

# Existence, Identity and Beyond

## Tracing the Contours of Dalit Literature in Punjabi

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This paper traces the development and emergence of Punjabi dalit literature as a part of dalit assertion and effervescence in postcolonial India. Today, Punjabi dalit literature is well established despite its very short history. The two significant features of dalit literature – powerful narratives constructed about the existential conditions of the dalits and an overarching emphasis on dalit identity – are examined, so too Punjabi dalit literature in terms of the agenda of dalit liberation that is articulated in various genres.

The expression “dalit literature” invariably invokes an ambivalent response for two reasons. One, it is not a genre of literature, but a type of literature based on the social background of the creative writers and subsumes the existence of all genres of literature. Therefore, we have French literature, black literature, ethnic literature, African literature, immigrant literature, Indian literature and so on. Such a typology may sometimes exist for the sole purpose of pure classification of the various courses in academic institutions. However, the classification may serve a heuristic purpose, as in the case of the periodic table which classifies the various chemical elements. In such a situation, the various genres of literature are combined to create a “type” on the basis of certain characteristics. Thus romantic literature has certain characteristics; so is the case with dalit literature. However, like ethnic literature, dalit literature is the creation of writers who could be categorised as dalits. It is not necessary that a writer’s work be classified as dalit simply on the basis of the fact that he/she is a dalit. For example, Daya Singh Arif was a Punjabi dalit writer, but his writings have never been classified as dalit literature.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, there is reasonable basis to argue that all writers categorised as dalit writers also belong to dalit castes. It implies that for any writing to be categorised as a part of dalit literature one of the necessary conditions is that its author should be a dalit. However, this is not a sufficient condition. This paper discusses what type of writing constitutes dalit literature. For example, Gurdial Singh’s novel *Marhi Da Deeva* has a dalit as the main character. The narrative of the novel does not implicate the caste of the hero and the tragedy emanating from it but his class situation. Therefore, it cannot be categorised as a dalit novel. We, therefore, come across two essential features of dalit literature. First, the writers belong to dalit castes; second, the theme takes cognisance of the existential conditions of the people mired in the caste system and/or its ideology.

Reasonably comprehensive information is available on the caste background of the Punjabi writers, presented in Table 1 (p 210). The data on the caste background of the Punjabi writers indicate the domination of the upper urban castes, namely, the brahmins and Khatri/Aroras. Though the Jats are the largest among the Punjabi writers, their percentage in proportion to their population is quite low. The main reason could be their peasant/rural background where literacy had reached quite late. Similarly, the dalit writers are less in number and in terms of their percentage as compared to the total population. The most notable distinction is that of the Ramgarhias, who are

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placed between the upper and middle castes. Their presence among Punjabi writers is quite high in comparison to their population. To return to the dalit writers, it should be made clear right at the outset that all writers belonging to various dalit castes cannot be categorised as dalit writers.

The single trajectory of the thematic progression of dalit literature makes it sociologically relevant and connects it strongly with the social and existential conditions of dalits. It also implies that dalit literature is the subjective construction of social reality in which the creative imagination is employed in the use of genre, metaphor and narrative structure without

**Table 1: Caste Background of Punjabi Writers**

Caste	Number	Percentages
Brahmin	44	8.00
Khatri/Arora	106	19.58
Jat	158	28.73
Other upper castes	59	10.73
Ramgarhia	69	12.55
Middle castes	69	12.55
Dalit castes	45	8.18
Total	550	100

Source: Prem Parkash in *Lakeer*, 95, October-December 2005.

altering the underlying reality of inter-caste relations. Since dalit literature not only keeps the fictional paradigm corresponding with the existing reality, but also makes claim of the validity of the portrayal of the real life picture. Literature, by definition, is not the depiction of reality as such, but the construction of a narrative through ambiguity and metaphor. For depicting the reality as such there are different language games. However, the way the narrative is constructed becomes the basis of its unique identity as literature. The author, narrative and content of a literary text are together embedded in what is called social reality in general. In the case of dalit literature, this relationship is obvious and, by definition, is subsumed as a priori.

Designating a class of writings as dalit literature could also be a process of pushing certain writings to the margins that is, decentring them spatially. However, if the same writings emerge from a movement/collective struggle, then the same class of writings become symbols of collective assertion and claim to coexist with the other writings as a distinct entity. Dalit literature in Maharashtra, in particular, belongs to the latter category due to which it has provided tremendous possibilities of a continuous struggle not only at the social/political level, but also at the cultural level. There are two significant features of dalit literature. First, there are powerful narratives constructed about the existential conditions of the dalits. Second, there is an overarching emphasis on dalit identity. While the former provides the basis for understanding and critiquing the existing social and political structures and conditions, the latter seeks political assertion. Owing to the inseparable relationship between the movement and creative imagination, the identity assertion is not an end in itself but a means to an end. The end therefore is liberation from caste-based humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. Does it mean an end of the caste system and caste ideology? Is it like the Marxian notion of the end of exploitation, which would end class society simultaneously? It means that a society free from exploitation would also be a classless society. In the case of dalit liberation, the end of the caste system as plausibility entails ambivalence. As the end of classes would also mean the disappearance of

