
Dalit Consciousness in the Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik

Sudhir K. Arora

Professor of English, Maharaja Harishchandra P.G. English, Moradabad, UP

ABSTRACT

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In this paper, the two dalit voices—Namdeo Dhasal and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik have been taken in order to reveal how they have voiced dalits who have been marginalized, exploited and oppressed for generations. Both of them have attempted to raise the dalit conscience so that dalits may walk with their heads up while recognizing their true value and identity. The choice is somewhat unusual as Namdeo Dhasal is a Marathi poet while Shyamal Kumar Pramanik is a Bengali poet. Namdeo Dhasal needs no introduction. He is a big name in the world of literature while Pramanik is moving ahead on this path with the intention of creating a space in Indian literature. More or less, both of them have suffered much because of being dalits. What makes them one is that both of them have given voice to their lived experiences of pain and suffering.

Corresponding author :

drsudhirkarora@gmail.com

I have a mission in life and that is to oppose all forms of exploitation—economic, social, cultural... What I write is spontaneous, natural. I make no compromise there. (Namdeo Dhasal 171)

...

I have a dream to annihilate the caste system in India. I also wish to establish equality and fraternity among Indians, irrespective of their caste and religion. As a writer, my aim is to create space for my writings within the larger domain of Indian literature. (Shyamal Kumar Pramanik 24)

Dalit literature, which is a subgenre of the subaltern literature, highlights Dalits' lived experiences and challenges, their resistance against caste-based discrimination, and their longing for social and political equality. It uncovers the systematic oppression and violence, done to Dalits with the aim of challenging and dismantling the caste-based hierarchy. Dalits, who belong to the marginalized communities, are known as “untouchables” in the caste hierarchy system, prevalent in India.

Dalit literature awakens 'Dalit consciousness', which refers to the awareness, understanding, and collective identity of the Dalit community. It is the power of dalit consciousness that not only makes dalits feel proud of their Dalit identity but also makes them fight against all the oppressive social norms which have kept them down for generation. “The mantra of struggle from Dr. Ambedkar, the magic of serenity from Lord Buddha, the value of

education from Jyotiba Phule and the force of protest from Periyar are the four ingredients which prepare an anti-dote, named, 'Dalit literature' for the affirmation of the Dalit identity against the Brahminic syndrome" (Arora 16). Dalit literature is not an attempt to bring the dalit to the centre while throwing the Brahmin on the margin. It is "basically in the affirmation of dalit identity by discarding the Brahminic language and symbolism. It is in their use of their own language, idiom, metaphor and imagery" (*Cyber Literature* 31).

Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014), who belongs to a mahar family of Pur-Kanersar, is a maverick Marathi poet. His poetry reflects the spirit of protest so profoundly that it has developed a universal dalit poetic idiom. He is a poet who cannot be confined to be a poet of any particular caste as he has become a poet of all those human beings who have been exploited and oppressed. Dilip Chitre has translated Namdeo Dhasal's Marathi poetry into English, titled, as *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld Poems 1972-2006*. Dhasal attempts to bring all the oppressed and exploited people under the banner of Dalit Panther, which is a militant activist dalit organization. He tags himself as "one of the lumpenproletariat—scum of the earth (*Poet of the Underworld* 19). Dilip Chitre calls him "a lumpen messiah, a poor man's bodhisattva" (*Poet of the Underworld* 153).

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik, who belongs to a Poundra Kshatriya community (a Scheduled caste community of West Bengal) is a dalit poet. His poetry reveals his lived experiences, his heart's pain, and his vision of social reform. Being an activist of the Dalit movement, he intends to annihilate the caste system in order to establish "equality and fraternity among Indians, irrespective of their caste and religion" (*The Untouchable* 24). Like Namdeo Dhasal, he cannot be confined as he himself admits: "I write for everybody" (*The Untouchable* 26). Jaydeep Sarangi and Anurima Chanda have translated Shyamal Kumar Pramanik's Bengali poetry into English. This translated poetry collection is *The Untouchable & Other Poems*. This poetry collection reveals Pramanik as a poet of the human beings, claiming to be acknowledged globally.

