

## Chapter V

### Neerav Patel: Modernity and Caste Consciousness

Neerav Patel, a bilingual (Gujarati and English) Dalit poet, began to compose Dalit poetry at an early age. He is considered as one of the pioneers of the Gujarati Dalit literature and a significant voice in Gujarati Dalit poetry. His constant involvement in Dalit issues, his self-reflective approach and his artistic articulations make his poetry an important document in the study of Dalit movement in Gujarat.

Patel was born in a Chamar family in Bhuvaladi village near Ahmedabad in 1950. His family was engaged in tanning and agriculture labour. His father Hirabhai was an experienced tanner of the area. He prepared hide and sold it in urban centers carrying it on his head. He was not a religious person; on the contrary, Neerav Patel says he was a kind of radical person who did not believe in idol worshipping. His radicalism was not the result of any particular ideological influence but possibly his own intuitive wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Devima, Neerav Patel's mother, brought up her children with hardship. She helped Hirabhai in fetching water for the *charm kund*, the curing vat. She also worked as a wage worker in the farms of upper caste farmers.

Patel was the only child in their family who got a chance to get formal education; other members of the family were illiterate. Patel was comparatively a clever student. He often stood first in his school examinations and obtained distinction class in his matriculation examination

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<sup>1</sup> For the biographical details of Neerav Patel, I rely on three sources 1) a personal interview with him on 31 March, 2015. I recorded it. It was largely in Gujarati. The details from the interview which I have used here have been confirmed with Patel. 2) His small autobiographical article, "What Did I do – To Be So Black and Blue" published in *An Anthology of Gujarati Dalit Literature* (2011) and 3) B. N. Vankar 's *Randvip: Creative Writers Their Life and Works* (2003)

also. After successful schooling, Natubhai Patel alias Prof. Zingaro<sup>2</sup>, his compassionate senior friend brought him to Ahmedabad for further study and helped him to get admission in the city's most famous college, St. Xavier's College. He began to stay at one of his relatives' home at Rakhial in Ahmedabad and started his higher education in the English Literature in 1966. Rakhial, Gomtipur and Saraspur were Dalit and Muslim dominated areas. Most Dalit mill workers who migrated from the rural areas used to reside in the *chalis* or congested localities of these areas. The one room quarters with tin roofs, narrow passages of *challis*, and crowded and noisy atmosphere became his new milieu. Here, Patel got chance to interact with Dalits from different regions of Gujarat. These *chalis* provided him a new exposure and made him aware of contemporary socio-political thinking. He came in contact with different ideologies - the leaders of *Mazoor Mahajan* inspired by Gandhian thoughts, some political workers inspired by Leftist ideology and later the leaders of the Dalit Panthers motivated by Dr Ambedkar's teachings. Patel also came in contact with Praveen Gadhvi and Dalpat Chauhan who later became famous for their Dalit literary activities.

However, the urban set up and some adolescent aspirations led him to change his personal name and his caste name. As Patel says, he changed his caste and personal name to escape from an immediate revelation of his Dalit identity. In numerous experiences, he felt that as soon as the upper caste person heard a Dalit's caste name, s/he felt something demeaning about him/her, and s/he had to face negative treatment with caste prejudices. So, Patel consciously changed his caste name and personal name from Soma Hira Chamar to Neerav Patel, His newly acquired caste name Patel, represented a dominant caste of Gujarat. His personal

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<sup>2</sup> Natubhai Patel was Neerav Patel's friend. He was two or three year senior to him in study. Later he was known as Prof. Zingaro due to his profession as a magician.

name 'Soma' carries connotations of his low caste identity, so by changing it to Neerav, he also attempted to neutralize it.<sup>3</sup>

Patel belongs to the Chamar caste, the Rohit community which is considered low in the social hierarchy. The Rohits were traditionally engaged in leather work. His changing of caste name and personal name has proved to be an 'empty signifier' for him. Neither 'Patel' nor 'Neerav' is able to obliterate his caste identity and these names fail to serve as a 'non-signifying face'. His migration to the urban centre also proved to be a futile effort in terms of caste discrimination. People often dug up his caste identity. Patel expresses in a poem, "The Vestige":

who was the satan sculptor  
who carved my name upon my forehead?  
o why do you deep in my veins to revive my name  
like tattooing into the bark of the tree  
with a knife?  
i wanted to forget my name-  
and at midnight  
i migrated to the city  
leaving my hut and hamlet behind  
.....  
you like the vulture  
why is the bill of your eyes  
pecking the carcass of my name perennially?  
alas! i am doubtful –  
my name will survive even after i die. (Patel 1980: 05)

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<sup>3</sup> In Gujarat, the personal name of low caste people generally do not carry the prefix like bhai, Kumar, Sinh, ji etc. These prefixes are the markers of respect. Moreover, personal names are pronounced in a pejorative manner. For instance, Someshvar is pronounced as Soma or Purushottam as Pasho.

His choosing of the new caste name 'Patel' was not an idle choice. The Patel community, whose caste name Neerav Patel adopted, in Gujarat is a tiller community and they are dominant in each and every field; economic, political, religious, educational etc. The vertical mobility achieved by the Patidars or Kunabis as they were earlier called was a consequence of historical forces in the late nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century they were considered as Shudras, now they enjoy, by and large, upper caste status. They have mostly benefited from land reforms and the milk revolution in Gujarat. Their early access to modern education ensured them chances to settle in America and many other European countries. It is their economic power and caste solidarity that helped them to achieve both political power and upward social mobility. The same thing has not happened to the Dalits.<sup>4</sup>

Patel might have imagined an objective world, a utopia of equal treatment without considering any caste markers, but its realisation seemed impossible to him. The urban space or modern education or new caste name hardly helped him. Modernity could not erase the deep rooted biases and on the contrary, the continuation of biases in new urban forms has aroused a kind of anger and frustration. His words, "You like the vulture" and "Alas! I am doubtful –My name will survive even after I die", are suggestive in this context.

In 1974, on 14<sup>th</sup> April, the Ambedkarite youth invited Raja Dhale, a Dalit Panthers' leader, from Mumbai, and organised a large procession to celebrate Dr B.R Ambedkar's birth anniversary in Ahmedabad. Thus, "the seeds of the Dalit Panthers were sown in Gujarat" (Franco *et al* 376). The Dalit Panthers gave shape to Dalit identity and magazines like *Garud* and *Panther* also contributed significantly. *Garud* was first published in 1970 by Dalpat Shrimali. The articles such as "Gandhi Ashram or Hub of Corruption" and "Shameful Scandal of

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<sup>4</sup> See for detailed discussion, Ghanshyam Shah. "Samaj Jivan." *Visami Sadi nu Gujarat* [A Collection of Articles on Various Aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century Gujarat]. Eds. Shirish Panchal *et al*. Vadodara: Samvad Prakashan, 2002, pp1-20. Print.

Gandhism” were published in *Garud* with factual details initiated a trend of “informative journalism” for Dalit magazines. *Panther* was started by Rameshchandra Parmar in 1975. Parmar’s “caustic pen opened new horizons in journalism.”<sup>5</sup>

Patel, during his study in Ahmedabad, came into contact with the Dalit Panthers’ activities and its leaders—Rameshchandra Parmar, Narayanbhai Vora and Valjibhai Patel; and also with many creative writers. His involvement in Dalit Panthers’ programmes directed his creative initiatives towards social concerns and provided him a new identity ‘Dalit’. As I have mentioned earlier, the poetry journal, *Aakrosh* published a special issue of Dalit poetry.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to pin point the commencement of Dalit writing in Gujarat but that issue of *Aakrosh* is often considered as a significant moment in the history of Dalit poetry in Gujarati. Patel was one of its editors along with Dalpat Chauhan, Praveen Gadhvi and Yogesh Dave.

Later the Dalit Panther published two of his anthologies of poetry in English—*Burning from Both the Ends* (1980) and *What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue* (1987). He is the only Gujarati Dalit poet who is bilingual and who frequently writes in both Gujarati and English. He also edited magazines *Swaman*, *Vacha* and *Kalo Suraj*. His articles also got space in mainstream English dailies like *Times of India*, *Indian Express* and popular magazines such as *Illustrated Weekly*. His Gujarati poems have been published in various magazines like *Naya Marg*, *Ahvan* and *Dalit Mitra*. He was also jailed for his poem on Jetalpur massacre in 1987. His Gujarati Dalit poetry anthology, *Bahishkrit Phoolo* (Ostracised Flowers) was published in 2006. In 2013, the English translation of *Bahishkrit Phoolo* has been published as *Severed Tongues Speak Out*. He, as an activist, worked for the Swaman Foundation for Dalit Literature (Vankar 2003: 49-53).

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<sup>5</sup> See for further details, Atul Parmar. “Gujarati Dalit Writing: Questions of Narrative and Translation.” (2014), (Ph.D.) Diss., The M.S. University of Baroda, 2014.p143.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed analysis about *Aakrosh*, see Chapter.2 “Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Survey.”

### **Modernity, the City and Utopias in Neerav Patel's Poetry:**

Dipankar Gupta, in his work *Interrogating Caste* notes that the great nineteenth century Indologist, Max Muller, the scholar-missionary Abbe Dubois, and the sociologist Max Weber were skeptical about India's success in its capacity to modernize itself, as they were skeptical about the role of caste system. They believed that the caste system would be a hindrance in the acquisition of modernity in India. Their understanding of caste system mainly depended upon their observations of a Brahminic dominance and resistance given by that dominance to modern aspirations for social change (2000: 54).

In spite of Brahminical dominance, as Gupta mentions, it is found that modern India has provided many instances where it can be said that the caste system has not offered any significant and decisive resistance, for example, in the development of democracy, the pursuit of modern occupations or in acquiring socio-economic mobility both horizontal and vertical (as in the case of Patidars of Gujarat).