the working class, dalit liberation is expected to end the distinct dalit identity. Interestingly, the notion of dalit liberation does not subsume the end of castes. The problematic of dalit literature is the issue of its moving beyond the existential and identity concerns. Does it do so? This paper examines Punjabi dalit literature in terms of the agenda of dalit liberation that is articulated in various genres.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section takes stock of the development and emergence of dalit literature in Punjabi, and the second section deals with contemporary themes. An attempt has been made to broadly contextualise Punjabi dalit literature in the concluding third section.

### 1 Emergence of Dalit Literature in Punjabi

The emergence of distinct space identified as dalit literature is a recent phenomenon arising due to the decline of the effect of progressive Marxist influence. The discourse of Sikhism, which claimed to be egalitarian, and the primacy of class in the goal of liberating society decisively contributed towards thwarting any possibility of the emergence of dalit literature. It should not be assumed that the caste question was ignored within the progressive vision of society. Creative imagination has its limits, for literature is an ambiguous expression and social reality is depicted through metaphors. The most important thing to remember is that literature signifies the emergence of a consciousness which goes beyond the mundane awareness of the world around us. We all know that historically and traditionally the dalits were denied access to education. However, we still have Guru Ravidass writing on various caste issues during the medieval period, and making and imagining Begampura as the city devoid of caste distinction. At present, dalit literature is a product of the creative imagination of dalit intellectuals, adequate historical conditions for which were created by the mass education introduced by the colonial rulers, whose intervention separated education from religion, moving it out of the gurdwaras, mosques and temples. In Punjab, the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha movements introduced formal western education and opened its doors for the untouchable castes.

Two important and prolific dalit writers were Daya Singh Arif and Giani Ditt Singh. Singh spent his later life preaching the Singh Sabha brand of Sikhism, whereas Arif authored the famous book *Zindagi Bilas*, regarded as a bestseller in Punjabi. By no means, however, could these two be considered as the founders of dalit literature. A beginning was made with the starting of the Ad-Dharm movement when poets emerged among the dalits and took up the caste issue. The major poets who emerged among the dalits in the early 20th century were Charan Das Nidharhak, Gurdas Ram Alam, Chanan Lal Manik and Pritam Ramdasपुरi. These poets did not delve into the deeper world of social relations of exclusion and dalit consciousness, but their programmatic and, to an extent, polemic verses were meant to leave a strong impression on the reader and, if recited in gatherings, could mobilise people. Either way, their poetry served the specific purpose of building Bahujan unity. The following poem<sup>2</sup> by Charan Das Nidharhak amply reflects these concerns:

*Choorhe te Chamaran vale ghar dekho vakhare*  
*Charh lainde naaq je Chamar Choorha takkare*  
*Saad de Churhakki kite basati noon Bhangian*  
*Ho ke rahena vakho-vakh eh gallan nahin changian*  
*Choorhe te Chamaro, Jheero, Nao te Ghumiaro*  
*Paa lao piar the kanghian...* (Singh 2010: 38)

In the beginning, dalits began to figure in Punjabi fiction as characters within the framework of class relations, as workers/landless agricultural labourers. *Jug Badal Gaya* by Sohan Singh Sital could be identified as belonging to the transition which might have paved the way for subsequent developments. In this novel, the son of a Mazabi mistress of a Jat Sikh landlord compels his biological father to accept his paternity. The story is set against the backdrop of India's Partition in 1947, metaphorically signifying the transformation taking place in independent India. Sital did not belong to the progressive tradition of Punjabi literature, but he alone could take up the theme of Jat-dalit relations in a definitive manner.

On the other hand, most of the novels in Punjabi were influenced by Marxism through the Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha, as a result of which the dalits were assumed to be a class category and could only be liberated through a communist revolution, for a change in class position would also change the caste situation. Heera (2004) has identified many novels which portray the conditions of the poor dalits and at times probe into caste discrimination. However, the class perspective handicapped most of these writers in understanding and appreciating the autonomy of the caste existence as characterised by the worst human conditions and exploitation. Among the many novels, two find special mention because both are written by major novelists in Punjabi. One is *Hani* by Jaswant Singh Kanwal and the other is *Marhi Da Deeva* by Gurdial Singh.

