

## Flames of Freedom: A Study of Namdeo Dhasal's Selected Poems

*Rajesh Chauhan*

### Abstract

*Whenever there is some discussion about the element of protest in Indian writings, the name of Namdeo Dhasal involuntarily comes in the mind of readers. Dhasal is known for volatile and resistant voice in Dalit literature. His very first collection of poems Golpitha (1972) revolutionized the Marathi literary landscape and inspired a whole movement of Dalit literature in the rest of the Indian languages. This collection offended the Marathi literary world, which had always been dominated by upper caste writers. In the beginning, it was attacked for not having a literary worth pointing that the very title of this book was unliterary. Dhasal's writings represent the anger and militancy; and reflect the untouchable's voice of protest against oppression and societal discrimination. Dhasal is truly unique in his style of fighting back. Namdeo Dhasal was one of the founder leaders of the Dalit Panthers movement which steered of Marathi literature with an unprecedented outburst of creative activity among Dalits later on.*

**Keywords:** *Namdeo Dhasal, Golpitha, dalit literature, dalit panthers, resistance*

The history of oppression of Dalits in Indian society often fails to recognise the Dalits' contribution to the repository of Indian literature through their distinctive criticism of the inhuman social system. A Dalit poet, Namdeo Dhasal, who symbolises the essence of dalit protest poetry. Dhasal with his unique style revolutionised the Marathi literary landscape and inspired a whole movement of Dalit literature in the rest of the Indian languages. Dhasal was one of the founder leaders of the Dalit Panthers movement, which flowered into a renaissance of Marathi literature with an unprecedented outburst of creative activity among Dalits. Dhasal's writings represented the anger and militancy; and reflected the untouchable's voice of protest against oppression and societal discrimination. His first collection of poems *Golpitha* (1972) took Marathi literary circles by storm and broke all the rules of traditional Marathi literature. *Golpitha*, named after a red light district of Mumbai city, caused uproar for its vivid language where Dhasal employed the language used in the red light areas, and shocked the traditionalists in literary circles.

A few biographical details are important to understand and appreciate Dhasal's work. Namdeo Laxman Dhasal was born on February 15, 1949 in an untouchable Mahar family in a village named Pur-Kanesar located near the city of Pune in Maharashtra. His father, Laxman Dhasal, moved to Mumbai to earn livelihood for the family and started working as a porter in a Muslim butcher's beef shop in central Mumbai. The family lived in a shanty called Dhor Chawl (Dhor is one of the Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra traditionally attached to the occupation of removing animal carcasses) (Kumar 32). Dhor Chawl has one distinctive stench in the many odours and many noises of Mumbai. Its leaky drainage gives a horrible smell of human urine and faeces, stale food and garbage, sweat and smoke pervades the whole locality. A typical consists of

---

\* Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, S.A. Jain (PG) College , Ambala City – 134003 (Haryana)

Dhor Chawl room is a barrack about four meters by five meters in area; on an average about ten to twelve people live in a single room; and they are not necessarily of one family.

As Namdeo recalls, three or four couples lived in a single room with their children or elderly parents. Each family improvised its own kitchen in a corner of the same room. Smoke, fuel fumes and the smells of cooking food must have coagulated the air inside most of the time. One can easily imagine the noise inside the room; other than people talking, there would be those with violent bouts of coughing, asthmatic, tubercular people. Sexually transmitted diseases and malaria also were regular characteristics of their lives (Namdeo Dhasal 150).

The slums of Mumbai are the refuge of people who cannot have homes or papers to be even legitimate tenants. The land on which their temporary homes stand belongs to either the city or the state, it is public land. Namdeo perceived them as one people but also saw that neither Marx and Engels's method of class analysis nor the Brahminical Hindu society of *varna* and *jati* could accommodate them all on an equal footing. In Namdeo's view, "all such human beings were denied access to the very basics of life as dalits. To be denied full human status by other human beings, to be isolated, to be excluded, to be ostracised, to be segregated, to be quarantined, to be branded, to be stigmatised, to be separated from humankind and all other definitions of humanity" (Namdeo Dhasal 156). This is what a dalit means to the upper caste in Hindu society. The dalits are downgraded people forced to lead a degraded life.

