes:

Dark clouds of tyranny have shadowed on us.

To abolish the tyranny we will fight bravely.

The company of goats has made us forget the lion,

Discarding goat-ness, we will become lions. (Painter 1984: title page 2)

However, the anger that is Painter's song articulates does not get translated into reality. His anger seems to be controlled and constrained. His poetry becomes, by and large, a means to express his anger. All the wishes of resistance and protest, as it appears, are neutralized in words. The literary work itself becomes a protest and ceases to go beyond and enter the social world of day-to-day life. The function that Dalit poetry performs is that it makes Dalits realize the inhumanities that they have internalized. By making them aware of their strength and instilling confidence among them; the poetry, it seems, attempts to prepare the Dalit masses for

meaningful intervention. What Dalits face on the ground is acute and intolerable. But, while asserting their rights it is necessary for Dalits to cultivate certain traits of integrity in action and expression. So, showing awareness about gruesomeness of the issue, the song at one level connotes the counter violence by asking Dalits to ‘teach lessons’, but at another level, it attempts to bring collective awareness, unity and organized assertion in response to the violence. The activities of Dalit Panthers in Gujarat in the 1970s and 1980s, as it appears, seemed to cultivate a sense of protest among Dalits. The Dalit Panther highlighted and offered stern resistance to the upper caste atrocities and they did not allow atrocities to go uncontested or unnoticed. So, the organized resistances to physical attacks on Dalits enabled the Dalit poets to incorporate such experiences into their literary enterprises in order to give an acute and wider articulation to their resistances. The interventions of the Gujarat Dalit Panthers in Golana massacre, Ranmalpura killings, Jetalpur murder case, and Sambarda case has definitely changed the tone of Dalit poetry in general and Painter’s poetry in particular.

The gradual transformation in Painter’s tone and attitude is quite visible in the course of his poetic journey. The early poems generally do not show his retaliatory temper, but prepare the ground for resistance with a persuasive attitude. For instance, Painter’s poem “*Jago Navjavano*” [Awake, the youth] composed in 1970 does not deal with caste discrimination in direct words, but rather deals with secular themes and attempts to relate exploitation and poverty as failure of the modern nation state. He says:

Talks of freedom are lies, utter lies,

Utter lies, absolute lies.

There is no grain in the pot on the fire,

Change fortune, sleeping community. (Painter 2010: 93)

His mention of lack of food, clothes and shelter in poor man's life connects us with the dreams that all poor had seen at the time of independence. He, by using the word 'lie' (*jhooth*) repetitively, makes the reader realize that the 'dreams' have withered. Poverty, exploitation and starvation have become rampant. The freedom for the downtrodden means freedom from poverty and freedom from social inequalities, but such type of freedom has been an illusion for them. Even after independence, the political power is firmly in the hands of the class and caste elites; and they have their vested interests. Material deprivation and social segregation have made Dalits doubly marginalized. The realization of it makes them frustrated and compels them to react. Painter urges the Dalit youth to awake and requests them to change the fortune of the community and bring the freedom in its true sense. So, the tone is rather soft and demands awareness and unity to tackle the issue.

Painter, as a social activist, often examines government policies and attempts to expose its weak implementation. His poem "*Panchayatni Poplilao*" [The Sins of Panchayat], composed in 1976, critically examines the Twenty Point Programme, launched by the Government of India in 1975. The basic objective of the Programme was to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life of the poor and underprivileged population of the country. The programme aimed to deal with various socio-economic aspects affecting the life of the downtrodden like poverty, employment, education, housing, health, agriculture and land reforms, drinking water, protection and empowerment of weaker sections etc. But it was very difficult to put through the programme at the village level when the upper caste *panchayat* members were hostile to granting benefits to the Dalits. Painter explains various kinds of difficulties faced by the Dalits in availing the benefits of the programmes. He says:

Twenty points' beautiful and dreamy palace,

By giving power to Panchayat,

Decentralizing the power.

In sinful Panchayat,

The Dalits are stumbling in the dark! (Painter 1984:29-30)

At the grass-root level, the ambitious programmes of Indira Gandhi's government remained unsuccessful partly because its implementation was in the hands of caste driven local leadership. Painter depicts how Dalits were imagining the changes these programmes would bring into their lives and how they felt frustrated by its poor and indifferent implementation. Moreover, the editorial of the Dalit Panther's mouthpiece, *Panther* also focused on the same issue related to *Panchyati Raj*. The editorial, written by Naran Vora says:

The dream of ideal village, as conceived by the *Panchayati Raj*, will not be possible because those who have ultimate political power in villages are still practicing untouchability, and are responsible for predicaments of Dalits and other backward classes. There is no harmony between the subject and local administration. That is why the administration is quite indifferent in implementation of the beneficial programme like the Twenty Point Programme. (*Panther* 14 May 1976)

Moreover, the poem also documents the contemporary relations between the Dalits and the political class in rural India. The vast gap between policy making and its implementation is exposed by both the editor and the poet. Painter performs the task of journalism through his poetic expression.