However, the empirical information that emerges from the Dalit poetry reveals the continued power of the caste system. Modernity, particularly related to urban centers, has certainly provided a space where Dalits can disregard their caste identity and without caste consideration pursue modern occupational practices. The city provides the social and geographical space where the disabilities of face-to-face society can be minimized and material relationships can be developed across caste lines as well. In modern material relationships, caste often loses its grip; and competence and wealth acquire a dominant hold. Thus, the city supposedly becomes a space prone to class conflicts rather than caste conflicts.

But the city, as it appears, has changed its forms of caste discrimination, not its adherence to it. Migration, from rural to urban due to modern economy, carried its caste prejudices, has

attempted to continue them in urban centers also. The caste rules that compelled Dalits to serve without suitable compensation have taken a new form in the urban society. Patel's poem, "the song of our shirt" reveals the life of Dalits in urban center.

we are a fashionable caste  
or tribe you may call:  
our forefather mayo dhed  
had a shirt of 3 sleeves,  
his father had a shroud as his shirt  
and his father wore a shirt of own skin.  
i am no less fashionable-  
just got a pocketless, sleeveless, buttonless  
Peter England, the second  
from the mall road pavements i sweep.  
.....  
our shirt has a song to sing  
of bizarre fashion. (2013:08)

Patel's poem with his historical context and journey traces the changes occurred in Dalits' life. The life without clothes to a life with a shroud as clothes, and three sleeved shirt of the mythical Mayo to modern 'tattered' shirt from a pavement conveys the distress that nothing has substantially changed, The Dalit is still sweeping the pavements, though now in the city; life is as miserable as it was in the past. Modernity has entered life of Dalits in its own way; the outer form has changed but the inner form remains unaltered. "Peter England" shirt, a marker of modernity, comes to him but in an inadequate manner, with its distorted and derogatory form—"pocketless, sleeveless, buttonless." The poet's utterance, "Our shirt has a song to sing of bizarre fashion" is a bitter sarcasm. Modernity promised to bring in equality and respectability to the life of Dalits in India but here the poet reveals how modernity seems to have bypassed Dalits and

their share of modernity is only its leftovers. Modernity has brought “Peter England” shirts in the market but the best which a Dalit sweeper can aspire for is the mutilated, distorted and beyond use by date of this product of modernity. They can manage to purchase it only from the second-hand cloth stalls on the pavements. The ‘left-over’ syndrome does not seem to leave the life of a Dalit. In pre-modern times, they had to subsist on the left-over food and clothes of the caste Hindus and now in the modern times, this ‘left-over’ manifests itself in the form of second-hand stalls, the only place where a sweeper can afford to get his “Peter England”.

Modernity has entered without altering the structure of caste discrimination. His identity as a ‘Dalit’ still hovers around him, and he has to limit himself to that identity only. A Dalit’s identity as a mill worker, a teacher, a municipality worker, a poet, a union member, or a sweeper, a poor person or rich, does not get any consideration. His multiple identities turn into the traditional identity linked to the concept of ‘purity and pollution’. Dalits in the urban center are absorbed into the milieu but by and large in their traditional occupations or areas related to these. Modern democracy gives them freedom from traditional tyrannical situations but offers another form of low life and low treatment.

Patel in his poem, “A Collegian Shabri” reveals the complexity behind so called ‘modernization’. The attempts to hide the indigenous identity by using the markers of modernity are proved to be a futile exercise. Dalits often adopt the outer markers of ‘modernization’ by wearing modern clothes, adopting modern style, holding new surnames and personal names, or converting to other faiths. Bringing superficial changes in life or leaving traditional markers or adopting ‘modernity’, Dalits hardly change the ground situation. Patel writes:

what could she do to protect her chastity  
molested by your imprudent ramas in the street?  
how could she put aside her indigenous individuality?



by changing name?  
by changing surname?  
by draping gujarati sari bengallee style?  
by converting to christianity?  
by changing her desi culture to hippiesm?  
but alas, history can't be changed  
and poverty can't be banished instantly.

.....

We will change the future,  
We will change the history of the future. (Patel 1980:11)

Here, the title of the poem, “A Collegian Shabri” suggests the dilemma of a tribal girl in particular and the Dalits in general. The poet realizes the limits of modernity for Dalits and tribals. Modernity promises to embrace everyone in its own fold of equality and rationality. But when it comes to Dalits and tribals, modernity faces the firewall of their pre-modern life style and culture (language, dress, etc.). Modernity demands complete severance of connection from the past in all walks of life and even with all the efforts, Dalits and tribals forever carry the traces of their pre-modern culture (caste and regional dialect, etc.). The poet knows from his personal experiences that changing of name, surname, or religion will not confer Dalits equality in treatment. The untouchability is ‘widely prevalent and deeply entrenched’ in our society (Shah *et al* 2006: 14). The dilemma of the poet is that how to escape from caste discrimination; any effort as suggested in the poem has already been failed. His haste is obvious; he wants quick change. But the poem ends on a sudden burst of energy and optimism. The poet is optimistic that Dalits will be able to rise from their current crisis and will work to change the future. There is a call for Dalits to put in their efforts to change the way in which history of Dalits will be written in future. It will not happen instantly but slowly and surely the change will come.

Modernity enters in Dalit life with multiple contradictions. The caste prejudices retained their brutalities and acquire new forms with the entry of Dalits into modern occupations. Capitalist industrialisation coexists with the caste clashes and atrocities. Caste identity does not get blurred even in the modern milieu of urban life and frequently shows its inherent biases. Modernity in production, as it seems, is not able to bring modernity in human attitude towards fellow human beings. The new emerging working class instead of becoming united to destroy the age-old unjust traditions discovers new forms of injustice. Ambedkar's dream of the annihilation of caste and Gandhi's dream of equal status to every work have not found their realization.

The contradictions of modernity have given birth to utopias. Utopias, that Gandhi and Ambedkar presented and even before them many bhakti poets imagined, represent a kind of space and time, where human beings would exist without any kind of exploitation or oppression. Gail Omvedt says that such utopia involves 'reason' and 'ecstasy'. Ecstasy is aroused upon the visualizing of a utopian society, "a society of equality and love" (2008c:10). Reason shows ways to fulfill the dream by understanding the present state of society and applying some reformatory or eliminative measures to level disabilities prevailing in society. With regard to utopias, Ernst Bloch argued that there are two kinds of utopias—abstract and concrete. According to him, abstract utopias are unreal and unrealizable whereas concrete utopias are realizable. For Bloch, concrete utopias express the unfinished nature of reality and they convey a possible future whereas abstract utopias are rather the result of fantasy and they convey a derogative sense of unworldly nature. (Levitas 2010:103)

Utopias offer hope and vision to make their realization possible. Modern times, in a sense, provides the "inspiration and outlining" to create new society. The city has the potential to make utopias because the city embodies modernity and urban space. The Gandhian utopia of

casteless society was outlined by Gandhi when wrote in *Harijan* (11 November, 1935) under the title “Caste Has To Go”:

The most effective, quickest and the most unobtrusive way to destroy caste is for reformers to begin the practice with themselves and, where necessary, take consequences of social boycott. The reform will not come reviling the orthodox. The change will be gradual and imperceptible. The so-called higher classes will have to descend from the pedestal before they can make any impression upon the so-called lower classes. (*CWMG* Vol. 62: 122)

Gandhi demands that the upper caste Hindus should come down from the so-called high positions to build a just society. His effort to realise a casteless utopia involves changing the oppressors, demands their purification and warns about certain obstructions. The reformers may have to face social boycott and its consequences. He predicts change which may come in a “gradual and imperceptible” manner.

The city, as a utopia, offers a space where the poet can fall in adolescent love. In the poem “shaded love”, Patel writes:

in the shade of bougainvillea  
the lovers woo secretly  
oblivion of the angry sun outside  
like the pieces of coloured tracing paper  
the dried flower-petals  
are raining upon them incessantly.  
but no new word begins  
where this shade ends.  
.....  
of a sudden,  
some wild foot-strokes penetrate into their hearts...  
....as hunter flays the hide of deer

he slits apart their hugging  
and roars like a lion:  
“you love the person  
whose shadow we hate?”  
the sacred and innocent couple  
is pulled asunder. (2013:91)

The metaphor of “shade of bougainvillea” is suggestive of a kind of shelter where the caste searching “angry sun” does not enter. The vastness of the city can extend opportunity for a while, to hide caste identity; such chances are rarely possible in the village life, where everybody knows everybody by caste and personal names. But even in the city, the love making does not last long, the ‘angry sun’, the caste searching eye identifies the lovers and caste plays its role. They are parted. The city can provide a short-lived shelter; the ‘shade of bougainvillea’ cannot shelter the couple for long. The city provides the space to transcend/transgress the caste boundaries to find love. Here, the couple from different castes is united as one in their love, but this love is possible only in a partial seclusion. As soon as the caste Hindu family of the girl intrudes, the union is disrupted. The girl stand accused of two crimes; one, her act of loving without the permission of family; two, even more serious, is her crime of loving an untouchable. The second crime is more heinous, and the reaction borders on repulsion among the members of her family. So, even the seclusion offered by the city proves to be only temporary and caste finds its way to break up the lovers.

However, Patel does not discard the possibilities of a better world. He invites his upper caste friends to visit his place and feel the “pangs of woe” directly. He is willing to trust the humanity. His poem, “Self-introduction” reveals a Gandhian utopia. In the poem “Self-Introduction,” Patel writes:

be my guest someday, sawarna.

if you want to feel the pangs of woe  
come in the guise of untouchable.  
.....  
.....  
we can love each other  
if you can shed your orthodox skin.  
i am no leper.  
come and touch, we will make a new world  
where there, won't be any  
dust, dirt, poverty, injustice, oppressions. (2013:46)

Patel here visualises Gandhi's utopia and feels that the Dalits and the upper caste working together may change the world into a better place. As Gandhi, Patel also feels that to realize a utopia, the upper caste must "shed [his] orthodox skin". The poet, as it appears, urges the upper caste brethren to understand the Dalit predicament and identify with them. Patel points out that the most powerful obstacle in realising the dream is orthodoxy.