Growing up in Mumbai exposed Dhasal to other human beings whom the term 'dalit' could encompass. They were not necessarily *shudra* among the Hindus. Some of them were Muslims, some were Christians and some were neo-Buddhists. To Namdeo, the word 'dalit' and the word 'lumpen' are often undistinguishable. His definition of dalit embraces all people discarded by society as useless to its organisation. This takes the term dalit beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of the Indian Constitution (Namdeo Dhasal 20). After Ambedkar's call for mass conversion of all Hindu dalits to a faith, Buddhist was precisely founded on human equality. Their class homogeneity could be seen where they lived and how they lived. At this level, their lives had much in common. But their religious, regional and linguistic backgrounds divided them. Most of them were poor migrants to the big city predominantly from the rural interiors.

They were the bottom residues in a hierarchic society. All those above them treated them as a scum. They were both the proletariat and the dalit. As Namdeo himself, was born with a dalit identity and was quite aware of bitter experience and stigma of being a dalit. He also saw them as alienated in the extreme from the elite of the society. He saw shades of slavery in their condition and felt that they were not a part of human society. They were its beasts of burden. Dhasal portrays, "They were seen as objects of contempt or pity but never empathised with as fellow humans, never treated with true compassion" (Namdeo Dhasal 156-57).

Kamatipura is located near Golpitha (*'gol'* means round structure and *'pitha'* is a 'country-liquor shop'). Dhasal himself acknowledged while explaining this place to his close friend Dilip Chitre, it is Golpitha – the centre of my poetry and the world in which I grew up. Chitre illustrates Kamatipura, through lane by lane, it was like looking at life in a poor people's hospital, ward after ward, and becoming aware of life as it is lived in a terminal ward. There were dead ends everywhere and no openings in sight. As we went along, Namdeo talked about prostitutes and pimps, hijras, loan sharks, corrupt cops, drug addicts, petty criminals, street urchins, sexually transmitted diseases, physicians and general practitioners, gangsters, supari

killers, singers and mujra dancers, folk balladeers, tamasha artistes, coolies, immigrant labourers, food vendors, paan shopwallahs – all sort of people who spiced these streets and their life (160-61).

Dhasal was inspired by Ambedkarite ideal and enraged by man's inhumanity to man. His famous poem 'Man, You should Explode' (A Current of Blood 9) demonstrates the oppressed friends to make a new world with the help of courage. He asks them to arm themselves with deadly weapons to fight back their oppressors in the same measure.

Man, you should keep handy a Rampuri knife  
A dagger, an axe, a sword, an iron rod, a hockey stick, a bamboo  
You should carry acid bulbs and such things on you  
You should be ready to carve out anybody's innards without batting an eyelid  
Commit murders and kill the sleeping ones  
Turn humans into slaves; whip their arses with a lash  
Cook your beans on their bleeding backsides  
Rob your next-door neighbours, bust banks  
Fuck the mothers of moneylenders and stinking rich  
Cut the throat of your own kith and kin by conning them,  
poison them, jinx them (11-20)

Dhasal further explains, “this is *do number ki duniya*”, “this is the bottom of the world”. This is where my poem comes from. I have taken Vijay Tendulkar around this place. I have shown this to Narayan Athavale. I am showing it to you. I'll show it to anyone that wants to know what life is like here. I grew up here. I have a bond with these people. They are my people – these lumpen; I am one of them. My poetry is about life here” (Namdeo Dhasal 162).