Later, from 1978 to 1985, along with his service in ONGC, Painter actively engaged himself with Dalit Panthers' activities and took part in many demonstrations organized by the Panthers. He played a leading role in spreading Ambedkar's teaching, and attempted to make Dalits realize their pathetic conditions and their rights. He believes that to make people aware about their own condition is the first step to join them in the larger revolutionary activities. By his song, endowed with folk rhythm, and using traditional musical instruments, he easily catches the attention of the audience. His songs have become a useful device to attract the audience as

they are written in the popular folk-song form. It is aptly mentioned by Chandrakant Topiwala, a renowned critic of Gujarati literature that; “Forwarding rustic intonations of typical dialect, wherever (Painter’s) such diction is used it arouses expected effect” (Chaudhari 2015:05)

Painter, like Gaddar,<sup>18</sup> uses the folk devices to reach the masses to make them understand his point of view, his people’s issue and their demands. His is a constant and concentrated effort for the cause. Though he uses in his poetry words having ‘double-edged’ swords, they are only for the establishment of a welfare state, for a just society and for liberty and equality of human beings, particularly the oppressed and marginalized. His efforts have created a space for the marginalized issues in the public domain.

Painter consciously uses the tool of folk songs to express his ‘lofty image of grief’ in rallies and demonstrations. Painter employs the language of *Basti* to make his performance effective and formulate a desired impact on so called illiterate and rustic masses. He consciously incorporates the images and symbols to relate them to brutal experiences that his people have been going through the ages. His selection of words has the specific purpose of inculcating new meaning to them. Though this purpose is identical to all Dalit writings, Painter has used it very creatively and innovatively in his poetry. He uses the informal style and everyday dialect with familiar images. The folk style is used because the poet does not want to exclude anyone from receiving his message. Painter’s use of images such as *tutela chapania* (broken tea cups), *triji bay* (a third sleeve), *jultu jadu* (a broom behind the back), *bungiyo* (a drum) leads us in no time to a history of subjugation and social exclusion of Dalits.

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<sup>18</sup>Gummadi Vittal Rao, known as Gaddar, a south Indian Dalit poet and folk singer, sings his songs before a large audience, he expresses his anguish and demand justice through folk style songs. Demand for separate state Telangana, or Naxal ideology gets its expression through this mass medium. For more detail see Kumar, P Keshava. “Popular Culture and Ideology: The Phenomenon of Gaddar.” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. vl No.07, 13 Feb. 2010: 61-67. Print.

His song, “*Besi Na Rahevay*” [Don’t be seated], is one of his early poems, composed in 1970 and ‘unfortunately’ it is still relevant. He says:

Don’t be seated, don’t be seated  
If we will not awake today,  
What will happen tomorrow... Dalits  
See at your vestibule,  
Revolution is knocking,  
To Fight against tyranny,  
Let all be united... Dalits (Painter1984: 13)

Through his songs, Painter enlivens the Dalit oral tradition and attempts to ‘politically sensitize the masses’. His songs with their folk tunes provide a tool to resist the hegemonic ideology and try to liberate his people from ‘oppressive social relationship’. His performances no doubt offer a mark of continuity of the Dalit tradition which is largely spiritual in tone in the medieval ages. But, what is innovative about Painter is that he has used the Dalit spiritual tradition to deal with social, economic and political issues. This has not stopped him from trying his hands in religious poetry.

In his poem “*Sudhareli Asprushyata*” [Reformed Untouchability], he criticizes his own leaders and presents a piece of pensive criticism to draw our attention towards a new web of ‘reformed untouchability’ to which the educated Dalits have fallen victim to, for the sake of individual mobility:

It is the culmination of political reservation,  
An elected leader  
He is a victim of reformed untouchability  
In his own constituency

Keeping a glass in his pocket  
Going to get his hair cut in a nearby town  
Then,  
(Think)  
What not had happened to a poor dweller of  
A mud-hut,  
Black and weak labour! (Painter1984: 24)

Here Painter reveals the harsh condition that still exists even after the political reservation and legal protection. He reminds us of an incident during the Morarji Desai government when an MP of the reserved seat had to move carrying a cup in his pocket. Political reservation cannot bring social justice or social equality. His connotations are clear that if a political leader is unable to oppose even his personal segregation, how will he liberate his people. Painter exposes hypocrisy in the name of democracy and criticizes it in harsh terms. He is also harsh on those members of his community who often distance themselves from the social issues and just use caste names for gaining jobs and promotion.