Like Gandhi, Ambedkar also realised that the orthodoxy on the part of upper caste is a major hindrance in realisation of equality and justice in the society and in creating an organic whole, "a unified life and consciousness." Ambedkar writes:

There is no Hindu consciousness of any kind. In every Hindu the consciousness that exists is the consciousness of caste. That is the reason why the Hindu cannot be said to form a society or nation...The Caste System prevents common activity and preventing common activity it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and consciousness of its own being. (2008: 93)

Patel's urge, "come and touch" reveals the state of Dalit-Sawarna relationship where untouchability is observed and intimate relationship embodied most by touch is denied. The poet is looking for a better world by creating a unified force with upper castes. He feels that as soon

as the orthodoxy vanishes, the way for the clean, just and benign state will open up. Yet the poem forecloses this possibility— this brave new world will open up only IF the upper castes want to feel pangs of woe. However, the condition of possibility remains unattainable; which oppressor would feel any urgent need to change the status quo? The poet's initial utterance, "If you want to feel the pangs of woe" indicates an inherent doubt, a condition that needs to be fulfilled. As it seems, from the modern Dalit poetry that the dream of utopia is largely a one sided dream, the upper castes do not feel any importunity to deal with the issue.

A utopia, as visualised by Dr Ambedkar, is of casteless society, where "respect and reverence to fellowmen" is a primary condition. He writes to outline a path for socialists, who wished to bring the social revolution:

He (a socialist) will be compelled to take account of caste after revolution if he does not take account of it before revolution. This is only another way saying that, turn in any direction you like; caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform; unless you kill this monster...Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards fellowmen. (Ambedkar 2008:92)

The assumption here is that every Dalit wishes to realise that utopia where "respect and reverence" prevails in its true sense. Ambedkar neither trusted in the 'purification theory' of Gandhi, nor its 'graduality' but he wants to bring change immediately by "killing the monster", by annihilating the caste system. His trust on modern democracy is immense, and he envisions democracy as "a mode of associate living". Ambedkar's trust on democracy comes from his knowledge that human beings are caught up with certain fundamental limitations of not having capacity of "assortment and classification". So it is necessary to impose a certain "rough-and-ready rule" to create the desired social conditions. However desirable and advisable it may be,

Ambedkar is not ready to trust an individual's capacity for purification. So, he inevitably forwards a practical tool of modern democracy to bring change in the status quo.

But, instead of being a tool to create a society of "equality and love", modern democracy, as it seems, has become the battle ground. As Ghanshyam Shah puts it:

The struggle for power and its distribution of power and resources constitute the major domain of politics. In democratic political system, participants assert their individual and/or collective rights and aspirations. They articulate an ideology and evolve strategies for maintaining the status quo in social order, or for bringing about social transformation. To attain these objectives they compete for power and influence.  
(2008: 01)

Shah observes that benign society is not a common goal, some want status quo and some want change. In this dichotomy of interests, confrontation among interest groups seems inevitable. Modern democracy, as described by Ambedkar, appears to have fallen short in its realisation of goals and in the realisation of his utopia.

Patel's poem, "Wailing in the Wilderness" expresses his concerns about change. Utopias, which were envisioned by Gandhi and Ambedkar, have neither realised changes in the rigid caste structure nor are its traces visible to him. He writes:

not only in jungles,  
but the beasts are everywhere,  
also in your neighbourhood-  
hornless,  
tailless,  
clawless  
biped,  
and totally resembling humans.  
these beasts enjoy civil rights,  
adorned with beautiful names,

like crests upon their ugly heads!  
they pounce upon our kids  
playing like squirrel's nurslings  
as hunting dog.  
they kill our full-blooded youngmen.  
they dream the smell of our flesh  
they push us into the ravines  
and oppress like the sheep in the confines.  
they drive us away with dislodged anchors  
shoving on the islets  
and we are thrown back miles away  
from the land of civilization.

.....  
.....

don't wait in vain hope  
for the incarnation after 1980 years.  
the deceptive hope will only breed  
more children of beasts  
now they play unbridled havoc.  
and under their authority  
we have to live the peaceful co-existence. (2013:78-79)

Patel here paints a dismaying picture with multiple images of violence. The time which he refers to in his concluding lines is the time of anti-reservation riots in Gujarat. So, it is not unreasonable to consider that the poem was written with the backdrop of the ant-reservation riots that occurred in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985.<sup>7</sup> Here, the utopias of Gandhi and Ambedkar are found to be unrealisable. They have taken the form of abstract utopias. The 'respect and reverence', or

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<sup>7</sup> A brief account of anti-reservation agitations is given in Chapter.2 "Gujarati Dalit Poetry: A Survey"



‘equality and love’ or the modern democratic system where the state is supposed to be a levelling agency, are all found flattened. Dalits are further pushed into ghettos, as images “they push us into the ravines’ and “Shoving on the islets” suggest. They are forced to live in congested *bastis* for their security. The anti-reservation riots against the Dalit community shattered the Dalits’ hope and Dalits are “thrown back miles away from the land of civilization.” Here, also the realisation of the dream, or a vision of concrete utopia, which was promised during the freedom struggle, has completely been delayed. The images which are used here in the poem intensify the effect of dejection. The images such as ‘push us into the ravines’, ‘sheep in the confines’, and ‘shoving on the islets’ remind us of the Dalit ghettos and segregated localities and the unbearable life there. While Dalits still have to live at the outskirts of village, in urban places too, they are segregated into slums and *chalis*. They have neither found geographical space nor a place in human hearts. Images like ‘hunting dog’, ‘smell of our flesh’, and ‘unbridled havoc’, create a horrific picture of the brutalities that Dalits have to undergo. In the concluding lines the poet discards the Gandhian position of “gradual and imperceptible” change by saying: “don’t wait in the vain hope.” The poet draws a picture completely contrary to Gandhi’s utopia. The violence and brutalities here are ‘immediate and perceptible’ and they have not been countered by the Gandhian ideology. The Dalit Panthers declared in 1973:

We do not want a little place in Brahman Alley. We want the rule of the whole country. Change of heart, liberal education will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle of this giant mass will come the tidal wave of revolution...To eradicate the injustice against Dalits, they themselves must become rulers. This is the people’s democracy. (Omvedt 2008a: 413)

Patel in the concluding line, abandoning any hope that rulers will eradicate injustice against Dalits, says “and under their authority we have to live the peaceful co-existence”. The irony of

the line is powerful that the democratic setup promises the peaceful coexistence, but here even the mere “existence” is at stake. The poem transforms the concrete utopias of Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers into abstract utopias; and exposes their unrealisable nature.

Patel’s poem, “a loom is broken” presents, at a metaphorical level, the impact of a new economy, the advent of capitalism and modernity in production. The poem focuses on how the complex of capitalism-industrialization has damaged the social and economic world of the artisan class in general and Dalits in particular.

now his eyes’ to- and -fro with the shuttle ceased.  
now on what texture  
the peacock of his dream  
would play and dance?  
on the woven half-moon  
on the scarf of his darling daughter is burnt away.  
the colour of the wet yarn is burning  
along with his colourful fantasies  
his age woven in the warp and woof  
is turned into the heaps of ashes.  
.....there burns the modesty of culture  
draped to the primitive humanity!  
now the frozen echo of tears in his eyes  
will glare in the darkness like lighted charcoal.  
now no more burning the midnight oil in his hut.  
they have broken his looms. (2013:34)

*Vankars* are a weaver caste. They work on looms and earn their livelihood by selling cloth. The loom is a symbol of Dalit life, of its tradition, of its economy and imagination. It is a symbol of

life itself. The ‘to and fro’ of the shuttle, its rhythmic voice, its threads, its design and dreams that follow are the product of Dalit life. Thousands of Dalit weavers clothed India and Indians by working on their looms. Though a loom suggests a specific Dalit caste, the weaver, it captures the image of craftsmanship and the hardship of life related to it. Weaving and spinning was the only profession in the whole range of traditional occupations that enabled Dalits to earn their livelihood independently. It allowed Dalits to interact with the upper caste members on equal business terms of selling and buying. Moreover, weaving was considered a less polluted occupation compare to sweeping, scavenging and tanning.

The poet intensifies the effect of dislocation by narrating what has been lost in the burning of looms. Dalit imagination gets form on looms and looms fulfill his material dreams too. The burning of a scarf which he prepared for his daughter suggests the breaking of his material dreams, hopes and aspirations. However, at the end, the poet suggests a feeling of revolt which is formulated as a “glare in the darkness like lighted charcoal”.