Namdeo Dhasal invokes Dr. Ambedkar, despite knowing that Baba never liked idolatry. How can he write poems without writing about Baba's achievement? He does not mind if he gets admonishment as he is "ready to suffer for life time / any punishment" (*Poet of the Underworld* 134). He follows what Baba taught. "Struggle relentlessly, challenge the foundation of faith, of pledges" (*Poet of the Underworld* 41). He calls Baba as "the Sun", the "only charioteer, / who descends into us from a vision of sovereign victory, / and accompanies us in fields, in crowds, in possessions, and in struggles; / and saves us from being exploited" (*Poet of the Underworld* 42). It is he who "became the human pivot for all dalits" (*Poet of the Underworld* 83) with a purpose of liberating man. The revolt that he began was not "a blind revolt" but it was "for caning oneself, for changing the world" (*Poet of the Underworld* 84). He believed in "awakening" which was based on "study and service." With the aim of opposing all forms of exploitations and oppressions, he brings all the dalits under the banner of Dalit Panther. The writings of Ram Manohar Lohia and Acharya Narendra Dev have influenced him. About the Dalit Panther, he writes: "I founded Dalit Panther to create a comprehensive base and it was a huge success from the start. It brought together people of different castes, communities and religious faith. Most of the untouchable communities were there: charmakar, bhanghi, matang and all" (*Poet of the Underworld* 168).

Pramanik thinks that "the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and Gujarat was stronger than Bengal" because of Jyotirao Phule, who used the word 'Dalit' for the first time and Dr.

Bhim Rao Ambedkar, whose “progressive ideas and thereafter the intellectual leadership were instrumental in realizing a distinctly different Dalit identity in opposition to the casteist Varna system of Hinduism” (*The Untouchable* 23). In the West Bengal, the Dalit literary movement is “a late phenomenon” and also not strong as it was in Maharashtra and Gujarat. In the West Bengal, this movement “started after the establishment of the 'Dalit Panthers' in Maharashtra” (*The Untouchable* 24). Pramanik makes himself engaged in writing the Dalit literary texts while considering his writing “as a commitment” and in them showing “a better society—one that is based on justice, equality, and fraternity instead of discrimination” (*The Untouchable* 90). In his eyes, he has the dream of freedom, and with the seeds of protest, he takes an oath of struggling against the exploitation and the oppression in the name of being dalit.

In the starry depths of my eyes today—sweet freedom
 Sprouting seeds
 Fiery protests
 Oath of a united struggle (*The Untouchable* 63)

He is not alone as he sees the uprising of dalits in the form of creation of the fourth world out of darkness. He feels that there is something wrong which does not make him stand heads up though everything seems to be right. He has hidden the pain and the sufferings in his heart. While looking towards the Eastern sky, he sees the rising of the fourth world.

I know
 I know everything is right
 Yet I didn't face you upright
 I sit in the turn of the road
 Heart full of sufferings.
 I look at the Eastern sky
 Watch the rise of
 The fourth world from the dark. (*The Untouchable* 27)

Where there is destruction, there is creation. Creation cannot be possible without destruction. Destruction finally leads to creation. There is a general saying that the very moment, the pitcher of sin gets filled, it breaks. The poet in Namdeo Dhasal believes in Communism as he dreams of a society which will be classless and casteless though he “was never a card-bearing member of the Communist Party of India” (*Poet of the Underworld* 169). When he sees wars—wars related to class, caste, party, communities, and countries, he feels much grieved and wishes to destroy all such things. After destruction, he envisions the classless and casteless society where there will be equality and fraternity, where man will be man and where everyone will take care of one another's feelings and sentiments. Hence, he longs for creating anarchy with the intention of creation of classless and casteless society. He wishes to wage “class wars, caste wars, communal wars, party wars, crusades, world wars” and expects that “One should become totally savage, ferocious, and primitive / One should become devil-may-care and create anarchy” (*Poet of the Underworld* 35). Such anarchy will remain till it grows “into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up / and burst at a nameless time to shrink” (*Poet of the Underworld* 36). What will be the result of such anarchy? After anarchy, he believes that there will be no oppression, no domination, no exploitation, no robbing, no discrimination, no political parties, no property, and above all, no crime of any kind. How spontaneously he expresses his humanitarian sentiments here!