Kanwal's novel, *Hani*, is the love story of a boy and a girl from the Jheer (waterman) caste. Running parallel is another love story of a Jat boy and a Mazabi (dalit) girl. The Jheer boy struggles and ultimately succeeds in marrying his love, but this is not so for the Jat-Mazabi couple. What is most notable is that there is no indication of any sorrow on the part of the latter. The writer has taken it for granted that the love affair between the Jat boy and the Mazabi girl is a routine sexual encounter, without any social consequence. As a matter of fact, it is not so. Empirically speaking, there have been instances of a Jat boy marrying a Mazabi girl, though the reasons have been different (Singh 1975). On the other hand, *Marhi Da Deeva* is a serious attempt at depicting the life of a dalit against the backdrop of agrarian relations. Dharam Singh's family and the family of Jagsir are related to each other under the Jajmani system as landowner and *kamin* (artisans). The novel depicts the wretched conditions of the dalits, but the fictional paradigm of the author revolves around feudal relations and the exploitation of the workers. Bharti (2004: 307) christens such novels and other genres of literature as entailing dalit sensibility. He writes:

The most important feature of Punjabi literature in the genres of poetry, prose and fiction is that it highlights the sensibilities of small and marginal farmers in the form of misery due to their poor economic conditions. Especially the poets and writers with Marxist leanings

have done this extremely well. A Punjabi rural society, mired in economic wants, has remained their main theme. In their opinion, a small and marginal farmer and an agricultural labourer, who is called 'Kammi' in Punjabi are synonymous... It is amazing to note that the life of a small farmer has been prominently depicted by the poets and writers of mainstream Punjabi literature but the downtrodden agricultural labourer does not figure in their literary works.

Dwarka Bharti, who is a well-known dalit writer in Punjab, stops short of stating the obvious, that most of the Punjabi novelists belong to the landowning castes. It implies that the novelists are writing what they are experiencing – which is part of their social existence. In other words, they know more about the life of the small and marginal farmers. These novelists had Marxist leanings and therefore they failed to go beyond their economic milieu. They tried to trace the source of change, in the process forgetting the basic Marxist emphasis on the working class and thus betraying their ideology as they remained loyal to their class.

### Impact of Naxalite Movement

In the late 1960s, Punjab experienced the Naxalite movement which questioned in a powerful way the class sensibilities of the Punjabi writers. A considerable number of young writers either joined or sympathised with the movement. In this regard, Harbhajan Halvarvi, Pash, Surjit Patar, Sant Ram Udasi, Darshan Khatkar, Waryam Sandhu, Prem Parkash and Lal Singh Dil could be identified as the most prominent writers. Of these Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Singh Dil were dalits and both were poets. The Naxalite movement made a definite impact on Punjabi literature, as it emphasised the role of armed struggle for social transformation (Judge 1992). Most importantly, it began to question and criticise the existing social relations of exploitation. The second important change that began in the late 1960s was the onset of the green revolution. Gradually, its benefits trickled down to the working classes. The arrival of migrant labour from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar made the dalits look for alternative jobs in the cities. In the process they learnt certain skills and became artisan workers and their centuries' old dependence on the landowning castes began to rupture and crumble. The third important change that occurred in Punjab was the emergence of the critical dalit intellectual mass through the acquisition of formal education. The foundations for the acquisition of formal western education were laid by the Arya Samaj, and after Independence the process was further facilitated through various state measures.

However, the absence of a strong dalit movement, after the Ad-Dharm movement in the 1920s, did not provide the needed impetus for the emergence of creative imagination, as it happened in the case of Maharashtra. The failure of the Republican Party in Punjab should not be isolated from the refusal of the dalits in general and the Chamars in particular to follow B R Ambedkar by converting to Buddhism. Therefore, the Punjabi dalit began to swing intellectually between Marxism and Sikhism/Ad-Dharm. Such a situation hampered their intellectual focus. Marxism showed promise and thus we find that the depiction of the dalit locality in the much acclaimed song of Sant Ram Udasi, "*Toon magada rahin ve soorja, Kamian de verhrhe*" (O' sun continue to shine on the locality of the workers),

implicated not only caste but also class in the verse. Sant Ram Udasi was a Naxalite and he belonged to the Mazabi caste. Lal Singh Dil, a Ramdasia Chamar by caste, was also a Naxalite. His metamorphosis into a dalit poet was to take place with time, but even in the initial phase he underlined the issue of caste, as is evident from the following lines he wrote in 1971 from the poem *Jat* (Dil 1997: 47):

*Mainoo payar kardi*  
 Par-jat kurhie  
*Sade saake murde vee*  
*Ik than te nahin jalaunde*  
 (Oh, the upper caste girl who loves me. Our dead are not even cremated at one place.)

The separation of the cremation ground on the basis of caste was used by Dil to highlight the social exclusion of the working class castes. After this change, he emerged as the major dalit poet towards the end of his life.