The poem gestures to the Vankars’ struggle to sustain their home-industry in the era of emerging capitalism and industrialization in India. New machines, mills and emerging textile industry had already pushed their occupation to the verge of extinction. Gandhi too had criticized the capitalist-modernity nexus. In *Hind Swaraj*, he underlines the effect of multiplication of machinery. The new technology eliminated whole artisan class and the rural forms of earning or made it redundant. Gandhi writes:

If the machinery craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land... Machinery is like a snake-hole which may contain from one to a hundred snakes. Where there is machinery there are large cities...I cannot recall a single good point in connection with machinery... If, instead of welcoming machinery as a boon, we should look upon it as an evil, it would ultimately go. (Gandhi 2003: 81, 83-84)

The new machine age removed the old forms of life. The destruction of weavers, metal workers, potters and other artisan classes was by and large inevitable in the capitalist modern society. Gandhi valued cottage industries as an organic structure of Indian society and as a counter to colonial modernity. He believed that the interdependency that emerges from it created harmony in society. For Gandhi, the web of relations that a cottage industry brings is the foundation of economic life, has the ability to satisfy hunger and strengthen co-existence in a very diverse social structure. Gandhi wrote:

I feel convinced that the revival of hand-spinning and hand-weaving will make the largest contribution to the economic and the moral regeneration of India. The millions must have a simple industry to supplement agriculture. Spinning was the cottage industry years ago, and if the millions are to be saved from starvation, they must be enabled to reintroduce spinning in their homes, and every village must repossess its own weaver. (CWMG Vol.18: 72)

Gandhi's critique of capitalist modernism operates at two levels. One, he advocates indigenous forms of economic practices as an argument against colonialism and two, he emphasizes the reintroduction of traditional forms of livelihood to keep the Indian social structure intact. His position is political, economic and social. As he mentioned:

The spinning wheel represents to me the hope of the masses. The masses lost their freedom, such as it was, with the loss of Charkha. The Charkha supplemented the villagers and gave it dignity. It was friend and solace of the widow. *It kept the villagers from the idleness.* For the Charkha included all the anterior and posterior- ginning, carding, sizing, dyeing and weaving. There in their turn kept village carpenter and the blacksmith busy. The Charkha enabled the seven hundred thousand villages to become self-contained. (CWMG Vol.71: 410 emphasis added)

Gandhi perceived indigenous artisan practices from the economic and social perspective. His faith in spinning wheel was based on it being the traditional occupation of millions of Indians either as a main or alternate craft. He believed that it was the rise of the industrial capitalism

which resulted in the loss of these traditional occupations. In a way, Gandhi's propagation of spinning wheel was anchored firmly within the framework of industrial capitalism and by extension in his politics of anti-colonialism.

For him, as the above quote shows, spinning wheel is intricately linked to the economic affairs of the people and society. When he speaks of the loss of freedom of people, he is evidently talking about the economic freedom of the people. Spinning wheel, for Gandhi, was the symbol and tool of people's freedom. In fact, for Gandhi, the loss of spinning wheel also results in the loss of proper 'subject' in the society, for people, as he says, tend to become idle and for Gandhi idleness is nothing short of a vice. It is only with the spinning wheel that the vitality of the people can be found and village societies of India can be made economically self-sufficient again.

The limitation of Gandhi's argument is its panoptic view of the problem of the loss of spinning wheel. Gandhi is not able to see what spinning wheel or loom means for a particular people, the Vankar caste. It is here that Patel's poem captures the tragedy and pathos which has engulfed the Vankar. For the Vankar, loom is not merely an instrument of economic freedom or self-sufficiency; it is rather the axis on which his entire social and cultural world moves. The loom is the center of every dream of the weaver in the poem. It defines his desires, fantasies and dreams. It defines the contours of his relationship with his daughter. The destruction of the loom is the destruction of the entire cultural world of the Vankar.

Further, Patel does not stop at the cultural world of the Vankars but goes ahead to make a far greater claim in the history of mankind. Patel's Vankar was the person who clothed the primitive man and so, it is the Vankar who should be credited as the harbinger of civilization. Industrial capitalism has not only destroyed the loom but also erased this glorious history of the

civilization. This personal, social and cultural tragedy and pathos of the Vankar has no place in Gandhi's propagation of the spinning wheel or his mourning of its loss. This poem can be read as a response to Gandhi's generalized mourning.

Thus, Patel's dealing with the themes of modernity and urban space, opens up the inner layers of Dalit's life and makes us journey through the internal terrain of the Dalit's world.

### **Neerav Patel' Poetry and the Question of Documentation:**

Many incidents and historical events that are turning points in the history of Dalit suffering and caste struggle are often revealed through literature. Dalit and non-Dalit poets try to document such events in their respective works. This is partly because these histories cannot be found in the mainstream. Poetry on particular issues gives a clear understanding of the Dalit perspective. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature* quote Thomas Warton (1728-1790), a historian of English poetry, that literature has the "peculiar merit of faithfully recording the features of the times and preserving the most picturesque and expressive representation of manners" (Wellek and Warren: 98). Literary histories do engage with the social and political at at least two levels. At one level, the great historical figures and monuments often become the subject matter of poetry. At another level, the impact of various social and political changes is also reflected in literatures of the world. Dalit Gujarati literature is no exception.

Patel, along with other Dalit poets, often attempts to document important incidents in his poetry. His poem, "Curse of Untouchability" depicts his personal world and relates it with the larger issues of Dalit modes of articulations. He writes:

it occurred to me to remain illiterate  
was far better than writing such a story.  
rather than the educated

and end up with awareness  
of insult, contempt, torture  
or mature inertness—  
it is better remaining illiterate  
with freedom to strike the unjust  
on head with a cross-bar.  
or intoxicated with mahudi swallow insolence! (Burke *et al* 69)

This poem was published in the issue of *Aakrosh*. Later, it was published in English by the Dalit Panthers in an anthology *What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue* (1987).

The part of the poem quoted here is a monologue; it is the concluding part of a long poem. The poet feels that in spite of education and a refined life style, he continues to suffer/face insult, contempt and torture. Instead of writing a story of his own agony and pain, he wants to remain illiterate. Literacy brings unwanted refinement and compulsion to use state-certified weapons to fight the caste system. This never works out for the poor and the marginalized. But by remaining illiterate, at one level the poet thinks that he can escape from the realization of inhumanities, and at another level, he wants to use simpler unauthorized weapons to deal with the casteist forces, or tolerate what injustice comes to him in the intoxication of liquor. Thus, the poem expresses prevailing confusion among Dalits regarding the proper way to react against the caste system. Should they follow the democratic path after getting education or without wasting time follow the militant path, or remain intoxicated in status quo? The poet here mirrors his own self as a representative of the community. He puts forward options but does not come to any conclusion. The churning, ‘what to do?’ is quite visible in Dalit poetry. A.K Dodiya, a Dalit poet also expresses his views on ‘what to do?’ in a poem, “Talk About”:

Talk about the air which is worth breathing,  
Talk about a mirror and a lamp.

.....  
Where they hoard our rightful things,  
Talk about breaking those treasures.  
I agree that we are at the bottom,  
Talk about rising above the sky. (Misra 68)

Dodiya, similar to Patel, thinks about the path. The images of a mirror and a lamp, suggest two major devices, ‘reflection’ and ‘enlightenment’, to go forward in the battle of liberation. Patel uses a mirror to determine where he is and undergoes a kind of frustration but his frustration does not hold too much.<sup>8</sup> His intention to withdraw from writing ‘such a story’ is countered by Dodiya’s poem “You Write”. He says, as it appears, by addressing to Dalit writers and poets:

The caravans will move towards the sun  
You write such a thought piercing the night.  
Our suffering have remained unwritten  
Write; do write all the incidents in detail.  
The eye that discriminates between man and man  
Write the scorn of whole human race. (Misra 69)

The writing is considered here as a weapon to reach at expected destination of liberation. The metaphors such as “Move towards the sun” and “To pierce night” suggest the way out of the tension felt by Patel’s frustrated and quandary position. The desire to document the suffering prevails across the geographical regions among the Dalit poets and authors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>It is important to remember that *Mirror and the Lamp* is also an important book on romantic movement in English literature authored by M.H. Abrams.

<sup>9</sup> Yashvant Manohar, the Marathi poet, for example, in his poem “I’m Ready For Revolt” sings in the same theme:

I’ am burning with a feeling for revolt  
and I call out to you  
I will write the poem of revolt on your sword  
Today I have become a storm-come with me!  
I reach out to you—give me your hand!  
I have become the sun, my friend—sing with me!  
.....



Indifference towards Dalit issues has not been only confined to mainstream literature but also to the journalism. The elite-controlled literature and media has no interest in the socio-economic and political questions which Dalits face every day of their life. Media could be an effective tool which can address the issues related to the ‘voiceless’ Dalits. It is necessary for the people of the oppressed classes to get their voice heard through media: print or electronic. For a genuine media set-up, it is desirable to give space to diverse views. For this, it is necessary to involve different sections of the society and their issues. As the fourth pillar of a democratic society, it should provide opportunity to the marginalised sections to debate their issues and concerns. But generally it has been seen that the marginalised groups like Dalits are excluded from that media space or misrepresented. For instance, the Khairlanji rape and murder case in Maharashtra in 2006 was not reported for many days. Later on, it was reported with distorted facts (Teltumde 2009). In Gujarat, news of the Sambarda migration (1989) was often blacked out. Patel’s poem “Journalistic Apathy” addresses the issue related to the exclusion of Dalit view points from the media. He says:

it’s neither glossy, nor glamorous,  
not chic, not debonair  
like surrealist’s imagination of anatomy  
it’s clumsy, distorted and nauseating.  
but bleeding wound on the forehead  
is hot red.

---

I’m out of my senses, out of control  
Make me a limitless sky with words. (Manohar in Dangle 1992:113)

Manohar wants to write a poem of revolt. To infuse the message of Dalit emancipation, it is necessary to reach out to every member and only writing has the potential of reaching to the masses. Dalit writing as a mode of protest and as a political activity has its own implications for the whole movement of liberation. The poets and authors in Dalit literature are closely linked with social and political activities. Literature is the tool towards emancipation. In Maharashtra, many authors and poets were simultaneously active in Dalit Sahitya and in the Dalit Panthers (Hardtmann 2010: 72).

