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Jaydeep Sarangi

In Conversation with Neerav Patel

Neerav Patel (b. 1950) is a Gujarati and English language poet, translator and editor from Gujarat, India. He is best known for his significant contribution in Gujarati Dalit literature such as *Burning From Both The Ends* (1980, English poems), *What Did I Do To Be Black and Blue* (1987, English poems) and *Bahishkrut Phulo* (2006, Gujarati). He edited *Swaman*, a journal of *dalit* writings in Gujarati. He pioneered the movement of Gujarati Dalit literature, publishing the first ever Gujarati Dalit literary magazine *Akrosh* in 1978 under the auspices of the Dalit Panther of Gujarat. He also co-edited short-lived Gujarati magazines such as *Kalo Suraj*.

Jaydeep Sarangi Please tell us about your childhood?

Neerav Patel I was born in 1950 into a *chamar* (tanner) family in a village called Bhupaladi, my parents were completely illiterate and were working as skinner, tanner, leather worker, carcass-collector and agricultural labourer. Literacy in our family started with me. I must say it is due to the lifelong hard work of my parents that I am what I am today. I was never asked to assist them either in their traditional leather work or in agricultural work, they wanted me to just study and get a respectable white-collar job in the city so that I can be spared of the miseries of a *dalit*¹ life. And I did study, I always stood first in my class. My high caste teachers and my high caste classmates all loved me. Although the untouchability was there, I was treated quite friendly keeping the customary distance when required in public. On passing SSC with distinction, it was a high caste *patel*² teacher who took me to the principal's office for admission at the prestigious St. Xavier's college in Ahmedabad. To have fun as a child, however, I do remember having gone with my parents and other *dalits* to drag a dead ox pulling its tail! I also remember having accompanied my parents for customary begging of feast food at our *girasdars'* (landlords) houses on festive or holy days. In a hurry to get a job, I applied in a nationalized bank for the post of a cashier, and I was selected! It was all due to my merit, I had scored 75% in SSC in those days. But it was also due to the reservation policy, how can a son of a *chamar* work in a bank otherwise? And it was posted in a far-flung place called Una (now known for the flogging of four *dalit* youths) in Saurashtra, some 400 km from my residence. And that was the end of my formal education. But I studied intermittently attending evening college / as external student and earned

¹ Meaning 'oppressed' in Sanskrit and 'broken/scattered' in Hindi, a term for the members of lower castes of India known as untouchables.

² The headman of a village, having general control of village affairs, and forming the medium of communication with government officials.

my BA, MA and PhD in English. I am married with three children (one of them mentally challenged) of different mothers. Yes, it's a story worth listening someday. Life has been a great roller coaster journey and yet goes smoothly.

JS What has motivated you to join the Dalit movement? Has there been any personal experience of discrimination on you?

NP I think you refer to both: the Dalit movement in general and the movement of Dalit literature in particular. Let me clarify at the outset that the specific movement of Dalit literature is part and parcel of the general Dalit movement. Their ultimate aims and objectives are the same: emancipation of the *dalits* from the oppressive and exploitative caste system, freedom from the unjust and inhuman social order that denies human rights of equality, fraternity, liberty and dignity to the *dalits*. Both are therefore complementary and contributory to each other, only the tools and weapons to fight for securing such social justice are different. No *dalit*, illiterate or educated, villager or city-dweller, poor or rich, weak or powerful, resourceless or influential, can escape overt or covert, rude or shrewd, visible or invisible, violent or non-violent casteism practised by Hindu Indians and Hindu Indian diaspora. How can I, and for that matter anybody born as *dalit*, be an exception? I have suffered my share of humiliations and indignities, discrimination and segregation but have saved myself from physical violence so far! I have however witnessed cruelties meted out to my innocent kith and kin and other known and unknown *dalits*. In this social scenario, what more motivation one requires to join a *dalit* movement? No choice but to join the movement that fights for survival and humanhood. I joined the movement with the tools and weapons I have: I have words that can appeal for change to a just social order, I have words that can attack for change to an egalitarian social system. I have joined the *dalit* movement as a committed *dalit* poet, as a missionary *dalit* writer.

JS When and how did you get introduced to the Dalit movement?