The literary work widely acknowledged as the first dalit novel is *Mashalchi* (Torchbearer) by Gurcharan Singh Rao (Bharti 2004; Heera 2004; Lal 2004). It was published in 1986 and was not noticed at the time of its publication. There was no dalit response to the novel. Today, *Mashalchi* has become a pioneering work, widely read by all. The main character of the novel, Kattu, is Chamar by caste and he is the only dalit boy to seek admission into college. In certain respects, Kattu symbolises the fundamental principles for liberation propounded by Ambedkar, namely, educate, organise and agitate. Kattu does all of these in his short life and faces caste-based discrimination as he grows from a boy into an adult. Despite all its powerful and inherent linkages with caste, the influence of Marxism is visible in the novel. The path to salvation is not seen just in terms of liberation from caste oppression, but also through the coalition of agricultural workers and marginal farmers. However, within the Marxist framework, the novel succeeds in emphasising the crucial role of superstructure. The important feature of *Mashalchi* is that it paved the way for the strong emergence of dalit literature as a type of literature in terms of both the motifs and the social background of the writers in the 1990s. The next part of the paper examines and analyses Punjabi dalit literature.

## 2 Three Dispositions

I begin this section with a caveat about what is meant by Punjabi dalit literature. Whenever the term “Punjabi” is used, it could either be as an adjective or as a noun. As a noun the term refers to the Punjabi language, whereas as an adjective it refers to the literature that is written and created in Punjab by Punjabi writers, entailing motifs covering Punjab. If we begin with the latter, then it is necessary to state that in Punjab the languages of literary writings have been in Urdu, Persian, Punjabi, Hindi, Braj and English. In recent years, in the Indian Punjab, Punjabi, Hindi and English have remained the three languages in which the literature is being created. Some of the prominent Hindi writers are Punjabi, for example, Mohan Rakesh, Agay and Krishna Sobti, to name a few. More interestingly, Punjabi is the only language in the world which is written in two scripts, namely, Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi (Persian).

In the Indian Punjab, Gurmukhi is the script used for writing, while in Pakistani Punjab, Shahmukhi is the script. Therefore, when the expression Punjabi dalit literature is used, it implies writings in the Punjabi language in the Gurmukhi script.

Two important observations should be made before taking up the analysis of dalit literature in Punjabi. First, only Lal Singh Dil evolved as a dalit writer and he can be considered as the pioneer in the emergence of dalit literature. In fact, his entire life can be metaphorically equated with the evolution of dalit literature as a type in Punjabi. Second, most of the dalit literature that emerged, and at this moment could truly be labelled as a movement, is a result of objective and subjective circumstances. The most important factor is the rise of Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The popularisation of Ambedkar as the great dalit leader took place in the 1990s with the arrival of Kanshi Ram and his demonstration of dalit power as reality. The assertion of the dalit identity has paved the way for the recognition of a distinct type of literature that is being created by dalit writers. There was a dramatic increase in readership and interest in dalit literature. Translations from Hindi and Marathi writings became available in Punjabi. It may be mentioned that a substantial percentage of educated Punjabis can comfortably read Hindi literature. Thus, the dalit writers who hesitated due to the domination of the Marxist paradigm of writing literature overcame their hesitation and began to write freely about caste and caste oppression. In other words, the assertion of dalit identity and the emergence of the market for dalit-related literature gave tremendous impetus to its establishment in the second half of the 1990s. As a matter of fact, the last decade has witnessed the domination of dalit literature in Punjabi.

Owing to its recent origin, particularly in comparison to Marathi dalit literature, it is possible to identify three trajectories of disposition of dalit literature – all three strongly embedded in social existential conditions. In the first are included writings on social existential issues. Most of the autobiographies cover this aspect in a classical manner. The second includes those writings which take up the identity issue. Poetry is the dominant genre covering this trajectory of literary disposition. The third disposition is an attempt to explore the dalit writings which go beyond existence and identity. In other words, it may be taken as the transcendence of the subject beyond the given reality. It implicates the project of liberation not simply in terms of “from” but in terms of “of”. Therefore, it is important to see how dalit writers locate the liberation of the state of existence. Is it in terms of the celebration of dalithood? Or is it in terms of the realisation of a casteless society? It is important to take up all the three issues consecutively.

**Autobiography as a Social Text:** It is interesting to note that a considerable number of dalit autobiographies exist in India. There are many autobiographies which are penned by relatively young dalit writers and, interestingly, some of them seemed to have attained fame due to this. Laxaman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* is a classic example. Similarly, Balbir Madhopuri was not known as a major poet in Punjabi, but *Changiya Rukh*, his autobiography, established him as a major writer. The

sociological significance of biographies has been frequently highlighted by many sociologists. C Wright Mills (1959: 159) makes his position clear when he writes,

Social science deal with problems of biography, of history, and of their interactions within social structures. That these three – biography, history, society – are the coordinate points of the proper study of man has been a major platform on which I have stood when criticising several current schools of sociology whose practitioners have abandoned this classic tradition.