.....

it never claimed for headline or hotline—  
the teleprinter went on tick-ticking the sports-flashes,  
the camera feasted on the nude beaches.  
the poor head of harijan!  
it is compassionate as the  
wrinkled face of Mother Teresa,  
darkness has settled like dust  
upon the sad face of agony—  
it carves for lime light,  
Miss Anees Jung—  
make it cover page agony. (2013:56)

Patel here desperately urges the media to look at Dalits' plight. As he puts, for media, priorities are grossly misplaced. For them glamour and pomp, sensation and fashion are more important than compassion. Atrocities on the marginalised rarely catch the headline of the newspapers or TVs. At the end of the poem, he names Anees Jung, a lady journalist, just as representative of her class and wishes her to cover Dalits' predicament. This poem has a historical reference too. When Anees Jung worked at *The Times of India* for *Youth Times* in 1979, on November 27, 1979 a Dalit leader and his son were brutally murdered at Mandala village of Dabhoi taluka. So, Patel might have indicated her name because her column, probably, did not give space to the brutal incident that took place in Gujarat. Patel's poem does not generalise the matter, but at a certain level it addresses the particular person and incidents. Such particularity makes his poetry significant 'evidence' in the reading of Dalit history.

Patel's poem "Sickly Medicos" brings us some accounts of the anti-reservation riots that occurred in 1981. Patel carefully employs the form of poetry to deal with the history. Generally,

poetry deals with the imaginative world, with probabilities, with what may happen; but using historical material in the poetry form; Patel, in a way, innovates the new genre. Poetry ceases to be merely an imaginative domain and acquires the form of reportage, and deals with reality. His poetry becomes a repository of Dalit history and their reaction to the contemporary scenario. When the incidents related to Dalits' life do not get visibility in contemporary account or mainstream history, there is an urgent need for documentation. Patel's poetry attempts to document certain important events to peep into for the posterity. Patel writes:

sickly medicos went mad one day-  
first they tore off the scroll of hypocrites  
and inserted into their anus, tail-like.  
then started ransacking, raiding  
and razed the ground.....  
.....  
poor dalits, the reservationists!  
left their burning bastis  
like migratory birds  
in search of shelter, food and friendship.  
.....  
dr Bharati Achyut bravely played her solo  
of dissentful distress...  
Girish Patel offered  
a column full of smelling potion  
to the swooned medicos  
in the hope they regain  
sense and sensibility  
justice thakkar prayed with folded hands  
not to play the game of fire.

a frail fakir bhanu adhwaryu  
 (beloved of harijans and girijans)  
 oracularly opened the mouth  
 for the deliverance of the downtrodden dalits....  
 Ramesh Menon cornered the culprit in the newsprint....  
 Manishi, the young and Hirabhai Parmar,  
 the lone dalit mp  
 choked with agony of anguished  
 ..... (2013: 106-9)

The anti-reservation riots of 1981 broke out from B. J. Medical College, Ahmedabad. The doctors, against their general reputation in society as saviours of humanity, demonstrated violently against the government's reservation policy. The poet describes their violent protest at length and with details in the poem. Patel gives us the list of the people who stand with the Dalits and shared their views against the violence and the anti-reservationist stand of the caste Hindus. Patel notes that Dr. Bharti Achyut, without supporting her fraternity, voiced her dissent. Girish Patel, a lawyer and activist, by writing columns and letters with powerful and convincing arguments in the print media bravely justified the reservation policy. Justice Thakkar, extending his official duty as a judge, personally appealed the rioters to restrain. Bhanu Adhwaryu, an editor of the magazine, *Naya Marg*, allowed the Dalit writers and poets to articulate their views through the pages of his magazine. The poet also remembers the support of Ramesh Menon, a newspaper editor; Manishi Jani, a poet and activist; and Hirabhai Parmar, a Member of Parliament for their active participation in defending the concept of reservation and in criticising the brutalities.

Patel's depiction of the history makes him a poet who consciously attempts to bring the unaddressed in to the light. His effort is to give solidity or a literary form to the historical. He

renders Dalit's perception of the 'wiped out' historical content. His attempts to write, publish, republish, and finally translate the historical content keep the events alive in the social sphere. Eventually, Patel assumes the role of a story-teller and a historian, who reviews and revives history and does not allow it to be lost as a wilful amnesia. He depicts facts in the form of fiction as Chinua Achebe does for his Igbo people. Achebe successfully presents the confrontation of his people with Europe.<sup>10</sup> Patel, as an insider who experiences the brutalities from the subjective perspective and position, attempts to ameliorate the condition of his injured community finds itself in through his poetry. He takes all 'risks' in educating and regenerating his society for its right. His role as a chronicler is as valuable as that of an academic historian. He recreates truth to counter the malice version of mainstream media or silence of mainstream literati.

Neerav Patel and many other Dalit poets realise the importance of documentation. They frequently note the details of the incidents in the poetic form to make people aware about it by singing or reciting the poem. Patel has documented an incident of murder of a Dalit young boy by caste Hindus at Jetalpur village near Ahmedabad in 1981. The poem, "Jetalpur massacre: A Report" was first published in *Aakrosh*. Later it was published in the first anthology of Gujarati Dalit poetry, *Dalit Kavita* (1981). The anthology itself was a bold intervention during the anti-reservation riots in 1981. The incident of Jetalpur, which Patel documented in poetic form, is considered by many to be the beginning of the anti-reservation riots. Patel's active participation

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<sup>10</sup> See Chinua Achebe. "The Novelist as Teacher." *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.40-46. Print

in the Dalit Panthers' activities led him to depict this incident.<sup>11</sup> The Dalit Panthers proved the strength of Dalit unity in Jetalpur where a Dalit youth, Shakrabhai was burnt alive. This incident aroused caste solidarity to a height among Dalits and made Dalit writers and activists protest against the casteist forces. Patel composed a long poem, depicting minute details of the incident. He reported:

In the shivering cold of winter,  
Farms were sleeping noiselessly,  
After driving the foxes away,  
Shakaro was sleeping on the grass,  
.....  
Suddenly a screaming,  
Owl cried,  
.....  
He was pulled into the village,  
In the gram Panchayat,  
Patel was ready with match-box,  
Kadavo poured kerosene,  
Someone held his hand,  
And someone put his leg on his neck,  
Now Holi is on,  
Shakro became a flame,  
.....  
And the whole village was basking itself... (Patel 1981: 38)

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<sup>11</sup> See for a fuller account of the incident, Atul Parmar. "Gujarati Dalit Writing: Question of Narrative and Translation." (Ph.D.) Diss. The M.S. University of Baroda, 2014. 244-258. Print.

The poem not only depicts the ghastly act of murder but also suggests its cold-bloodedness. Shakrabhai was an agriculture labourer who was keeping vigil at a farm. He was political in the sense that he often attempted to demand the minimum wages for Dalit labourers. His activism might have made the caste Hindu furious and he was burnt alive in the panchayat office. Moreover, Jetalpur is also historically important because the first attempt to organize Dalits under the banner of the Dalit Panthers was made here. The Dalits formed a loose co-operative *Shramjivi Sahkari Mandali* (Labourers' cooperative society) and demanded village waste-land for cultivation. It was granted for a year, but before the end of the term the land was allotted to the forest department. The Dalits united and demonstrated under the leadership of Dalit Panthers. The unity of Dalits caused frequent clashes between Dalits and the Patels, the land owning community. The feudal mind-set of the Patel led them to attack the most vocal voice of the Dalits, Shakrabhai. Patel's narration of the event and aftermath is full of visual images. The publication of this poem made Dalits and non-Dalits aware about the incident and made many people identify with the Dalits. Manishi Jani, a non-Dalit poet and activist comments on Patel's poem:

After reading "Jetalpur Hatyakand: Ek Dastavej" [Jetalpur Massacre: A Report] again and again I feel that how Neerav Patel has made the temperament of the poem, so penetrating and pervading while linking the local, political, social and religious wickedness with an event of oppression of a Dalit. Repetition of certain statements and sentences give it a specific harmony. (2013: xiii)

Patel's poem, "Jetalpur Massacre: A Report" was taken as a criminal offence by the authorities. The poet and the editor of *Aakrosh* were arrested and presented before the court. The prosecution, after quoting some lines of the poem demanded judicial custody and remand for further inquiry.

they ( the caste hindus) appointed Havard's L.L.M,

appointed clever chankya,  
appointed brave birbal,  
appointed palkhiwala  
appointed pakhalwala,  
poor judge urinates by hearing these names. (in Jani 2013: xiii)

The lines, they quoted, suggested that the caste Hindus appointed reputed and learned advocates to defend their case of Shakra's murder and influence the judge. But fortunately the judge did not sanction remand or custody by commenting that "remand cannot be given for poetry writing" (Jani 2013: xiii). The social history of the Dalit community or the atrocities on them is not attempted in an academic manner, but such incidents are preserved in the literary forms.

The cases of caste discrimination and atrocities of Golana and Ranamalpur (1974) are also documented by various poets. The poets such as Neerav Patel, Harish Manglam, Parveen Gadhvi, Chandu Maheriya, Arvind Vegda, Sahil Parmar, B.N. Vanakar, Shankar Painter etc. were also engaged in social activism along with their literary activities. The caste solidarity has provided a cover of protection at many places.

Dalit poetry, in particular, is indeed a record of caste discriminations that the marginalized as a whole pass through. Dalit poetry, personal or impersonal, deals with what is felt by the community as a whole, how the discrimination hurts and arouses a kind of contempt. Dalit poetry has proved to be an important historical document as it reveals the social truth with its factual description and images. Thus, Dalit poetry offers the parallel history which contextualizes Dalit life experience in the context of contemporary political and social life. The richness of the written Dalit expressions makes it easy to understand a different notion of culture, a culture of protest and resistance.