Namdeo Dhasal began to earn his livelihood as a taxi driver and his youth took shape in the midst of smugglers, drug peddlers, sex workers in the neighbourhood, which also was home to one of the largest red-light areas of the subcontinent called Kamathipura. Kamathipura where the evening lights were being turned on and gaudily made up, scantily dressed prostitutes were displaying themselves in the windows and doors of their dwellings known simply as 'the cages' in local slang. It is here Namdeo had launched the *Tiraskrit Naari Sanghatana* (Association of Loathed Women) to work towards the empowerment of sex workers harassed by extortionists, gangsters and police personnel (Namdeo Dhasal 18).

The boundaries of *Golpitha* are not just verbal. It can be read in many ways, can be read as a series of interrelated poems or even as journey of poem that takes us simultaneously to the exact location and the mind of its speaker. Vijay Tendulkar, an eminent Marathi playwright, was also one of the first to recognise the poetic genius of Dhasal in his powerful masterpiece *Golpitha*. Tendulkar writes,

The world of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry - the world known as 'Golpitha' in the city of Mumbai - begins where the frontier of Mumbai's white collar world ends and a no-man's land opens up. This is world where the night is reversed into a day, where stomachs are

empty or half empty, of desperation against death, of the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages, of diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighbourhood tough guys and pimps ... (Namdeo Dhasal 10).

Chitre represents, "Dhasal's universe is untouchable, loathsome and disgusting. A journey into it is a journey from the sacred into the profane. It is a journey from the clean to the dirty, from the sanitised to the unsanitary, from healthy to the diseased" (11-12). Dhasal is not an individual; he is a by-product of circumstances and state of affairs around him. Dhasal pits a nauseous reaction against the mainstream literature which carries elements of compassion and sensuousness. The mainstream literature is used for exposing the various outlays of the touchable, pleasing, beautiful and refined world.

Dhasal was not the first Marathi Dalit poet. There were numerous who wrote before him but only in received and standard Marathi language, whereas Dhasal challenged the orderly polished and sophisticated literary trends. He fearlessly brought the language to life as a tool to express anger in a society that is awfully uneven marked by caste and class. At all times, there were some rebellious souls, who never accepted their situation lying down but protested loudly against the exploitative and oppressive system of the society.

They turned activists to affect change not only in their own entity but those of their brethren as well who have been the underdogs of the society over centuries. Such souls scorn at all the paradigms of the elite literature, be they in the form of themes, imagery or all other matters concerning aesthetics. They may not be interested in soft, romantic even ethical themes; the themes of their literature could be as filthy as their lives, the images could be as harsh as their thoughts, their syntax could be as broken and splintered as their souls. As such, they emerge through their literature as the voice of the millions of those whose voice is snatched from them, and their songs as staccato as their own lives have been.

*Namdeo, moreover, shared his vision of writing poetry that suggests "My poetry was as free as I was. I wrote what I felt like writing and how I felt like writing. I had found my weapons and I sharpened them. Nothing was going to stop me now. I went on writing, unshackled and liberated. Once you develop a taste for knowledge, you begin to grow. If you do not have a vision, you become a problem unto yourself. I never became a problem to myself. I became a socialist; but as soon as I saw the hollowness of it, I turned to communism. However, whatever I did, my foundation was Ambedkar's vision" (Namdeo Dhasal 166).*

*Dhasal further explains in an interview that "I share the secret of my success. I never compared myself with anyone else nor did I consult anyone on whether what I was writing was right or wrong. The only rule I followed was not to miss in my writing any nuances and shades of the life I lived. I am here now only because my poetry has brought me up to this point in life. I have led a head-on kind of life. I have always done what I felt I must do. I have not run away. Therefore, when I get involved in the life of the child of a prostitute, I have a friendly relationship with her. I have friendly relations with a pimp too. I am so neutral and nonjudgmental. A deep belief that humanity is a person's greatest source of strength is ingrained in me. That is where I come from. This is why I was able to capture in my work such nuances of life; Golpitha is only an observation" (Namdeo Dhasal 167).*

*Namdeo feels that being dalit and the way dalits have confronted and experienced sub-*