It is clear from these lines that the life story is an important basis of sociological enterprise. Shanahan and Macmillan (2008) have come out with the complex paradigm of studying biographies for sociological imagination. They use the expression “life course” by virtue of which they tend to blur the distinction between biography and autobiography. Their major argument is that the life course connects micro and macro social formations through the life story of an individual. An individual has family, friends, and is socially located in class, ethnic and caste contexts, which are specific and generalised situations. To again quote Mills (1959: 178-79) in this context:

The life of an individual cannot be adequately understood without references to the institutions within which his biography is enacted. For this biography records the acquiring, dropping, modifying, and in a very intimate way, the moving from one role to another. One is a child in a certain kind of family, one is a playmate in a certain kind of child's group, a student, a workman, a foreman, a general, a mother. To understand the biography of an individual, we must understand the significance and meaning of the roles he has played and does play; to understand these roles we must understand the institutions of which they are a part.

Mills makes an important point about the individual character and its connection with society and, as a result, the possibility of interpreting and explaining social institutions and practices. The dalit autobiography, in particular, is manifestly connected with the caste system and gives us an unlimited facility to understand caste as both a structural element and as a practice. There are not many dalit autobiographies in Punjabi. The three that could be identified as representative of this genre of literature are Lal Singh Dil's *Dastaan* (1998), Balbir Madhopuri's *Changiya Rukh* (2004) and Gurnam Aqida's *Kakh Kande* (2007). Most of the autobiographies written in the various Indian languages share certain common features. The authors have attained better economic status compared to at the time of their birth. They were all educated and many got government jobs. For example, Arvind Malagatti, the author of *Government Brahmana* (2007), has been professor in Mysore University. Many of them fell in love with upper-caste girls. Both Madhopuri and Aqida fall in this category of dalit writers who have come out of their poor and wretched conditions. The only exception to this general rule, in the case of Punjabi writers, is Lal Singh Dil. He was born in a poor Chamar family and he died a pauper. Dil's autobiography has another unique feature. Unlike the polished, organised and urbane expression of other autobiographies, *Dastaan* is disorganised, anecdotal and devoid of any systematic presentation of events of life – and that is what life is. By reading most of the autobiographies one may feel his/her suspicion stirred. We all know that social

reality and events do not occur as systematically as they are presented. It implies that the writer has organised his/her life course in a presentable manner, which introduces a degree of superficiality in the narrative in this genre of literature. In the case of Dil, it seems so real that one hastens to accept whatever he has narrated about his life.

The life course of Dil is a tale which is quite similar to that of an ordinary man. As an untouchable he faces humiliations common to his caste fellows. There is no narration of great events or achievements in his life, but the rebel in him led him to join the Naxalite movement where he remained an ordinary member. As a Naxalite he participated in certain actions which led to his arrest and torture. When he was released from jail, he ran away to Uttar Pradesh where he converted to Islam. He was ambivalent about publishing his autobiography which was ultimately brought out by his two friends, both well-known writers of Punjabi in 1998. The second edition came out in 2009, two years after his death. What is the significance of Dil's autobiography? Four aspects make this work critical writing on the existential conditions of the dalits. First, the author remains at the margins of society. Second, even the communist/Maoist ideology fails to remove the caste stigma from his life. Third, reconciliation between Marxism and Islam yields no positive results. Finally, it is a tale of an ordinary Chamar and his unchanging existential conditions despite his being a poet and a Naxalite. Even after writing his life story, nothing changes for Dil. “By and large neglected though occasionally patronised, he ended up as a tea vendor at a bus stop close to his native town, and died in penury, a sick man and an addict.”<sup>3</sup> The same anonymous writer makes the following remarks on Lal Singh Dil's *Dastaan*:

Another something special about Dil is that a person so completely marginalised, alienated and cast out should have at all pursued the vocation of a poet. ...If we go and look out for a poet who economically perhaps never rose above the level of a wage labourer, we are unlikely to find many anywhere in the world.<sup>4</sup>

### **Changiya Rukh**

In comparison to Dil's *Dastaan*, Madhopuri's (2004) *Changiya Rukh* is the narration of a successful man, which obviously brings in an element of pride in expression. The description of the mud houses and other conditions in the 1950s and 1960s were realities not of the dalits alone. Even many landowning upper-caste Jats and Sainis lived in such conditions. Poverty was common among many castes or families of all castes. Madhopuri has made a unique contribution by informing the reader through the story of his grandmother that the dalits used to consume dead animals. By doing so he brings in an element of ambivalence in social structure where structural inequalities are ruptured by strong emotional and friendship bonds. It also creates an understanding that all landowners are not just cruel oppressors.

Existential conditions, as depicted by the personal life stories of the two poets, are inseparably connected with the social history and social structure of Punjabi society. Caste, class and gender inequalities are shown as intertwined social formations whereby the path towards overcoming caste-based

inequality is not simple and easy. Nothing is suggested in these autobiographies in this regard. We may now move to the more complex phenomenon where existence is articulated through identity articulation to make an assertion about caste.