His questions are coming from relentless frustration. Even after years of independence and democratic rights given by the constitution, the hegemonic forces have not loosened their grip on the lower castes. Legal and political rights do not ensure social justice and equality to Dalits. Painter's fear is justified and it reveals the failure of the objectives behind our legal and political rights.

Painter consistently criticizes the 'benefited few' who often forget their own brothers and do not look at them after gaining reservation benefits. In his early poem "*Mahavro*" [Practice]

composed in 1968 Painter had addressed the question of lack of caste solidarity among the Dalits. He had written:

I don't like even an iota of this now,  
  
Now community even doesn't like dogs.  
Whereas I am  
GOVERNMENT GAZZETTED OFFICER,  
How can I keep relations with you?  
Alas!  
You all know me by my inherited caste name.  
Now  
Will cut down even this black tail itself.  
.....  
Today,  
I have built  
a big bungalow among the upper caste.  
But afraid if the anti-reservation and caste riots  
Would break out again?  
I have hidden the CASTE CERTIFICATE safely.  
Perhaps,  
Tomorrow I may need it for PROMOTION,  
I have mastered the art  
of ceasing to be  
an untouchable overnight. (Painter 1984: 25-26)

Painter, using a free verse form, in the poem “*Mahavro*” bitterly criticizes those Dalits who do not want to identify themselves with the community and do not share the pains of the community. Painter uses the words – “Government Gazetted officer”, “caste certificate”, and “promotion” in English even in his Gujarati poem to emphasize the sarcasm. Painter complains

that those who got good education and jobs have kept themselves away from the community and now they feel ashamed of being known as Dalits. The Dalit officer in the poem, a representative of Dalit elite class, has built a big house in the upper caste locality by successfully hiding his caste. However, he has a fear of caste riots. He has already kept his caste certificate safely to use it whenever the caste benefits are needed. For the elites among the Dalits, as Painter argues, their caste name is a 'black tail' which they do not like, which they try to hide but whenever the caste benefits are offered they put their caste names in front. Painter is marking here a social change that Dalit community has been passing through. It is generally seen that most of the Dalits who have good jobs have shifted themselves to urban areas, perhaps, to save themselves from the evil of untouchability. Their migration has made them somewhat indifferent to the Dalit issues faced by Dalits in rural Gujarat. The 'Sanskritisation' and 'Westernization' has kept them away from their own caste fellows. Painter's concern is more for the fact that when the community needs them, in times of need they hide themselves as they hide their caste certificates. Painter demands caste unity and solidarity to deal with the grim issues affecting the Dalits in Gujarat. His criticism of Dalit elites is aimed at demanding sensitivity towards their own caste and community.

### **Shankar Painter's Poetry and the Advent of the Dalit Panthers:**

Joseph Macwan, a Sahitya Akadami award winner writer, while hailing Painter's songs, writes: "If your songs are sung with proper emotions instilled in them, they will produce the desired effect for you" (Painter 2010: 03). Painter's poetry volume *Bungiyo Vage* (1984) was a significant intervention during the anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985. Though the volume contained some poems which were composed before the anti-reservation riots, his intervention was timely, relevant and spontaneous. Here, he deals with various issues relating to Dalit consciousness.

His most famous song, “*Bungiyo Vage*” was published in 1984. It asks Dalits to identify what they have internalized. He writes:

Today at your porch, a drum is being beaten, and *tabalas* are being played,

Why are you sleeping brave hearts?

Mother, sister, daughter, are screaming!

Why have you become deaf?

You have grown crops, and got abuses as rewards!

Why have you become cowards?

.....

Fighters of Bhim-army, the sons of labourers, now challenge!

Whom are you waiting for?

(Painter 2010: 40)

As I have mentioned before *Bungiyo* is a kind of drum which is played by Dalits, particularly by *Valmikis*. It is played on various occasions, auspicious and sad. It is also played to deliver important messages. Here, the poet plays it to awake his caste brethren. The poem was written at the backdrop of anti-reservation riots in 1981. The riots disillusioned Dalits largely both about the role of Government and the caste Hindus’ so-called pledge for self-reformation. The poet’s call: “Why have you become cowards?” is loaded with Dalits’ helplessness in the face of 1981 riots. They could not fight back the ‘merit’ and ‘capacity’ arguments and could not resist collectively physical attacks on them. Thus, Painter’s ‘*bungiyo*’ attempts to ‘unite and organize’ Dalits and demands them to challenge the hostile forces. Maybe while grasping the current atmosphere of hate and violence, he was also visualizing a repeat of the same thing, in the following year in 1985, another brutal caste and communal riot. During the years between 1981 and 1985, Dalit literary activities were focused on uniting the marginalized to offer a concentrated resistance. Painter’s “Bungiyo Vage” a poem and *Bungiyo Vage* (1984), a

collection of poems are considered as milestones in Dalit efforts at forging unity and building up resistance.