NP It was when I left my village in 1966 and came to Ahmedabad city for college studies. I lived in a *chawl*³, a paying guest in a labour area, a *dalit* ghetto surrounded by Muslim *chawls*. Here, I happened to meet and make friends with many activists, communists and socialists and *Ambedkarites*⁴, one of them was Dr Ramesh Chandra Parmar, President of Gujarat Dalit Panther and a lover of literature! He used to publish a journal called *Panther* in which *dalit* poetry and short stories translated from Marathi appeared almost regularly. That was the biggest inspiration, we thought why not publish an exclusive magazine solely devoted to *dalit* literature? And *Akrosh* was born on 14th April 1978, launching so to say the movement of *dalit* literature in Gujarat. I have been with the movement as a completely committed *dalit* writer from those days ...

³ A large building divided into many separate tenements, offering cheap, basic accommodation to labourers.

⁴ Followers of B. R. Ambedkar, politician and social reformer who inspired the Dalit movement and campaigned against social discrimination against *dalits*.

JS Are there specific activists in the movement or outside who have inspired you to join the movement?

NP Although initially there was apathy and antagonism from mainstream literary establishment, the movement of *dalit* literature in Gujarat has been lucky from its very beginning in getting the support and guidance of some well-meaning non-*dalit* activists, academics, writers and artists. It's a long list to name, but most prominent among them were Achyut Yagnik, Bhanu Adhwaryu, Manishi Jani, Indukumar Jani and Girish Patel. And there were *dalit* activists like Valjibhai Patel and Pravin Rashtrapal in addition to Dr. Ramesh Chandra Parmar. They were the source of great inspiration, they acted as mentors to us budding *dalit* poets and writers.

JS What is the role of *dalit* literary activism in the *dalit* freedom movement?

NP As I have said earlier, the role of *dalit* literary activism is complementary and contributory to the general movement. I will give just one example: in 1981, a *dalit* youth was burnt alive in a village called Jetalpur in the *Panchayat*⁵ office itself. *Dalit* activists and organizations were on the streets protesting and demanding justice on this gruesome murder. *Dalit* poets decided to join the protest by urgently bringing out a special number of *Akrosh* solely devoted to this incident. It had such an impact, that government immediately banned the magazine, confiscated undistributed copies, arrested editor and publisher and contributing poets – I was one among them! *Dalit* literature thus sensitizes both the *Dalits* and non-*dalits*, the victims and the perpetrators with the its special literary appeal and literary attack.

JS Do you have any thoughts regarding the present *Dalit* freedom activists?

NP This is a time of great awakening, at the same time it is a time of great opportunism. Many *dalit* activists are sincere and passionate. And knowledgeable and committed too. Almost all call themselves *Amebedkarites*, but they can be found attached anywhere, from left to centre to right, to the extent that they can be found in ultra-radical Marxist-Maoist parties to RSS/VHP/BJP⁶ as well. At this moment, one Afro-American woman writer and activist comes to my mind, probably Gloria Naylor, who was asked on priority. She said I am troubled by three things simultaneously: my class, my colour and my gender. But I think I am more troubled by my colour and race than my class and gender. I would therefore pre-

⁵ Traditionally, every Indian village was ruled by the 'Five Elders', who collectively comprise the *Panchayat*. Further, each community within the village (caste, sub-caste) has its own *Panchayat*, invested with certain judiciary powers. Many Indian villages over the centuries have been relatively unaffected by historical and political changes and continue with the *Panchayat* system even today.

⁶ RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*), a Hindu right-wing nationalist organization with a purported objective to uphold Hindu values and a conservative agenda; VHP (*Vishva Hindu Parishad*), an Indian right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation based on the ideology of *Hindutva*, which adheres to the concept of homogenised majority and cultural hegemony; BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*), the centre-right party that is built out as the political wing of the RSS.

fer to be with my black brothers and sisters in the fight against racism. Ambedkar acted on the same priority, and my opinion cannot be different. Let us first work for the abolition of 'caste', for without which there cannot be a real fraternal 'class' of have-nots in our society, the class that is dreaming for higher goal of a classless society.

JS Years back you wrote: "Without seeing and knowing/Without reading or thinking/Without understanding/You attacked like stupid". Please explain what you mean through these lines?