**Identity as an Expression of Existence and Protest:** Generally, identity discourse in the public sphere is linked with politics and power relations, but in the creative imagination no such specificities could be underlined. Dalit literature brings out the issue of identity in a number of ways such as self in general, self in relation to others, self in relation to social structure, and self as an existential paradox. What is meant by existential paradox? We may understand it in terms of how the dalithood pervades every aspect of event and interaction in the Fanonian sense.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the existence of a person is given meaning only in terms of his caste identity, whereas he/she wishes to be identified as an individual. Once the dalithood constantly and insistently turns into the reference point, the dalit strives towards turning it upside down by claiming the dalit identity and begins to construct its exclusiveness. The classical example of such a situation is Guru's (2002) assertion regarding the subjective experience as the basis of social science theory.<sup>6</sup> The existential condition becomes the basis of glorification of the identity which dehumanises the individual in relation to the other. Identity discourse moves towards various trajectories and in the Punjabi dalit literature all its shades are visible in the genre of poetry.

There are a large number of young dalit poets who have recently started writing poetry that could fall under the purview of dalit literature. Balbir Madhopuri, Lal Singh Dil, Sant Ram Udasi and Manmohan are some of the poets who began writing poetry and were not regarded as part of the dalit literary movement. However, poets like Madan Veera and Gurmeet Kalarmajri were associated with the dalit literary movement right from the beginning. Here, for the sake of precision, I discuss Lal Singh Dil and Madan Veera. Dil has already been discussed. It should be noted that he began writing his poetry under the progressive movement and remained committed to Maoism till the end – the fact of his life which makes him the most important dalit poet. Despite his commitment to the revolution, he remained painfully aware of the caste factor. He did not spare even the communists for being caste-minded and for their failure to transcend caste differences. His dalit poetry emerges from his ambivalence towards communists and it develops as a critique of the existing caste-class inequalities and exploitation. In the poem *Uchchi Jat*, Dil (1997) looks at the two situations and the reaction of the upper castes. The first situation is of a boy from an upper caste who falls in love with a girl from the lower caste. The reaction is that of rejection, but it remains verbal. The other situation is explained as follows (ibid: 136):

*Je neeven jat da munda te uchi jat di kurhi  
Stane hoiye ishaq na karye je chahunde haan bhala.  
....Do dil na ho jan ikathe nit panchayat jurhi  
Unjh hee jeen naan dinde paapi jape ishaq blaa.*

(If the boy is from the lower caste and the girl is from the upper caste, then it is better for the boy to be wise and not fall in love. The caste panchayat makes sure that the lovers do not succeed.)

A similar motif is found in Madan Veera's (2008: 117) poem *Ahmne-Sahmne*:

*Par saath vichale uss nun disya, gabharu ik patha latkaya  
Naram kaleja moohn nun aya  
Patwante panchan da kahinan, sabak neech nun dena paina  
Uchchi kul di dheer iss di nar, din diharhe hai andhkar  
Te andhakar aassin rahin nahin dena  
Gaandh koorha assin pain nahin dena.*

(In a public gathering, he was shocked to see, a young man hanging upside down. Respectable members of the panchayat said that his wife is from the upper caste and it is darkness in day, which cannot be tolerated.)

The issue of love between a dalit boy and an upper-caste girl is one of the most recurrent themes in Punjabi dalit literature after the depiction of existential conditions and discrimination – both social and economic. Lately, honour killings in north India have been highlighted by the media, though their occurrence did not start in the recent past. In the case of Punjab, there are a large number of stories, most of them real, of love, elopement and, many times, killing of both boy and girl or only the girl. At the same time, there are also successful love stories that abound in Punjab. The issue of love between persons of different castes is not an existential question, but a question of identity and a change in the existing state of affairs. It presupposes the overcoming of the initial and primary existential obstacles and barriers linked with survival and discrimination. It is in this context that Sikhism has played a decisive role by assuring the equality of worship among the Sikhs irrespective of caste status. Economic development and dalit movements have made some dalit castes better off than earlier and they have begun to assert and compete politically. Despite all this change, social exclusion of dalits continues.

Both Dil and Veera are painfully aware of the identity paradox and they seek a solution in connecting it with the social structure and practice. Both broaden their canvas of the social landscape and build a critique of the system. Dil (1997: 31-32) puts it in the following manner:

*Sham da raang fir purana hai  
Ja rahe ne bastian nun footpath  
Ja rahi hai jheel koe dafatron  
Naukari ton lai jawab  
Pee rahee e jheel koe jal dee payas  
Tur pia e shahar kuzh pindan de rah  
Sut ke koe ja riha sari kamai  
Poonzhda koe aa riha dhoti de nal  
Kamzor pashuan de pinde ton aran da khoon  
Sham da rang fir purana hai.*

(The colour of the sunset is again old. Footpaths are going to the slums, some lake is moving from office after termination of service. Some lake is drinking the thirst of water. The city has started following the path of the villages. Someone is leaving after throwing away all his earnings and someone is sweeping it with his dhoti. The weak animals are bleeding due to beating, the colour of the sunset is again old.)