During that period, along with Painter's poetry collection *Bungiyo Vaghe* (1984), a significant number of Dalit poetry collections were published: Ganapat Parmar and Manishi Jani's edited collection, *Dalit Kavita* (1981), K.B.Pandya's *Chingari* (1982), Vasant Purani's *Manas* (1982), Dalapat Chauhan's *To Pachhi* (1983), Sahil Parmar's *Vyatha Pachchis i* (1984), Babaldas Chavada's *Atyachaar Thavado* (1984), Chandu Maheriya and Balkrishna Anand's *Visfot* (1984), Praveen Gadhvi's *Bayonet* (1985) etc. Moreover, if the poem "*Bungiyo Vaghe*" is seen in the context of the Dalit movement, it is a conscious attempt to build the movement on the more solid ground of Ambedkar's ideology. Painter mentions the daily incidents of atrocities—widespread sexual harassment of Dalit women, exploitation of Dalit labourers, and violence against Dalits; and urges Dalits to counter the oppressors with organized efforts.

In December 1990, Shankar Painter started a monthly magazine called *Voice of the Weak*. He wanted to provide an alternative to the mainstream print media. The mainstream magazines and newspapers hardly addressed the issues related to atrocities and upper caste oppression. Along with news items he used to print a literary section too. He discussed as much as seventy incidents related to the atrocities in his short-lived magazine during 1990 and 1994 (Jadav2004). His ability to document incidents has often found its beautiful expression in his poetry.

Painter depicts a whole range of atrocities committed on the Dalits in his poem, "*Savaj ne Sandesh*" [A message to a lion]. He mentions Mahadevpura, where a Dalit boy was killed because he entered the Shiv temple, Sagasan where a Dalit was killed because he rode on a horse. He also mentions Mitha Ghoda and Saijgam where Dalit women were raped, Ranmalpur

where a Dalit was killed for water, Zanzmer where a Dalit boy was killed because he eloped with an upper caste girl, Tharad where a Dalit Sarpanch was killed, Chitrodipura, where a Dalit boy was killed and his eyes were pierced with thorns (Painter 2010: 53).

His poem, “*Sambarda nu Sambelu*” gives us a minute picture of the incident which occurred in a village called Sambarda in the north Gujarat region in 1989. In Sambarda, the relation between Dalits and the dominant caste-Gadhvis was like master and bonded labourers. Gadhvis do not belong to the upper caste category. They are generally considered as an OBC caste. Traditionally they were court singers and poets, but they expected that others should address them as ‘*darbar*’ (a mark of respect, generally used for Kshatriyas). Thus, they enjoyed affinity with the ruling people and got lands and certain rights in Sambarda village. During the pre-independence time, Gadhvis had donated some land to Dalits to build houses. They expected, in return, agriculture labour in their farms without any remuneration. But after independence the regime changed and the Dalit showed their reluctance in continuing ‘*jajmani*’. Many Dalits pursued education and some of them also got appointments in Government departments. When the incidents occurred in 1989, as many as 49 Dalits held government jobs. Some of them for their convenience shifted to the nearby towns. The family of the local political leader, B.K. Gadhvi was dominant in the village. They encroached upon Dalit land which was used by Dalits for cemetery and also *gaucher* (common land for cattle grazing). The Gadhvis also expected that Dalits should not wear modern clothes, watches or glasses. Moreover, physical harassment and verbal abuse was an everyday business. The Dalits were fed up of such atrocities, and as a sign of protest they

collectively migrated to the nearby town Palanpur. The very act of migration offended the Gadhvis and they attacked a Dalit youth.<sup>19</sup>The poem documents the incident:

Dalit cemetery a major obstacle,  
Gadhvis want to encroach and cultivate it,  
Poor condition of Dalit women,  
Are stoned while they go for defecation!  
If a Dalit plays drums.  
If comes in in-shirts,  
If keeps buttons of shirts open,  
If wears goggles!  
Tear the clothes and break the glasses,  
Break legs and heads,  
And open fire,  
Phone Delhi. (Painter 2010: 55)

Painter here exposes the feudal mindset of the Gadhvis. To agitation against the dominant caste was organized by the Dalits. Painter himself was present during the agitations. Before the rally at Palanpur, thousands of copies of his poem “*Sambarda nu Sambelu*” were distributed in the area. Dalits of the nearby villages and the poet himself used his poem to mobilize the masses for the demonstrations. Painter’s poem played a catalytic role in mobilizing Dalits for demonstrations against the Gadhvis. The demonstrations created a powerful effect. The agitations were successful in forcing the government to act and nab the culprits. The role of the poet here extends to the level of an activist. His art and poetic ability were involved in mobilizing the masses to fight against injustice. By providing visual word images of the oppressors he enlivened the