## Alliances, Violence and Neerav Patel's Poetry:

To fight the hostile upper caste forces, Dalits formed a kind of class alliance with Muslims. Their living in the nearby localities and working together in the textile mills provided them the space to share class problems. Having same level of socio-economic and educational conditions, they could build a loose alliance based on sympathy for each other. Moreover, in the political domain, Muslims and Dalits were sharing an equal imaginative space in the policies of ruling Congress Party in Gujarat during 1980s. The then chief Minister, Madhavsinh Solanki's political strategy of KHAM theory was inclusive of Dalits and Muslims.<sup>12</sup> During the anti-reservation riots in 1981, Muslims stood with the Dalits and at many places they fought together against the anti-reservationists. Patel's poem, "They let loose the world" expresses his concern over increasing communalism and its effect on Dalits and Muslims. He says:

they say  
that the wall-writing is vulgar and  
provocative;  
'Dalit- Muslim bhai bhai'—  
the brotherhood of the depressed and  
the persecuted,  
the class-collaborators,  
the unholy alliance.  
and let loose the word:  
they say  
themanu's pyramid is shaking

---

<sup>12</sup> KHAM is a political theory which focuses on the political alliance of Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims. See for detailed discussion, Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Seth. *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva and Beyond*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. 252-276. Print.

.....

the day of qayamat is near  
for the great Aryan civilization is at stake  
and they let loose the world:  
teach them lesson.

.....

and i find  
charred pages of Koran  
and mulla-topees  
and corpses of ashes  
under the large dome of  
maleksaban mosque

.....

and set afire  
the ghettos of allah fearing-Garibnagar  
and bhagavan fearing-Dalitnagar,

.....

god is not in heaven  
and everything is not well in the world. (2013: 43-46)

The alliance, which was taking shape between Muslims and Dalits, threatened the right-wing Hindus. The poem narrates the attack by hegemonic forces on the class-based alliance. Achyut Yagnit *et al* notes:

This new formula, known as KHAM, was an electoral combine of Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasis and Muslims, in the numbers game these four communities formed 56 per cent of the total population of the

state.... The KHAM formula was successful beyond imagination.... For the first time in history of Gujarat there was not a single Patidar minister with Cabinet rank. A Dalit was sent to the Union Cabinet as minister of state for home. Further for the first time a tribal was made a Cabinet minister in Gujarat and that too with the irrigation portfolio...The Brahmins and Vaniyas, it appeared that their age-old political power was slipping away and was transferred to *pachchat* or backward castes and communities. (254-255)

The political empowerment of Dalits was the cause of irritation for the upper caste. It threatened their “surplus recognition.” The growing alliance among the marginalized communities as mentioned by Patel in his poem as ‘depressed and persecuted’ was another issue of concern for the dominant communities. The writing on the wall, ‘Dalit-Muslim bhai bhai’, a marker of growing affinity between Dalits and Muslims, was really a provocation to the upper caste Hindus and more especially to the right wing Hindu political outfits. The right wing political parties like Jan Sangh had been continuously attempting to acquire the political space. So, to counter KHAM formula, they started an agitation against the reservation policy to consolidate the upper castes in 1981. It started as a student demonstration from the B.J. Medical College, Ahmedabad but soon it was converted into a political agitation which later got the shape of caste and communal riots. Patel’s poem gives us a picture of the way ‘Manu’s pyramid’ was considered under the threat. This led to sharp reaction from the right wing Hindu organizations. The class-collaborations of poor of the society have become ‘unholy’ for them and they ransacked both ‘Garibnagar’ and ‘Dalitnagar’. The class alliances are obviously provocative to the capitalist world. Patel here overlaps the caste and class. At one level he mentions about the ‘Manu’s pyramid’ and Aryan civilization’ as markers of a caste based social structure. At another level, he talks about ‘brotherhood of the depressed and the persecuted’ as a class solidarity indicator. Thus, the discourse suggests how Dalits have to fight both caste and class struggle simultaneously. Moreover, for a Dalit poet, it has been quite uncomfortable to take positions on communal

matters. Muslims, with whom they have formed a class alliance, may be found on the opposite side while dealing with the communal politics because in Gujarat, unlike Maharashtra, Dalits have not been detached from Hinduism at any point of time. So, when the casteist forces wage the war in the name of Hinduism, Dalits feels a natural confusion to take a position. Moreover, the right wing organizations such as VHP, RSS, Bajrang Dal, ABVP, have systematically attempted to break the Dalit-Muslim alliance by drawing Dalits into socio-religious activities. Moreover, after the anti-reservation agitations and violent attacks on Dalits, these organizations realized their strategic flaw and began to work among the Dalits. The slogan of these organizations '*Hum Sab Hindu Ek Hai*' (We all Hindus are united) now found its place on the wall.

In another poem, Patel looks through the latest development how Dalits are moving towards the Hindu rightwing socio-political organizations. He expresses his worries in his poem, "bal swayamsevak: child volunteer":

they came in the dalit colony  
with the slogan of samarasata  
integration of all caste of all castes into a single community  
called Hindu.  
first they put a chocolate  
in the pocket of his khaki chaddi.  
then a piece of chalk.  
quite like a child,  
he scribbled in the back-board a line  
he had learnt from his school-going elder sister:  
'India is my country and all Indians are my brothers and sisters.'  
they were startled at the child's natural sense of fraternity!  
'these children must first be taught the stories of good and evil':

Aryas and Anaryas, Devas and Danava, Suras and Asuras,  
 Ramas and Rakshasas, Adityas and Daityas, Sadharmis and Vidharmis,  
 very proudly he now thrust a trishool,  
 a trident into his white shirt's pocket.  
 and goes with great zeal to his shakhas's daily morning shibirs.  
 as a bal swayamsevak of samarasata andolan.  
 a child volunteer for integration campaign. (2013: 66)

If we see in the socio-political context, it seems that Dalits in Gujarat are torn between two main political ideologies, a secular democracy represented by Indian National Congress and the Hindu right-wing led by BJP and its sister organizations, eventually the marginalized could not establish an alternative that leads them to the Ambedkarite positions. The political opportunism and 'open to be infatuated conditions,' in the later part of the twentieth century allowed Dalits to identify themselves with 'Gandhian' socio-political movements. After the 1990s, more specifically, during and after violent agitations around the controversial issue of Ramjanmbhoomi-Babri mosque in Ayodhya, the neo-educated Dalits found space in Hindu right-wing movements. Patel's poem "bal sawayamsevak, child volunteer", expresses the emergence of Hindu right-wing in Dalit colonies. On the name of '*Hum Sab Hindu EK Hai*', *samarasata*, social integration, Dalits are infested with 'trishool' in their pockets. The catchy slogans of *samarasata*, and very presence of upper castes in Dalit colonies, offering Dalits some 'chocolates', means some political and organizational posts, made Dalits identify them with the upper caste politics. The moral stories of 'good and evil' eventually led the Dalits towards the binary of '*Sadharmis* and *Vidharmis*' and made them eclipse the binary of "high and low" or "touchable and untouchable". All these strategic moves made Dalits operate within the communalist framework and positioned them against the Muslims, who were once with them in their class struggle.

While expressing his concerns, Asgar Ali Engineer, a social activist, remarks:

In all major communal riots it has been observed that Dalits participate in Hindu-Muslim riots on behalf of Hindus, especially the Dalit youth. In North India the Valmiki are invariably used against Muslims. In Maharashtra of course Mahars who follow Ambedkar's ideology by and large resist the Shiv Sena attempt to assume anti-Muslim posture.....in 1985 riots in Ahmedabad again; the Dalit youth were used by the Sangh Parivar to attack Muslims. When I questioned Waljibhai about it he expressed his helplessness and said that these youth do not listen to us. (2004)

So, in a sense, the Dalit movement became weak and again it diverted itself from the core issue of social equality and became a victim of other's 'agenda'. Earlier the Gandhian leadership used them for political purposes without doing much at social level. Politics made them confront with the Caste Hindu anti-reservationists in Gujarat in 1981. Later in the 1980s, due to the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad other places, and in the 1990s due to communal politics of the right wing political parties and Hindu organizations, and frequent Hindu-Muslim communal clashes; the rift between Dalits and Muslims has become wider and the class solidarity between them has been damaged severely.

The right-wing political groups used the marginalized communities like Dalits, Adivasis and Vagharis to fulfil communal agendas in 1992 and 2002. These marginalised groups allowed themselves to be used as they perceived it as a marker of upward mobility. Romila Thapar notes in the context of the marginalized groups joining the Hindutva forces as:

In Gujarat, its recent recruitment of the OBCs (Other Backward Castes), Dalits, and tribal people as abettors in the murder and plunder of citizens had an echo of conquest and conversion, with the aspiration of upward social mobility providing incentive. (2010: 192)

The emergence of new 'cultural nationalism' advocated by the right-wing organizations needed a kind of detachment of Dalits from the 'democratic nationalism' promoted by Ambedkar and 'spiritual nationalism' promoted by Gandhi. The 'cultural nationalism' sought unity of Hindus

on the ground of religion, not on the basis of humanity in general. The Gandhian ideology might have yet attracted Dalits because it offered Dalits a medium of social equality on the name of ‘removal of untouchability’ programmes as Gandhi says:

Anyway, in battling against untouchability and dedicating myself to that battle, I have no less an ambition than to see a complete regeneration of humanity. (*CWMG* Vol. 54:187)

On the other hand, Dalits might have been attracted towards the right-wing groups because the proponents of ‘cultural nationalism’ like the RSS chief, Balasaheb Deoras offers another option as he writes:

This barrier of ‘casteism’ can be broken... in the morning or evening they would be playing and singing together in the Shakha and imbibing the faith that all are patriots having a common meeting ground. (Jaffrelot 2011: 189)

In moving from one ‘camp’ to another, apart from the political reasons, the urge for equality remains the core and fundamental issue. But, as it seems, unfortunately for Dalits, both the Gandhian and the communal forces have effectively blunted the thirst of the Ambedkarite movement and have deviated from the goal of ‘annihilation of caste’. This has eventually put the movement on the verge of diffusion. In pursuing ‘equality of castes’ Dalits, as it appears, have left behind the larger goal, the ‘casteless society’. Equality of caste entails permanent existence of castes whereas casteless society seeks annihilation of caste system.