One is reminded of Ambedkar's views on the village as the site of exploitation and dehumanisation. When Dil comments that the cities have started following the villages, the implications of this observation become quite clear. Veera (2008: 10),

in his poem *Nabraan Di Ibaarat*, puts the issue of the oppressive system in the following manner:

*Eh desh  
Desh udon tak tuada hai  
Jadon tak  
Tuhade mannan wich khauf hai  
Khatra hai  
Jadon tusin kise lai  
Khauf bane khatra banen  
Hoonjhe jaoge.*

(This country, country is yours so long as you have fear in your mind.  
When you become danger or are feared, you will be swept away.)

The critique of the system by Dil and the underlining of the oppressive nature of the ruling classes by Veera provide us with a critique of the way social inequalities are maintained and perpetuated. Identity assertion is connected with the roots of its emergence – the system controlled by dominant castes and classes. Through the critique of the system the language of protest emerges and revolution becomes a normative necessity. Both Dil and Veera fundamentally differ from Rao's novel on account of their critique of the Marxist solution, whereas Rao argues for it.

**Beyond Existence and Identity:** It is quite clear from the discussion of the poetry of Dil and Veera that the dalit discourse has neither become free from nor stifled by the Marxist-progressive moorings of the Punjabi literature. Dalit literature has emerged as a literary genre and this emergence could be attributed to two facilitating factors. First, Punjabi literature is no longer under the dominant influence of Marxism. Various trends have emerged during the last two decades due to which no singular trend has remained dominant. Second, the Marxists in Punjab have begun to recognise the autonomy of caste independently of class. Despite the hope for revolutionary change in Indian society, the trajectory of Punjabi dalit literature beyond existence and identity is moving away from this ideal objective towards the celebration of exclusive identity at both the individual and collective levels. As a result, we are witnessing a paradoxical construction of the desired social world: there is a need for equality for all castes as well as the celebration of dalit identity. Such a trend is found in fiction – novels and short stories – and two representative short stories with tremendous sociological significance are Bhagwant Rasoolpuri's (2010) *Jarhan* and *Ad-Danka*.

Let us begin with *Jarhan* (Roots). The narrative is constructed in the first person singular and the protagonist is a Chamar from village Dharampur. The Chamars do the tanning work in the village due to which the "smell" of leather pervades all corners of the village. They regard their occupation as divinely bestowed through Ravidass – revered and worshipped by them as their guru. The protagonist returns to the village after spending more than three decades in England. He has become a Buddhist and is genuinely concerned about the liberation of his fellow Chamars. He constructs a Buddhi Vihar to preach the new religion. However, his fellow Chamars, including his own family members refuse to follow him. They try to convince him that their real guru is Ravidass.

The young Chamars of the village assault him and he is injured. He is determined and continues his work, but he begins to question his own commitment to Buddhism. The story ends with the war he is carrying out with himself. His dead mother's words that Ravidass is the real religion and identity haunt him.

As a story, *Jarhan* exhibits the paradox faced by the Punjabi Chamars who have accepted Ambedkar's politics but not religion. There are few converts to Buddhism among the Chamars. The story tends to answer the obvious question as to why, after following Ambedkar's politics, the Chamars have not followed his religion. Ravidass is part of their identity. The story does not only handle the issue of the deep-rooted connection of the Chamars with Guru Ravidass, but it also ends by underlining the Chamar identity.

The second story *Ad-Danka* (Ancient drum) metaphorically signifies the ancient rootedness of the Ravidassia tradition, symbolised through the Ad-Dharm movement led by Mangoo Ram. The backdrop of the story is the Chamar mobilisation in 2009, when the head, Sant Niranjjan Das, along with his aide, Sant Ramanand of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, was shot at in a Ravidassia temple by the upper-caste Sikhs. Sant Ramanand succumbed to bullet injuries, whereas Sant Niranjjan Das survived. This incident led to widespread violent mobilisation of the Chamars/Ad-Dharmis in Punjab. They largely attacked and burnt public property including a train. Rasoolpuri's story is an attempt at making sense of the episode. The protagonist is a shoemaker who owns a small shop made of wood. It is through him that the author links the incident of violence with the Ad-Dharm movement of the 1920s. The protagonist harks back to the initiative of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan in the Ad-Dharm movement. Swami Achhutanand's role in the Ad-Dharm movement and his return to the Arya Samaj later is narrated and through this the ambivalence of the protagonist is depicted. However, in the present he is a small owner of a shop which has been burnt by the Chamar agitators – his caste fellows. He is disturbed and he starts planning and making an effort to rebuild his shop. Simultaneously, he begins to look for a justification of the violence committed by the protestors who are instrumental in destroying his source of livelihood. It is worthwhile to quote the concluding sentence of the story:

'See, how these fools have destroyed so much property', the words of Bantoo Lohar are echoing in his mind. These words have disturbed him... 'Who am I?' 'What is my identity?' ... I have been searching for my identity since the British rule? Why nobody is telling me 'this' is my identity. ... 'I' am nothing. ... Drums shall be beaten... But 'I' shall not be there (Rasoolpuri 2010: 71).