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<sup>19</sup>For the detail of this incident, I relied on Atul Parmar’s unpublished Ph. D thesis “Gujarati Dalit Writing: Question of Narrative and Translation” (2014) (The M.S. University of Baroda) and on Shankar Painter himself. The frequent informal talks with Painter have helped me to understand the poem and other incidents related to his life and works.

whole incident and allowed the Dalit masses to visualize their oppression and marginalization  
Here Painter fits the role which Limbale (2010) visualizes for a Dalit writer:

Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotions and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems- their writing articulates this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist-artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature to be movement. (33)

Painter here not only attempts to mobilize the masses but simultaneously within the same poem presents the critique of the social order and its brutalities also. He indicates all the reasons why the upper caste feels unease and discomfort; the reasons are trivial and quite insignificant if we consider them in the context of human rights. Painter's poem paints a picture where the very every-day-ness of Dalit lives, a decent normal living is denied by the caste Hindus.

The poem is a stinging reminder that Dalits cannot live a normal human life because very normality of a normal life brings them on par with the caste Hindus. This normality of a Dalit life threatens the caste Hindu's 'surplus recognition' (Guru 2011: 211). This poem can also be understood in Guru's formulation of reduction and rejection. Guru writes:

The desire for surplus recognition presupposes a permanent gap between the elite and the subaltern cultural aspirations for recognition. This desire for surplus recognition forces the modern social elites to produce a new form of reduction, rejection, and exclusion sustained by modern conditions. Modernity has an inherent tendency to exclude more in favour of few. (2011:211)

The Dalits of Sambarda dared to fill the gap between the caste Hindus and themselves and thus they threatened the surplus recognition of the caste Hindus. Even more problematic was Dalit access to modernity: goggles, shirt tucked in, playing drums in public places. The modernity has been the sole preserve of the caste Hindus and only by denying the markers of modernity to Dalits could caste Hindus maintain their dominance or surplus recognition. So, inevitably, they

have to stop the Dalit's access to modernity and the only way they can do so is through direct physical violence which is only one of the many tools of reduction, rejection, and exclusion.

Painter, showing his attentiveness and sensitivity to the contemporary social turmoil, composed the poem "Who is Making the Nation Weak?" in 1991. The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid agitations were in the air and the nation was going through a sequel of communal riots during the early years of 1990s. Painter indicated that it was the communal forces that actually weaken the nation. His point is also sarcastic on the anti-reservation agitations when the argument was made by the caste Hindus that the reservation to the inefficient people would make the nation weak. Painter here mentions that by instigating and perpetrating violence among countrymen, the right wingers are actually making the nation weak. He also subtly argues that what is the relevance of the temple when the Dalits are not allowed into it. He bluntly indicates politics behind the whole Ram Janmbhoomi agitations.

Who is instigating riots?  
Taking the stones of RamShila?  
Who is a raging fire,  
By making a pretext of Babri mosque?  
.....  
Who is distributing *trishul* and *dhariya*,  
To kill down Mohan?  
Who is fighting with acid bulbs,  
To trial Ahemad?  
.....  
Who is closing doors  
of temples for humans?  
Who is killing Dalits for  
Smooth throne?

Who is making the nation weak

By making us fight within? (Painter2010: 83)

Very few Dalit poets took a clear stand during the Ramjanmbhoomi-Babri mosque agitations. It was a dilemma for many Dalits during the communal atmosphere. During the anti- reservation riots in 1984, Dalits were systematically used against the Muslims particularly at certain places where tension prevailed between Muslims and Dalits. Muslims, at many places, especially in rural areas, practice untouchability and inhumanities against Dalits. But Painter here took a firm stand against the communal forces and criticized the evil design of the right wing organizations.

Moreover, his song “*Ratan ne Rang*” sings the bravery of Ratanbai, a Dalit woman who fought against the attack of a casteist mob during the anti- reservation riots in 1981. The song says:

Run Dalit run...run youth run...

To see the battle of Jotan, you run Dalit run.

Your *vas* has been gheraoed by the tyrants,

Screaming, crying all around and sound of slash, slash and kill.

It is raining stones, no chance to escape

Attack with *barshi*, spears, hatchets and burning torches.

Speak, Dalit speak, speak youth speak...

Hiding in the house, why brave heart? Speak, Dalit speak...

Shivering with fear, all younger brothers, sisters and mothers,

Now the eyes are red in front of centuries old tyranny!

When Jotana village is fighting back!