Let all this grow into a tumour to fill the universe, balloon up

And burst at a nameless time to shrink
 After this those who survive should stop robbing anyone or making others their slaves
 After this they should stop calling one another names—white or black, brahmin,
 kshatriya, vaishya or shudra;
 Stop creating political parties, stop building property, stop committing

The crime of not recognising one's kin, not recognising one's mother or sister (*Poet of the Underworld* 36)

After destruction comes creation—creation of a humanitarian world where the sky will become the grandpa and the earth will become grandma. It is deplorable that man has gone to the stage of exploitation and possession to the extent that he does not hesitate in exploiting Mother Nature, the Earth and the Sky. But, he is sure that creation after destruction will create the feeling of mutual love in the hearts of the remaining people. He exhorts man to compete and asks him to do such deeds and actions as may make even the sun and the moon pale into insignificance. Such is the vision of Namdeo Dhasal who is sometimes wrongly considered as the destructor while the reality is that he talks of destruction only for creation—creation of casteless, classless, and stateless society. In his poem, “Man, You Should Explode”, he concludes his utopia with the touch of the spirit of humanitarianism:

One should regard the sky as one's grandpa, the earth as one's grandma
 And coddled by them everybody should bask in mutual love
 Man, one should act so bright as to make the Sun and the Moon seem pale
 To humanity itself, man, man should sing the song of man. (*Poet of the Underworld* 36)

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik also talks of destruction but his voice is rather soft, certainly not weak. When he states that “Man was not born with caste / Nobody came equipped with Brahmatya” (*The Untouchable* 52), he points out towards the faulty brahminical system. It is a wrong system that has tagged man with caste. Brahmatya i.e. divinity is not the sole right of the Brahman as no one comes in this world equipped with this. In his poem “Untouchable” he raises his voice through Shambok who was killed in the name of restoring the *varnashram dharma*. He sees the difference between 'have' and 'have not.' The poor untouchable are being exploited and oppressed only because they are born in the dalit families. They do not have the houses to live in. They do not have bread even to feed their bellies. The poet expects of the ideal days when there was love, equality and fraternity. He warns that the day is not far when all the dalits will be united. They will come with holding their hands together while beating their empty bellies to take not only what they really deserve but also all the deserving things and rights which have been taken from them.

Day ablaze will return
 Drumming our empty bellies we'll come
 Holding hands
 Like a storm at sea (*The Untouchable* 56)

Pramanik recalls the days when touchables (non-dalits) destroyed dalits' houses and their lives. They (non-dalits) did not hesitate in playing Holi with their blood. These are the horrible moments which have been layered in the mind. But, he is sure of one thing—their destruction. Dhasal talks of creating destruction. But, Pramanik does not talk of creating destruction. He leaves this destruction to time. He believes in time that will bring their destruction. The

inevitability of their destruction makes him confident to declare that:

They who had destroyed our houses
 They who had destroyed our lives
 Played Holi with our blood
 And they, who did not speak
 They saw but did not see
 To them I say—Listen, you were not true to your world
 Caged within yourselves, you are,
 And blind
 Your destruction is inevitable. (*The Untouchable* 74)

Pramanik asks the primitive man to awake because he is sure that “a wondrous worldly life (is) emerging out of destruction” (*The Untouchable* 49). He knows that sin in the form of exploitation and oppression cannot go far. He raises his voice against non-dalits, so called touchables, but this voice is replete with a warning—the warning of their inevitable end.