On the other hand, the caste Hindu dominated right-wing forces relentlessly tried to recapture ‘a slipping ground’, by re-establishing their hegemony in more direct and brutal ways. Omvedt warns all marginalised by saying:

In destroying the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, the forces of *Hindutva* declaration of caste war, not simply an assault on the Muslim community...the “Dharma Sansad” was being posed as higher than the people’s parliament. This was a declaration of war against dalits, adivasis, women, the bahunjan samaj, the

toiling and productive castes and classes who have always been held as inferior by *Varnasharama dharma*.  
(2008b: viii)

The authority of courts was challenged and the voice of the parliament was undermined by the Hindu nationalist organizations. That is why the writers such as Omvedt read the whole Hindutva movement in the context of marginalized communities. Their worry is that the undermining of democratic judiciary and law making bodies starts the ultimate loser will be the marginalized. However, in the context of Gujarat, though some Dalits identified themselves with the right-wing politics and a major blows was delivered when some founder leaders of the Dalit Panther joined the right-wing politics in Maharashtra; the positioning of the Dalit Panther and its literary activities remained unchanged but has to address these diversions. Patel reflects his position from the point of view of class, leaving some traces of communalism to it, and identifies himself with contemporary conditions of both Dalits and Muslims.

### **Neerav Patel's Poetry and Dalit Sub-Caste Consciousness:**

In the 1970s and 1980s Vankars (weavers), Chamars (leather workers) and Bhangis (sweepers) were working together in cotton mills in Ahmadabad and other places. They were mostly allotted the same work in the mills, weaving or spinning. They were drawing “higher salaries than those on offer at that time in other trades” (Breman 2001). Their better economic condition provided them chances to liberate themselves from severe deprivation. They could spend money on their children's education. They could take the benefit of government schools earlier than the other Dalit castes. It is rightly observed by a group of researchers:

It was a promise of release from conditions of extreme wretchedness, both economic and social, in the villages, of possible if partial anonymity from crippling caste identities that held them down in their homes.



Work in the textile mills of Gujarat is strenuous and hard, and yet waves after waves of Dalits have left their villages and gone to the mills of the town and cities. (Franco *et al* 144)

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

But after the closure of mills in the late 1980s and in the 1990s, the Vankars and Chamars both had to face state of economic crisis. The Bhangis, who were mostly engaged in low jobs in mills, could be absorbed into sweepers jobs in government offices or in private firms, which was their traditional occupation but Vankars and Chamars had to face a more acute challenge because they could not fall back upon their ancestral occupation of weaving or leather work in that the changed economic and industrial atmosphere.

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

On the other hand, the Bhangis that is Valmikis are in the same place where they were a century before. They have not changed their occupations "because they feel powerless to resist,

and because alternative occupations are either not available or not remunerative occupations and secure. In some cases, the weight of oppression also means that they may accept their caste role without any resistance” (Shah 2008: 110).

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

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

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

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

.....

at the gate of Jodhpur castle,

King Gajaraajsinh is standing with garlands,

to welcome the vice chancellor dr. Shyamlal

.....

the statue of Manu is burning with shame-

a valmiki has become a vice chancellor

a chamarin has become the queen of ayodhya

(and) a dalit, Narayan is the king of nation. (Patel 2003: 24)

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

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

My lord honoured my hundi-<sup>13</sup>  
How shall I perform Gagli's wedding ceremonies otherwise?  
My oath to deity chavanda bore fruits  
And the young garasani died.  
They draped her corpse with a shroud of red gavan.<sup>14</sup>  
Flames of her funeral pyre are burning red  
And the red gavan is waving at the akda bush!  
Gagli's mother is smiling bitchy!  
Let them turn their back  
And I shall run to the funeral ghat.  
My lord honoured my hundi. (Patel 1987: 08)

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<sup>13</sup> *Hundi* is a kind of promissory note which was used during pre-modern time for economic transactions. In the poem, *Hundi* has a mythological reference. Narsinh Mehta, a mediaeval Bhakti poet of Gujarat, wrote a poem called “Kuvabai nu Mameru”. In the poem, he requests the lord Krishna to help him in his daughter, Kuvabai's marriage. At the time of marriage, the lord Krishna himself appears in a disguise of his friend and helps Narsinh Mehta to pay dowry for his daughter's marriage. Mehta calls it as a ‘Shamaliya ni hundi’, a promissory note by God himself so there is no chance of it ‘bouncing back’. Neerav Patel uses this mythological reference in a different way to enhance the effect of his poem and with the same time he turns the myth on its head.

<sup>14</sup> *Gavan* is a kind of saree generally worn on marriages in Gujarat. However, when a woman dies in her young age, instead of white shroud, the red *gavan* is used for her last rites.

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

In Gujarat, the hierarchy within the Dalits is very sharp and narrow. It is a major hindrance in achieving unity to wage war against the larger evil, the caste system. Patel writes:

It is everybody's knowledge that dalit is not a homogenous community; it is divided in different castes and sub-castes, one above the other and one below the other with the notion of superior or inferior status. There is no unity or fraternity among them; they are equally loyal to their caste as are Hindu castes. They practice segregation and untouchability. They have their own separate housing societies, their own separate caste councils, separate bhajan mandalis, mahila mandalis. Admission to their ghetto is restricted and reserved for their caste. (Patel 2011: 19)

The identity 'Dalit' has not been able to eradicate the sub-caste consciousness. It has just remained a political identity. At the social level, it has more to do. The main castes which constitute the Dalit community are Vankar, Chamar and Bhangi. The Vankars consider themselves higher than the other Dalit castes. Their traditional occupation, weaving was not considered as impure or polluted as that of the Chamars or the Bhangis. Vankars are at the top of the Dalit caste hierarchy. They are the elites among the Dalits. Most of the leading Gujarati Dalit writers such as Dalpat Chauhan, Mohan Parmar, Harish Manglam, Ganapat Parmar, B.N. Vankar

etc., come from this community. Neerav Patel opines, while discussing novels by five Gujarati Dalit novelists; “The dalit experience portrayed in these novels can hardly be considered as complete. All the five novelists incidentally belong to one gender and come from the predominant vankar caste which is at the top of the dalit pyramid and more backward castes like chamar and bhangis and many others are yet to articulate. One shade cannot create rainbows: let hundred flowers bloom to bring the spring” (Kothari 2001). Here Patel clearly indicates the prevailing graded inequality among the Dalits. The fruits of education are still a dream for many. Their voice in literature is yet to be articulated. Like Bhangis, the Toories, Ravaliyas, Vagharis and many more have not got any opportunity to bring any significant progress in their socioeconomic spheres.

Ambedkar was also against such kind of ‘graded inequality’ within the dominated castes. He argued that the dominated that remain divided cannot fight effectively against the oppressors. Ambedkar analyses the graded inequality and warns:<sup>15</sup>

In a system of graded inequality, the aggrieved parties are not on a common level [...]. In a system of grade inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vishya). Below the high are the low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). .... The high wants to over-throw the higher who is above him but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. (BAWS Vol. 5: 101-2)

The condition, which Ambedkar described, still exists. The elites of the Dalit in Gujarat are the Vankars and Chamars. Their attitude towards the other downtrodden caste is not justifiable in

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<sup>15</sup> See B.R. Ambedkar. “Untouchables or the Children of India’s Ghetto.” *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches*. Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989, pp101-102. Print.

any way. The ‘graded inequality’ or sub-caste consciousness has proved to be a curse on the lowest of the low castes. They have been facing multi-layered discrimination. This caste system, as Ambedkar puts it, “has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and it has made common action impossible.”<sup>16</sup> It was his introspection and deep study that he put before his people with concern.

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

These Vankars have dug out a well within ten days, but these big brothers! they consider themselves even purer than Brahmins. It is possible to fetch water from the pond but if we take water from these Vankar’s well their well becomes polluted! (Joshi 153)

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<sup>16</sup> See B.R. Ambedkar. “Held at Bay.” *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writing and Speeches*. Vol. 5, Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989, p266. Print.

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

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

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

The democratisation of education provided an opportunity to some of the Dalit castes to make some progress. Many others could not benefit from it. The benefited few have created a new Dalit middle class which is torn between mainstream ethos and their past. The urge for identity leads them mostly to change their names, occupations and localities. However, all these practices have been proved futile efforts for the Dalits. On one hand, Dalits, tired of segregation and humiliation, try to hide their caste identity. On the other hand they want to maintain their relation with their past and caste identity. As Kothari argues: "Disassociation from the

community results in non-participation in building an infrastructure for other suffering members of the dalit community” (Kothari: 2001). Patel, it seems that, to save himself from being marked as Chamar by the upper castes changed his caste name and personal name and shifted to an urban area but hasn’t dissociated with his past and his concerns. Instead he has sought to problematize his situation. He reveals his confusion in his poem, “Mess”:

When you call me dhed

I am hurt

and wish to kick you in the belly

When you call me an untouchable

I am offended

and wish to slap you on the face

When you call me harijan

I am humiliated

and wish to spit upon you back

.....

When you call me Neerav Patel

I suspect you called me convert

( a crow that dyed his feathers white to be called a swan)

and wish to turn away my face

.....

Yes, it’s all mess since beginning

like the tale of seven-tailed mouse. (Patel 1987: 46-47)

Patel knows well that any name he or his people may carry the load of the past. It has been quite common among the Gujarati Dalits to adopt the caste names of the upper caste Hindu. Some



sociologists characterise it as an act of ‘sanskritisation’ but it is not so simple as it sounds. The whole process of changing names and surnames requires deeper understanding.

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

What is our fault?

And what is our folly?