Who will face the raining sling shots!

The drum is beating, drum is beating.

There is an attack on *vas*, drum is beating

Heads broken, bone crushed, when women became men.

The tyrant has been defeated and made to run.

Bravo Ratanbai bravo! , bravo her mother!

Bravo youth of Jotana! The world has been amazed!

Dalits, tribals, and OBCs of every village,

All have tired of caste exploitation.

Maintain peace and unity, all poor are brothers,

How will a handful capitalist going to last in the battle? (Painter 2010: 73)

The poem depicts a historical incident that occurred in 1981 during the anti-reservation riots in Gujarat. The Dalit maholla was attacked by the upper caste Hindus in Jotana village of north Gujarat. It was fiercely attacked with spears, *barshis*, stones and torches and there was no escape route for Dalits. The women of the *maholla*, under the leadership of Ratanbai, confronted the Hindu mob and used slingshots and were successful in chasing the mob away.

The caste Hindus opposed the reservation policy in violent ways. The anti-reservation riots, as it seems, occurred out of an urge to acquire political power, on the one hand and to affirm the dominance of the upper caste Hindus, on the other. The upper castes in Gujarat were disgruntled because they felt that Madhavsinh Solanki led Congress government did not give ample political space to the upper castes and did not allow them to pursue their capitalist ventures in Gujarat. In addition, the reservation policy of the government which benefited the lower castes further alienated the caste Hindus from the government.

Painter praises Ratanbai's bravery in the poem and exposes the tyranny of the caste Hindus. But it is important to note that Painter does not problematize the gender question here. He talks of men of the *vas* hiding in the houses and women under Ratanbai fighting the mob. He likens the bravery and courage of Ratanbai and women to those of men but the question is the normative qualities of bravery and courage which Painter identifies with male does not hold much water here. Still Painter does not probe this question deeper, he seems to be contented with

the fact that by putting up women characters and by admiring women bravery, he has sufficiently provoked the Dalit men and appealed to their bravery.

The later part of the poem in fact addresses an important issue. In a dramatic way, Painter brings in the question of capitalism into the picture. It is dramatic because the poem starts with caste Hindus but by the end the binary of caste Hindus vs Dalits changes into an altogether new binary of capitalist class vs exploited classes which include OBCs, SCs and STs and the poor. He pointing, it seems, to an important alliance between capitalism and caste Hindus. This as a result leaves the poor and the exploited with two enemies who are in fact rolled into one. Painter exhorts the poor classes to unite against the capitalist system and once united, he suggests, they can easily defeat the capitalist class. Apart from purity-pollution ritual, modern economic development has also created tensions between the rich and the poor in general and between the upper caste Hindus and Dalits in particular. We can say that economics played as important a role in the anti-reservation riots as the political economy of caste. While analyzing the anti-reservation agitations, D.L Sheth (2004: 207) noted:

In a state like Gujarat, where the agitations were more persistent and virulent, they have forced the reversal of the government policy. Even if we discount the rhetoric employed by the anti-reservationists, which often resulted in escalating their demand to total abolition of all forms of reservations and preferential treatment, the impact that the agitations have made on the minds of the policy makers and of the intelligentsia in the country is quite significant.

According to Painter, the anti-reservationist forces seem to have succeeded in their mission, they seem to have established a permanent fear both in the psyche of the beneficiaries of reservation, here the Dalits and the policy makers, here the political class. In fact, they have succeeded in putting up a resistance to the kind of mobility which the reservation policy envisaged for the Dalits. Now, it is difficult for a government to extend the preferential treatment in other fields.

Besides, the Dalits out of fear cannot demand it forcefully. However, it will be a simplistic reading to say that anti-reservation riots happened only because caste Hindus hated the idea of Dalits availing opportunities of education or gaining political and economic power. This reading does not allow us to raise the question of political economy of the state. Painter does not ask why the government is not opening more and more educational institutions or why it is not creating more job opportunities.

Again, though Painter criticizes capitalism for its exploitative nature, still he does not question why the state is allowing free rein to capitalism. We know that the defenders of capitalism hail it as a caste free economy because it provides equal opportunities to all. However, the issue remains unaddressed as to how Dalits are supposed to acquire necessary competence in a caste ridden society where social hierarchical structures work as obstacle in providing a level playing field to the Dalits. Ambedkar considers both Brahmanism and Capitalism adversaries in the pursuit of Dalit emancipation. He says, “There are in my view two enemies which the workers of this country have to deal with. The two enemies are Brahmanism and Capitalism” (Rai 2013: 46). Painter also addresses this issue in the same fashion. He urges for unity of Dalits, tribals, OBCs and all the poor to fight against the Brahminical and Capitalist forces.