Identity is the tag that every person wishes to establish. Identity based on talent is not taken into consideration. What counts is caste. Caste determines one's identity. Here lies the main issue. The poet Namdeo Dhasal belongs to the mahar family. Being mahar gives him the tag of being dalit. This dalit spirit is his fate. The poet wishes to get rid of this identity as he becomes a victim of discrimination everywhere. He calls this identity “infernal” and wants to be free from it. Dalits are not allowed to move with their heads up. They are not expected to look towards the stars, that is, high ambitions. They are expected to remain in the cage of dalits without any hope of coming out of its grip. He also wishes to stare the stars with the wishes of falling in love with them. He states: “Release me from my infernal identity. / Let me fall in love with these stars” (*Poet of the Underworld* 100). The next moment he thinks how it is possible when he feels hunger. The python of hunger swallows him from inside. He is worried about the bread that he does not possess even for tomorrow. He cannot rest until he earns his bread. It is not possible for him to take rest and stare the sky when he states: “As for me I still have to worry / About tomorrow's bread” (*Poet of the Underworld* 107). How can he have his identity if he remains in fear because of hunger?

Pramanik cannot move from the place where he is and does not know where to go to satisfy the hunger. He continues to wait throughout the night as hunger does not let him sleep. He bursts out: “Hunger keeps me waiting throughout the night / Where shall I go” (*The Untouchable* 31)? He addresses his homeland and shares his feeling saying that:

O my homeland, it seems I don't belong here
 For me are dark nights,
 Pain and tears,
 For me only hunger and hate. (*The Untouchable* 65)

The poet in Pramanik also feels frustrated and disassociated from his homeland while he wishes to feel a sense of belongingness. Where lies his identity? Hunger and hate are in his share. It seems that he will never see the light. Dark nights have become his fate and shedding tears along with feeling pain has become a part of his life. While facing life and death, he feels agony and, so, rises up against his enemy in order to tell his story of pain and suffering. He states very poignantly thus: “Here I rise up to stand against my enemies / Let me scream out my story” (*The Untouchable* 65). He comes out and begins to walk in order to search for his lost identity. “And I

walked in search / For the face of me” (*The Untouchable* 69). As Pramanik feels alone and begins to walk with the hope of making an end of his loneliness, the poet in Namdeo Dhasal also feels lonely to the extent that he begins to be afraid of his own shadow. His pain knows no bound when he sees that the world he created is now being broken. Mark the touch of loneliness in the voice of Namdeo Dhasal!

Nowadays I feel very lonely
As though I'm afraid of my own shadow...
I'd worked too hard to build my world
Now I'm seeing it falling apart (*Poet of the Underworld* 127)

Namdeo Dhasal feels the pangs of pain and suffering in life so profoundly that he realizes that he is on “seashore of pain.” He has got the wounds after wounds without counting their numbers. He takes a chisel to carve a living image of wounds. In the poem “Autobiography”, he reveals his pain thus: “I’ve made myself tired and unhappy here on this seashore of pain; / Sculpting with a chisel an image of many-faceted wounds” (*Poet of the Underworld* 112). On the other hand, the poet in Pramanik does not create an image of wounds that he has got in life as a dalit. He hides pain, anguish, and insults in his heart and takes them wherever he goes. He himself admits: “All day long, I have carried a heart heavy with anguish and affront / Of life's suffering” (*The Untouchable* 50). He cannot rest in peace as he is “reduced to an untouchable” (*The Untouchable* 53) resulting in loathing and spitting by touchables (non-dalits) on his body.