*human status throughout their existence is not a burden easy to carry. His personal experience of stigmatization reaches deep into his childhood in his native village and keeps accumulating through years of growing up in Mumbai, dividing the world into ours and theirs – a world broken apart in an absolute sense. His poetry divides its audience in us and you at times; however, more often than not, it rises above the split and views human life with dispassionate compassion, almost forgiving life its flaws and faults. At one time, a surge of cleansing fury rages in his writing; at another, it is moistened by sensitive compassion and a spiritual clarity. Dhasal rooted and located human voice that demands to be heard on its own terms. He uses words that do not exist in the vocabulary of the other or have different connotation for aliens (Namdeo Dhasal 23-24).*

Dhasal's second collection of poems, titled *Moorkha Mhataryane Dongar Halavile* (The Stupid Old Man moved the Mountain), was published in 1975. This is a collection of his political poems. He wrote this collection when he was reading a lot of Marxist literature and realised the limitations of bourgeois political parties. Dhasal never separated his poetics from his politics; he conceded that both are inseparable from each other and politics always was part of his poetry. This collection has one of his famous poems 'Song of the Dog and the Republic' (A Current of Blood 35). The very opening lines inspire and realize to enforce the socio-cultural upsurge for the total emancipation of the dalits.

The chained dog, being a dog, whines and sometimes barks

This being his constitutional right: he lives on leftovers;

He's used to injustice; his mind is desensitised;

He'd be shot dead if he took a chance to rebel and break free of his chain.

Every street resounds with the drums of 'Total Liberation'. (1-5)

A long poem '*Priyadarshini*', that Dhasal wrote in praise of Indira Gandhi, was published in 1976. Dhasal's defence of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi came as a surprise to both his friends and foes. Dhasal recapitulates when I met Indira Gandhi; our meeting lasted for an hour and a half. Most of the time, I talked and reviewed political situation and frankly discussed with her, what she had done and what we felt. She gave a patient hearing and I talked about atrocities committed against dalits. I explained to her how Dalit Panther operated within the framework of democracy. She was impressed. Mrs. Gandhi ordered Maharashtra government to drop all the charges against members of Dalit Panther and their leader, Namdeo Dhasal. Shankarrao Chavan, then the Chief Minister of Maharashtra had withdrawn more than 300 criminal cases on Dalit Panthers activists by the government (Namdeo Dhasal 14; 170).

But true to his political spirit, he did not make a permanent compromise with Indira's false rhetoric of '*garibi-hatao*'. In 1981 came his next collection of poems, titled *Tujhi Yatta Konchi* (What is Your Grade?), which chronicled celebrated poems like 'Ode to Dr Ambedkar: Equality for All or Death to India' and 'Sweet Baby Poverty'. Dhasal engages with poverty and segregation in his famous poem 'Hunger' (A Current of Blood 47-48) that dalits experienced all the years in history.

Hunger;

Today we haven't got a grain of food left to eat.

Today, there is not a single wise soul left in our house.  
Hunger;  
If one went on singing till one reached that last flicker in the soul,  
Would the light of hunger go out?  
Hunger: if we preserve you any longer, everything will turn dark.  
Hunger; your fashion's unique.  
You are the last whore  
We can make love to.  
If we can't get laid with you,  
If we can't get you pregnant,  
Our entire tribe would have to kill itself.  
Hunger; we hold the race,  
We have nothing to say about the music eunuchs make.  
Our virility confronts you.  
Let's see who wins – we or you. (80-96)

Another collection of Dhasal's poems, titled *Khel* (Play, 1983), has many romantic and satirical poems. The disdain in the content of another collection is evident from the very title, *Gandu Bagicha* (Arsefucker's Park, 1986). In this collection, the poem called 'New Delhi, 1985' (A Current of Blood 63) brilliantly mocks the celebration of the Republic Day at India Gate in New Delhi. The entire poem is worth quoting.