It is our fault

That we scavenged your streets?

It is our folly that we shouldered your dead cattle?

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

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

It is our fault that we washed your bottoms? (Patel: 1987: 36-37)

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

I am the son of my father-

Why the blood of a panther howl in my veins?

.....

My father was a poor servant in the cemetery.

He buried many a corpse.

I am the son of my father

and will bury them alive. (Patel: 1980: 09)

Patel is a peculiar voice among the Gujarati Dalit poets. His expressions are inclusive which represent almost all strata of the Dalit identity. Scavengers, leather workers, weavers, tribals and deprived women and others find their voice in his poetry.

He also composes poems out of ‘catholic sympathies’, on the issues other than related to the Dalit. His diversion and digression does not take him far away from the Dalit causes but on the whole, he successfully addresses other issues of concern in the Dalit literary domain. However, the unjust caste system which injures more the lowest among the low is a major area of concern for him.

### **Neerav Patel’s Poems on ‘Catholic Sympathies’:**

By ‘Catholic Sympathy’, I mean sympathetic attitude towards the victims of modern social and economic inadequacies. In society, there are many issues which affect the human life continuously. Issues related to child-labour, woman foeticide, sex-workers, transgendered, war-crimes etc. often attract his attention. Patel, along with his poems on the caste discriminations, deals with such issues out of catholic sympathy.

Patel’s poem “For Adults only” deals with the issue of sex-workers. Generally people do not debate on such subjects. The vocabulary related to sex-worker is considered taboo in general social context. The marginalized voices, eventually, suffer further exclusion when their distressed world remains unattained by the expressive mediums. The issue of sex-workers is hardly touched by the ‘clean’ literature. Here, Patel deals with the subject with a long poem of 84 lines. The issue of sex-worker is social and economic and it seems that Patel deals with it keeping these two aspects in his mind. While unfolding the plight of sex-workers, he presents the

strong critique of social and economic structure which forces some women into this profession.

In “For Adults only”, he writes:

I am a worker, I seek employers.

.....

Women’s empowerment is in the air

And in the era of feminism I am fully liberated.

Let me tell you openly

I am a worker, I seek employers.

.....

I am secular, socialist

I am not racist,

Do not believe in color caste and creed.

.....

Orders readily served.

Cash and carry

Home delivery? Yes, Sir!

Hotel delivery? Yes Sir!

The position yours, orgasm yours.

Whip me if you are sadist.

If you bring wine, I will serve it.

I am untouched, like a lotus in pond like a Yogini:

Bid me farewell when you finish;

Daughter is waiting at home, to be breast-fed.

The economists say that

With liberalization and globalization

The nights are dazzling

All industries are a standstill

The entertainment industry is up, at peak.

.....

Like astrology,  
Teach kamashastra and kokashastra in the universities

.....

Now I am revolting.  
On the pitch of dark night of Women's Day

I call:

"Sex workers of the world unite.

We have nothing to lose

Except your chastity chains." (2013:103-104)

Patel relates the sex-workers' life with modern social conditions. In the era of woman liberation and empowerment, the condition of a section of women has remained unchanged. Though the advocates of feminism debate and fight for the women's right, the plight of sex-workers remains unaddressed. Patel's satirical tone indicates the darker side of society where various economic models have failed to address the problems of the marginalized communities. Capitalism or socialism or communism could not address the issue of unemployment adequately; and consequently this problem of unemployment leads some people to indulge in 'immoral' practices to survive. The sex-worker in the poem is a representative of such practices. The sex-worker in the poem is a woman whose daughter is hungry at home, but she has to come out in search of 'an employer'. The poet consciously uses the word 'employer' instead of 'costumer'. The 'costumer' suggests the binary of 'owner and customer' which is a common usage but the poet here, to intensify her lower status as an unemployed person, use the binary of 'worker and employer'. She is in search of an 'employer' not a 'customer'. Moreover, Patel criticizes the capitalist form of economy. The modern economic system of globalization and liberalization has not yet addressed the issues of unemployment satisfactorily. The 'moral' and 'immoral' businesses have flourished simultaneously. The poet also mentions that with globalization, the

sex industry has also developed through modern mediums like internet. The poet also criticizes the modern governments which instead of dealing with the issue of unemployment allot such sex-workers the status of 'worker' and eventually escapes from its social responsibility. The poet extends his argument and sarcastically demands training of such workers. The poet's reference, as it seems, is to the government's idea to start certain astrology courses in some of the universities of Gujarat to train the youth in *Jyotish Vidya* to curb the unemployment.<sup>17</sup>

In the concluding lines he ridicules the Marxist dictum, 'Let the workers of the world unite' and in a sense, attacks the Marxist position which does not take into account the plight of these women. It is a peculiar problem of the Marxist position that it offers an overarching category of work and workers and does not stop to look at different kinds of work and different kinds of workers. In such a situation, sex workers are left to fight for their emancipation on their own.

Patel's poem, "Me and My Old Woman" mocks at the election system. The poet presents a pathetic picture of the electoral democracy and futility of the 'right to vote' for the poor. The poet says:

The white men left  
And that old man died  
And they shouted: Swaraj has come.  
Of these last-fifty years,  
They have been shouting and screaming  
With the punctuality of the frogs in rainy season.  
It's hardly five years and lo. They arrive

---

<sup>17</sup> During A B Vajpayee government (1999-2004), in Gujarat many universities offered the Astrology Courses to deal with the issue of unemployment. The Human Resource Minister then, Mr. Morali Manohar Joshi initiated such courses.

Asking for vote, and more votes,

Again and again!

.....

Have you heard that they give ten rupees per head?

And a pack of ganthiya snack in addition

A motor car would pick up

And drop you back at our hut's door.

.....

If you wish to give twelve

We have two,

Me and my woman.

It's not much

It's wages of a day for us two.

..... (2013: 16-17)

Patel, while referring to the British regime and Gandhi in his opening line, "The white men left and the Old man died", indicates the hopes and aspirations of the poor at the time of independence. The marginalized may have thought that their emancipation would be achieved soon and the 'Swaraj' would come in the real sense. But as the time passes, the poor people find 'Swaraj' an illusion. For the poor, the ballots are the tools to express their discontent but to deal with poverty is their immediate concern rather than to deal with the system for better future. So, out of temptation of immediate profit, the poor often compromise their electoral rights. Patel here draws attention towards this issue. He expresses his concern in quite sarcastic and dramatic way.

The political leaders visit the poor *bastis* for vote every five years and offer some 'cash for vote' schemes to the poor. In the poem, a poor old couple bargains; they are ready to vote for the candidate who pays them more in terms of cash. A daily wage of rupees twelve is more than enough for them to sell their right and weapon to express their discontent. The poet's concern is

that the rights cannot be fully utilized without eradicating poverty. But on the other hand, poverty cannot be eradicated without showing enough discontent/presentation in the ballot form. So, the whole system creates a vicious cycle. The poor, as it appears from the opening line, after change in the system of government have not been benefited properly, so they naturally look for immediate profits rather than futuristic promises. They compromise with their right to vote for 'a pack of ganthia' or 'a day's wage' and eventually maintain the status quo in their socio-economic conditions. Thus, the poem portrays the realistic picture of the electoral politics in India.

As can be seen from the discussion of above two poems, Patel remains committed to represent the situation of the marginalized section of the society. Apart from representing the caste system, Patel's catholic sympathies extend to incorporate the marginalized sections such as sex-workers and extremely poor people.<sup>18</sup> The prevalent socio-economic, political and cultural structure of the society creates and perpetuates the degrading life of a sex-worker and that of a poor couple. The situation is so stark that no reformist or revolutionist ideology offer them any hope for emancipation.

Thus, Neerav Patel, in his active career of more than forty years as a Dalit poet, has been relentlessly making his case for the emancipation of his people. Using poetry as his tool and weapon, he, as it seems, has created a significant corpus of poetry which convey the entire journey of the Dalit movement in Gujarat. His understanding of Ambedkar and Gandhi is very rational and he is ready to scrutinize their ideas in the present context. Throughout his poetry he does not deal with the subject of conversion of faith, as he seems skeptic to look at religion as a

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<sup>18</sup> Patel's poems such as "My Dear Gujarati," "Feel Good," "A Man out of My Mind," "A Tamil Tigress" etc. deal with the contemporary social and political issues.

remedy; rather he trusts a strengthened modern democracy for the emancipation of the marginalized in general. For him the ‘Dalit’ should include only the untouchables, those who have suffered and have been suffering the consequences of the social segregation and social evil of untouchability. Though he was a bank officer, and now lives in a posh area of Ahmedabad, he has not cut himself off from the feeling of his *chamar-vas* and dejected people. He identifies himself with the lowest of the low— the gutter cleaner, the corpse handler and Shakrabhai (a murdered Dalit youth).<sup>19</sup> He does not fail to mark the change in the conditions of Dalits; his poems address the instances of social and economic mobility. He acknowledges mobility but expresses his concern over increasing indifference towards the people who are still lagging behind.<sup>20</sup> For him Ambedkar is nearer than Gandhi. He wants Ambedkar to incarnate in Dalit’s children again. For him Ambedkar is a pole star, a permanent guide. His poetry addresses the issues related to all Dalit sub-castes (Vankar, Bhangi, Chamar, Tribal etc.) and in a sense, his poetry becomes an epitome of Dalits’ experiences and aspirations.

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<sup>19</sup> His poem “Dr Bhaga Manga MS and Dr Mhera Mohan FRCS” is suggestive of this position. (2013:11-13)

<sup>20</sup> His poem, “To a Young Dalit Careerist” advises educated and developed Dalits to look after their brethren. As he says:

“can you pick up dear vidushi, from where our savior baba left?  
the unfinished yatra of his caravan,  
the juggernaut for dalit emancipation” (2013: 74-75).