The resolution of inner conflict by an old activist of the Ad-Dharm movement through the justification of violence is the hallmark of this story. The story is not a simple narration of the paradox of an old activist of the Ad-Dharm movement, but of the crisis faced by the entire dalit community in its search for an honourable living without any fear of stigma to its identity.

Rasoolpuri is one among many dalit writers who are going beyond existential issues and the caste identity as stigma.

Attempts are also being made to reinterpret the past. Des Raj Kali's *Praneshwari* and Manmohan's *Nirwan* are two such novels. During the last decade, the major feature of Punjabi literature is the emergence of dalit literature.

### 3 Conclusion: General Context

The analysis of Punjabi dalit literature in the previous section is by no means complete and comprehensive. Nor was it my intention to venture into such an effort with limited space and time. However, Punjabi dalit literature should be understood as a part of dalit assertion and effervescence in postcolonial India. Dalit literature emerged earlier in Maharashtra and some other states, particularly Karnataka and later in Punjab. It is therefore important to map the general features of dalit literature in India. Let us begin with Nagraj (1993: 61) who identifies two major features of dalit literature in Karnataka:

- First, it explores the world of the untouchables and other humiliated castes, although the word 'Dalit' means the oppressed in general. Second, it is written by members of that class which makes for a crucial difference. Not that such experience was not available earlier in our literature. It was there, but seen outside... Dalit literature is the product of the new generation who are brilliant and their rejection of the Hindu society is total.

Nagraj's explication of the features of dalit literature is general and largely applied to this type of literature. Punalekar (2001: 213-14), in comparison, makes a comprehensive analysis of dalit writings in Marathi. He writes,

- Dalit literature – short stories, novels, poetry, critical essays, autobiographies, plays, etc – provides critical insights on the question of dalit identity. Emerging as a social stream in literary landscape, it tends to cover a wide range of ideas and insights governing the social mindset of dalits. It also contains a critical evaluation of the prevailing social and cultural practices. Dalit writers themselves are either victims of or witness to social inequities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political and cultural organisations of dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and often use literature as a vehicle to propagate their

view on dalit identity and prevailing social consciousness. Dalit literature does not constitute a homogeneous or unified entity.

Punalekar's observation about dalit literature in Maharashtra is important as he summarises certain basic elements of dalit literature that are common to all languages in India. Most interestingly, he also points out that dalit literature has its own constituency of readers.

Most of the features of dalit literature delineated by Nagraj and Punalekar are similar to the writings of the dalits in Punjabi. However, there are certain unique dimensions of Punjabi dalit literature. It should be noted that the emergence of dalit literature in Punjab was not a logical culmination of a collective movement for equality. Sikhism and Marxism played a very important role in determining the course of literary writings in 20th-century Punjab. The emergence of dalit writings in terms of theme took place under the influence of the translation of various dalit writings from other Indian languages. There also emerged a sizeable educated population of the dalits. Punalekar mentions that most of the Marathi dalit writers are Mahars. A similar observation could be made in the case of Punjabi dalit writers where the Chamars/Ad-Dharmis dominate in the creative imagination. There is no powerful rejection of the Hindu tradition – a fact that could be explained in terms of the failure of the Buddhist movement in Punjab.

At present, dalit literature in Punjab is well-established despite its very short history. There is a powerful emergence of the new generation of Punjabi dalit writers who are not stifled by the overwhelming oppressive structure of the caste society. They are educated and less dependent upon the upper castes. They are engaged in dalit organisations and the dalit movement. They are coming out with a new language, providing a fresh perspective to Punjabi literature. Most importantly, in a short period of time, the diversity in perspective within this type of literature has become visible and is poised to gain much importance in the future.

#### NOTES

- Hans (2010) has raised a pertinent issue with regard to Daya Singh Arif. He points out that in the various histories of Punjabi literature, Arif has been more or less ignored, which, according to him, has happened due to the fact that he was a dalit.
- The poem highlights the separation between two dalit castes, namely, Chamars and Balmikis, and insists on unity among all Bahujans.
- See <http://ghai-tc.blogspot.com/2011/11/lal-singh-dils-dastaan.html>, viewed on 3 November 2011. Author's name is not listed.
- Ibid.
- It alludes to the famous comment of Franz Fanon (1969) on how blackness confronts the black man in his interaction with the white man.
- Guru questions the right of the upper-caste social scientists to theorising about the dalits, arguing that there is an important link between experience and social theorisation. Since there cannot be any denial of privilege to theorise, Guru's argument tends to justify the creative imagination of dalit writers.

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