The needle probed for the artery;  
Enemies of poetry gather in your city  
Your town is cursed with power;  
Roses flow in this stream of blood;  
The waters of your Yamuna stand exposed.  
India Gate:  
Over there, the Rashtrapati Bhavan.  
How ruthlessly has this city been combed and groomed!  
White elephants sway at the gate of the past.  
Goldsmiths mould replicas of peacock.  
Your well-carpentered glory.  
Long Kashmiri carpets are rolled out in your streets.  
Armed regiments on alert;  
The showy itch of culture;

---

Wooing guests, dancing before them;  
Parading cavalry;  
Anti-aircraft guns;  
Nuclear missiles to frighten off enemies;  
The President accepting a salute from those hanging between the sky and the earth;  
The Prime Minister shaking hands  
With the glorified blemished.  
Bravo!  
What a spectacular festival.

Dhasal's disillusionment with Dalit politics in Maharashtra took many turns but his final right-wing shift and that too coming close to the Shiv Sena against which he fought on the streets during the Worli riots of 1974 came as a rude shock to both his Dalit and Leftist friends. Though he contributed occasionally to the Sena mouthpiece, *Samna*, he never spared the divisive and fascist tendencies of the Right-wingers and his politics is adequately reflected in the collection, *Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi* (The Soul Doesn't Find Peace in This Regime, 1995). One of Dhasal's poems in this collection clearly demonstrates his secular and humanitarian spirit as well as his vengeance against the fascist forces in his poem 'Concomitantly: December 6' (A Current of Blood 72).

Now  
This city is no longer mine  
It was only yesterday that you told us  
That this country belonged to us  
Tell us now, is this country really ours?  
The walls of my own house charge upon me  
They want to assassinate me (1-7)  
-----  
Who are these people – my own, my countrymen?  
Usurpers of yore who seized my country  
These are their rites, their ritual chants  
God or religion?  
Yesterday they murdered Gandhi  
Now they want to put the whole nation to death  
How many stories of alien invaders shall I tell them?  
My original ancestors were dark Dravidian non-Aryans (14-21)  
-----  
Death is a better alternative to fear

Rather than get buggered, butcher them back  
Then bring them back to life, and then kill them again  
I too would like to be martyred  
For my people's sake. (51-55)

From Mee Marale Sooryachya Rathache Ghode (I Slew the Seven Horses of the Chariot of the Sun, 2005) is a collection of his philosophical and emotional poems, and *Tujhe Bot Dharoon Chalalo Ahe Me* (Holding Your Finger, I Walk On, 2006) is a collection dealing with poems he wrote for and dedicated to Babasaheb Ambedkar. In his writings on Dalit consciousness, Dhasal always feared the pitfalls of identity politics and worked towards a synthesis between Ambedkarism and Marxism. His novel in Marathi, titled *Ambedkari Chalval* (1981), reflected upon Dr Ambedkar's critical engagement with the socialist and communist movement of his times. Dhasal regarded Baburam Bagul as the foremost literary master whose *Jevha Me Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had concealed my Caste) and *Maran Swasta Hot Ahe* (Death is Becoming Cheaper) became masterpieces of modern Dalit literature.

*His first collection of poems Golpitha (1972)* broke away from normal poetic styles and conventions; he profusely used words and expressions typical to Dalits. In *Golpitha*, he exploited the filthy, abusive language used normally in a red light area sending shock waves to many elitist readers. The major awards conferred upon him include the Maharashtra State Award for Literature, the Padma Shri (1999) and the Sahitya Akademy Golden Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004. *At the age of 64 Dhasal lost his long battle to cancer, he died on 15 January 2014. On his death* Maharashtra Governor K. Sankaranarayanan paid a rich tribute to this literary warrior. In his message he said that “Dhasal was the voice of the poor and the oppressed. In his demise, Maharashtra has lost a brave activist and a writer who felt genuinely for the poor and the oppressed” and Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan paid his tribute in words on the sudden demise of Dhasal that “he shook up the white-collar authors and readers by his own style of writing. He understood the power of literature to raise a voice against atrocities on Dalits. We have lost an aggressive Dalit leader” (Tatke and Despande).