The 'Sun' is considered to be impartial as he shines over all and gives his warmth to everyone without making any discrimination of any kind—be it of caste, colour, creed or sex. Namdeo Dhasal feels that the Sun will listen to the cries of dalits and punish the wrongdoers. He asks the Sun to punish “the landowners and the feudal lords / Whom caste and money have made powerful and arrogant” (*Poet of the Underworld* 123). He also challenges the Sun saying if he (the Sun) does not do so, he (the poet) will be compelled to slay the seven horses and break the wheel. He shares his feelings with the Sun and asks him to return the rain that irrigates their crops and also the breeze “that refreshes (our) tired and weary soul” resulting in making an “end, once for all, this age of exhaustion” (*Poet of the Underworld* 124). A human being is expected to behave like a human being, not like a beast. If he behaves like a beast, he is not entitled for human love. He states: “If a human being begins to behave as a beast / it can't be human love” (*Poet of the Underworld* 128).

Shyamal Kumar Pramanik is so grieved that he has no trust in the false promises. Trust is not the trust but it is the lie that lies even far away, far from the stars. What he sees in his life, i.e. dalit's life is the meaninglessness of living. There is no ray of hope in life. Even the wind is not free. So far as love and bonding are concerned, he cannot even think of. He lives in the darkness so profoundly that he has started loving night. He gives a release to his feelings very spontaneously thus:

Trust? Now lies farther than the stars!
Did we ask for these ghastly days?
No light,
No wind flowing freely—
Love, Bonding
Nothing!
Now night seems better

Surrounded with dreams (*The Untouchable* 55)

For Pramanik, life for a dalit has become “fossilized” due to scriptures and the constraints they put on dalits resulting in the “blind beliefs” that create blindness to the extent that no sunlight can penetrate it. Dalits, despite their continuous work fail even to gain the grain and even water also becomes inaccessible. The poet feels the pain and suffering of dalits so deeply that his heart begins to cry. He voices their feelings, but it is strange that touchables (savarna / non-dalits) seem to understand dalits' suffering and start writing stories. He is sure that non-dalits cannot understand the sufferings of dalits as they never get the first hand experience. Mark the poignant words that come out directly from his heart:

The night here is long
 Our decaying lives here see only oppression and abuse
 This is the way, in sheer negligence, from dirty dustbins
 We scrape out food on which we survive
 The write stories on us
 And more darkness descends into our lives. (*The Untouchable* 59)

Pramanik does not believe in the narratives set by non-dalits about dalits. Such narratives cannot be faithful in their portrayal of the sufferings of dalits. In an interview, he admits: “A non-Dalit can obviously write about Dalit experiences but a non-Dalit cannot reach into the depth of the Dalit experiences. ... A non-Dalit writer might write out of mere sympathy towards the Dalits, but mere sympathy cannot produce revolutionary Dalit literature” (*The Untouchable* 24).

Both the poets—Namdeo Dhasal and Shyamal Kumar Pramanik voice the oppressed, depressed, exploited and marginalized. They write not with the aim of bringing the marginalized dalits to the centre from the periphery, they write, at least, to bring them into the mainstream and make non-dalits feel and realize that they are human beings who also need love and affection without being discriminated on any ground. Namdeo Dhasal remains incomparable because of the height and depth of his poetry, but Pramanik has learnt from him how to release anger and how to raise the flag against any kind of oppression and exploitation. Pramanik is on the way of his journey of turning himself into the soft version of Dhasal. He is not Dhasal and cannot be so. Dhasal is Dhasal. No one can take his place. But, Pramanik seems to be following the footsteps that certainly take him to the hearts of dalits. He feels their pain in his heart.

As I inhale the smell of the earth, I feel the pain
 Stand near wounded time
 So much restlessness, insult
 I am tired, yet sing will I the morning song (*The Untouchable* 75)

Pramanik, no doubt, is a Bengali dalit poet but he shares the dalit consciousness and makes a brotherly bond with the Marathi poet Namdeo Dhasal. Both the poets differ in their approaches, but join hands together in matter of content—the content of voicing dalits and their sufferings. Dhasal's use of abusive words makes him look real and somewhat tags him to be an angry dalit poet while Pramanik uses the indirect, but sharp words that make non-dalits understand the dalit's idiom of pain and suffering. Both the poets oppose exploitation and wish to establish an ideal society where there will be no discrimination.

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