Thus, Painter’s poetry along with its revolutionary purpose presents history and a critique of that in a poetic form. The documentation of events of atrocities and reaction to them is indeed a kind of protest and resistance through poetic means. This type of poetic narrations of incidents provides a sense of unity to the community and empowers them as a people. Painter’s role is not limited to a poet or a singer but, in the larger context, he is a teacher. A Dalit poet or writer, if his community matters to him/her, he has to assume the role of a teacher. The lessons which are taught through literary creations are nothing but means to wipe out what the community has

internalized through the ages and to empower them with stories of struggle and resistance. The role is to make the people see, understand, realize and react, as Chinua Achebe, in his essay (1990:44), “The Novelist as Teacher” expresses his purpose as an Igbo writer, which is “to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.” Similarly, Shankar Painter is quite aware of his role. He writes:

A true sensitive writer should be completely aware of his role. Our community has been living in oppressed, abased, tolerant and undignified conditions. It has been suffering for the sake of mere survival. The only remedy isto awaken my vulnerable and poor, powerless and ashen community ... I have been beating ‘*Bungiyo*’ of my songs and poems to alert my community.(Painter: 2010:26)

Thus, the revolutionary imports, as perceived through Painter’s endeavours, make us look at his poetry with renewed eyes and make us examine the damage that the caste system has done to the psyche of a Dalit living in a continual state oppression. In the same vein, it can be said that what Ambedkar performed at a larger forum, a Dalit poet is expected to perform a similar task in his or her language to percolate it as wide and as deep as possible in his or her own society. And, it seems that Painter is following it with ample commitment.

The fire of Dalit movement may seem to have weakened and dwindled but the poet’s new volume *Hachche Hachuchu Bol ne Fadya* (2010) has again raised the voice of dissent in north Gujarat. His bluntness and folk form have given his poetry an explosive tone and in this his poetry resembles what we know as movement poetry or protest poetry.

Painter’s recent poetry shows his assertive tone and shows a predominance of rustic language. His resistance is quite visible and witty. He shows that Dalits have courage to counter the casteist forces by reason and wit. In the poem, when an upper caste person asks a Dalit youth why he had polluted the pond by drinking from it; the Dalit has enough courage to say that he had not polluted it by drinking but by washing his bottom. The courage and assertion shown by

the Dalit is a result of empowered position of the Dalit. Painter believes in meaningful confrontation, not in passive submission to tyrannical forces. His poem, “We are the owners of the village!!” presents his new tone. He says:

Why have you passed from here, bastard?

How dare you?

Have you polluted our pond?

Have you drunk water from the pond?

You have broken tradition of castes!

We will not spare you?

(He) Brought out a hidden knife, and slapped.

Brother, ma-baap, I haven't drunk water.

I haven't polluted it.

I am telling you the truth.

I have just washed my bottom. (Painter: 2010: 74)

Painter also participated in the street play performances. During the anti-reservation riots, under the banner of the *Jati Nirmulan Sankalan Samiti* (Caste Annihilation Coordination Committee), Shankar Painer, Raju Solanki, Kardam Bhatt, Sahil Parmar etc. performed a street play, called *Brahmanvad Ni Balaxari* (The Alphabets of Brahmanism) at various places all over Gujarat. They performed it before important rallies and during speeches to mobilize masses and to orient the gathering. They had to face stern resistance from the upper caste forces but they did not swerve from their path. Shankar Painter, Raju Solanki and Kardam Bhatt sang songs in folk tunes also.

Radheshyam Sharma, a Gujarati writer and columnist hailed Painter's songs for their quality of presenting a critique of poet's own people. Painter does not spare the sophists of Dalit

community who enjoy the constitutional benefits of the caste reservation but who do not show any sense of affinity with their own community (Sharma2010). Chinu Modi, a famous playwright and poet, opines that Painter’s poetry has a quality of folk which cannot be forgotten easily. Modi writes that Painter uses “crude and unrefined” language to depict both the oppressed and the oppressor (Modi2010). According to the mainstream canons his language is not refined and sanitized. But his use of dialects, of both caste and regional, makes his poetry more suitable for listening than reading.

Mohan Parmar, a well-known Dalit Gujarati writer and critic, classifies the Gujarati Dalit literature in four different categories. He includes Shankar Painter in the first category along with Joseph Macwan and Neerav Patel. The first category consists of “those who are committed to give voice to the fundamental problems of the Dalits. They believe in bringing social revolution through their writings to resolve the Dalit issue. They insist on vivid description of oppression, exploitation, sufferings and all types of social injustices in their literature. They engage in documentation and least care about the mainstream measures of appreciation. They aim to create their own aesthetics” (Parmar in Patel 2011: 31).