Dhasal fought against all sorts of social evils in Maharashtra throughout his life. In the last phase, Dhasal spoke the language of social unity. He was a true revolutionary who galvanised millions of minds over last four decades and his poetry will keep inspiring all humanity to the dreams he cherished for all. His life can be seen in multilateral he could be seen as the poet Namdeo, the Dalit Namdeo, the power broker Namdeo, the survivor Namdeo, the rebel Namdeo, the melancholic Namdeo, the cunning Namdeo, the defeated Namdeo, the activist Namdeo, the idealist Namdeo, the compromised Namdeo - he has been everywhere, from the fringes to the centre.

Quoting Dilip Chitre, “Uprooted from the countryside and replanted in the inner city and the rotten core of Mumbai – a city of the most extreme and dehumanizing forms of exploitation – Namdeo's human roots proved not only tenacious, but also triumphant. He grew up out of a cesspool, drawing nourishment from it, metabolizing its toxic waste and thriving on the immunity he acquired, to become the poet of the underworld, a lumpen messiah, a poor man's bodhisattva” (Dutta). *It seems that Namdeo is great poet because he understands that great poetry integrates rather than divides. Humanity is the core effect and expression of human condition in its own space and time is the very principle of creation of a work of art. Its specifics do not obscure its*



*universal appeal. It invents its own language but stays connected with every other language and this is what makes it, despite difficulties, open to translation and acceptance by the other.*

### Works Cited

- Aston, N.M, ed. *Dalit Literature and African-American Literature*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. Print.
- Chitre, Dilip. "The Architecture of Anger on Namdeo Dhasal's Golpitha." *Journal of South Asian Literature*. 17.1 (1982): 93-95. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 March 2014.
- Dalit Panthers Manifesto. 1973. Web. 28 April 2016.  
<[http://ir.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/14528/15/15\\_appendicies.pdf](http://ir.inflibnet.ac.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/10603/14528/15/15_appendicies.pdf)>.
- Dangle, Arjun, ed. *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit autobiographies*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994. Print.
- Dhasal, Namdeo. *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld, Poems 1972-2006*. Trans. Dilip Chitre. Chennai: Navayana Publishing, 2007. Print.  
*A Current of Blood*. Trans. Dilip Chitre. Chennai: Navayana Publishing, 2011. Print.
- Dhasal, Namdeo and Santosh Bhoomkar. "Occasion: 6 December." *Indian Literature*. 39.6 (1996): 34-36. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 March 2014.
- Dutta, Madhusree. Interview with Namdeo Dhasal: The Poet and the Politician -2. 28 Feb. 2005. Web. 2 May 2016. <<http://pad.ma/GO/info>>.
- Hovell, Laurie. "Namdeo Dhasal: Poet and Panther." *Journal of South Asian Literature*. 24.2 (1989): 65-82. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 March 2014.
- Kumar, [Arvind](#). "Poetics of Subalternity: Remembering Namdeo Laxman Dhasal (1949-2014)". *MAINSTREAM*. 52.12 (2014): 32-35. Print.
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007. Print.
- Mane, Vasudha. "Recent Marathi Writing." *Indian Literature*. 17.4 (1974): 98-103. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 March 2014.
- Omvedt, Gail. *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2006. Print.
- Radical Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal dead. 15 Jan. 2014. Web 22 April 2016.  
<<http://www.sify.com/news/radical-dalit-poet-namdeo-dhasal-dead-news-national-obpvuuehidhsi.html>>.
- Tatke, Sukhda and Alok Deshpande. "Marathi Poet Namdeo Dhasal Dead". *The Hindu*. 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 22 April 2016.  
<<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/marathi-poet-namdeo-dhasaldead/article5577696.ece>>.