Painter in his famous song, “*Cham Lya Atlu Fatyu Sa?*” translated into English as ‘Monarch’ which he sings on various occasions, says:

What make you so prodigal, you fool?

You dare challenge me openly?

And that too fearlessly?

Go and ask in your *vas* who I am?

.....

The police is mine, mine sarpanch is,

The *talati* mine, mine minister,  
Mine village entire, *fozdar* mine,  
Whole district, chief minister mine.  
Famous my name even in Delhi,  
Who is yours? Who is yours?  
Who is yours? Who is yours?

I can shoot you if at all I want. (Burkeet *al*: 46)

Painter often sings this song in Gujarati using a popular folk tune accompanied by musical instruments. It is in north Gujarat dialect. The character who is shouting in the poem is not a Dalit but an upper caste oppressor who is threatening a Dalit boy by asserting his hegemonic social position and reminding him of his political influence. Painter uses the line ‘Who is yours?’ frequently to make Dalits aware of their isolated conditions. His use of a question-answer style has roots in the folk tradition of posing a spiritual question in one line of the *Bhajan* and giving an apt answer in another. He also follows this tradition and composes another poem to answer the first one.

Don't talk rubbish, my son,  
Stop your tongue,  
You were urinated on by Shakas-Hunas  
And you allowed MohamadGhori to loot your temples,  
.....  
Don't talk rubbish, my son,  
Stop your tongue.  
You people went to Delhi and  
Flattered the Britishers like a dog,  
.....

For jobs you ate leftovers!

Then he answers the question ‘who is yours?’

Mine are landless peasants,

Mine are poor farmers,

Mine are the workers of the world,

And mine are all labourers.

And Painter rhetorically asks the counter question and answers it himself.

Who is yours in all these?

Who is yours?

Stop your tongue. (Painter 2010: 47)

His answer is a reflection of the Dalit thinking process. He brutally and bluntly reminds the caste Hindu people their ‘shameful deeds’ of the past as well as the present. The song is his whip; it is a weapon for him. Throwing the broom aside, Shankar Painter holds a torch and yields a pen to ignite the masses against injustice.

Bharat Mehta, a Gujarati literary critic says that Painter was originally a *bhajanik*, who used to move among folks and acquired rhythms of *bhajan*, *kawwali* and folk songs and ultimately the Dalit poetry has benefited amply from his manner of poetic engagement with the Dalit cause. He continuously wandered in the streets and *mohallas*, in remote villages and slums of urban areas to awake his people through his melodious songs (Mehta: 2010:7-11). When Gaddar came to Gujarat, Raju Solanki, a Gujarati Dalit poet and other friends arranged his programmes in the Dalit slums in Ahmedabad. Painter also accompanied him at various places. One of his songs, “From Broom to Mouth”, is very poignant:

From dawn to dusk

To earn crumb and leftovers

The broom they bestowed on us  
And warning cry of our approach  
As we carried their shit on our heads  
From broom to mouth we live,  
When shall we break our chains?  
We are just a bunch of helpless sheep  
Waiting for the killer wolves to arrive  
From broom to mouth we live,  
When shall we break our chains?  
Bleeding white to turn the earth red  
We became a tribe of living corpses.  
From broom to mouth we live,

Rising up we shall break our chains! (Sheriff 1999: 31)

He raises the question ‘when shall we break our chains’ and in the end he answers ‘Rising up we shall break our chains?’ His optimism lies in his conscious and willful resistance. According to Painter, only concentration and focus could bring about a revolution. But, he is not a revolutionary in an ordinary sense. Along with his social assertion, he successfully brings Dalit folk traditions in alignment with contemporary Gujarati literary traditions. His use of Dalit dialect and folk form for protest purpose is in itself a kind of assertion. He, in a sense, gives Dalits their own weapon to fight back. He not only revives Dalit folk traditions but also exploits it for a larger good. As a keen observer of social turmoil, he feels it necessary to provide a medium to his masses that can be handy and effective. Thus, his *bhajans*, songs, poems and *bhavai* performances have ample of traces that the Dalits find it easy to identify with them not only in terms of their content but also in terms of their form. Painter, as it appears, writes from a position of contesting and resisting hegemonic forces both at the social as well as the literary level.

Shankar Painter could be seen as a poet-protester who has been writing consistently on Dalit issues in order to mount an organized front for liberation. Perhaps the last word goes to Bhikhu Parekh (2009) who says in his article “Logic of Humiliation”:

A systematic and persuasively articulated critique of the dominant ideology weakens its hold and creates spaces for individual and organized dissent. (34)

Looking at the vitality of caste struggle and the urgency of its democratic remedy, it is the time to mobilize masses for the cause. For that, it seems, Painter feels it necessary to exploit the handy tool of folk arts.