NP These are the lines from my poem 'Operation Equality'. The devastating earthquake of 2001 in Gujarat serves as its backdrop. As if to act as a leveller, the earthquake ravages one and all, rich and poor as if to begin afresh with equality and fraternity for all human beings. But the caste and creed play the partial role of spoiler in rescue and rehabilitation and relief works. The poet rebukes the Earthquake for his failed mission and in a sense all those Hindu levellers calling themselves philanthropists or revolutionaries who do not forget to play caste card even on these tragic times! The poem is a scathing satire to so-called levellers.

JS Please let us know more about the *dalit* literary magazine *Kalo Suraj*? Is there a manifesto?

NP Since there was no space available to *dalit* literature in the mainstream literary periodicals, *dalit* writers and activists had no option but to launch their own little magazines from their meagre resources. After *Akrosh* in 1978, *Kalo Suraj* ('The Black Sun') was another important magazine launched by us in the early '80s. They lived for a short time, they couldn't sustain financially, but their contribution in creating literary impact was immense. Their short editorial notes were a kind of their manifesto, therefore, strictly speaking, there is no manifesto of *Kalo Suraj*.

JS What are your important books of poems?

NP I am a voracious reader, but not a prolific writer. Some of my Gujarati poems have been collected in a book called *Bahishkrut Phoolo*. I also occasionally write in English and my originals and translations are collected in three slim volumes: namely *Burning from Both Ends*, *What Did I do To be so Black* and *Blue and Severed Tongue Speaks Out*. I have edited a book called *Gujarati Dalit Kavita* for Sahitya Akademi (Delhi). I also write short fiction and some autobiographical and journalistic pieces of prose, they are yet to be collected in a book.

JS You have translated your poems yourself. How do you do that?

NP I am a bi-lingual poet and depending on my mood and demand of the topic, I write in Gujarati and English and translate vice versa. Since I am the original author of the poem, I think I know better what I mean, and try to make it poetic in the other language taking care of the meaning even by taking a little liberty here and there. Let me frankly warn: it's really very difficult to translate *dalit* poetry that usually comes with local references and *desi*⁷ *dalit* diction.

⁷ India's various regional/local traditions.

JS How will you define the term *dalit* in the present context?

NP The term is debated for years and even after its worldwide currency, it has still not become acceptable to all in its essential meaning. The literal meaning of the word refers to those who are crushed, those who are beaten and broken to pieces, those whose existence is altered to nothingness by oppression and exploitation, those who have lost their identity as the grain lose its identity by grinding it in a stone mill. This suits only to the ex-untouchables in the Indian context. But for sheer political reasons, both *dalits* and non-*dalits* want to include under this term all the other poor of India.

JS Do you think a literary association and forum can reform a society from caste stratification?

NP Literary associations and forums can generate awareness and awakening about the evils of caste stratification no doubt, and I think that is their only role. Their product, literature, can act as silent and subtle catalyst, thus contributing in their own way towards bringing reforms.

JS Who are important *dalit* activists from your state and how far are they influenced by other *dalit* activists from other states?

NP I have had a chance to learn and work with the most dedicated lot of *dalit* activists: Dr. Ramesh Chandra Parmar, Valjibhai Patel, Pravin Rashtrapal, Naran Vora, Martin Macwan, Raju Solanki and many others. For the present, Jignesh Mewani and many young activists have emerged as committed *dalit* activists.

JS Can your writings be seen as a vehement literary expression?

NP With this question I am reminded of Sartre who wrote in 'What is literature': "If I am given this world with all its injustices, it is not so that I may contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation, that I might disclose them and create them with their nature as injustices, that is an abuse to be suppressed"⁸.

JS Are you familiar with *Bangla dalit* literary movement?

NP It's an inviting discourse. I don't know very much. But I know some senior *dalit* writers like Mr. Biswas who has translated some of my early poems into Bangla. I know that you and your colleague, Angana Dutta, have been working on translation projects from Bangla to English. Language and distance are big barriers for introduction to each other's writings and meaningful discourse on *dalit* literature in India.

⁸ J. P. Sartre. 1988 [1947]. *What is Literature and Other Essays*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 67.

JS How far are you associated with the other *dalit* activists and writers?

NP I know almost all the *dalit* activists and *dalit* writers of Gujarat as I have been part of *dalit* movement through literature for all these years.

JS Will the *dalit* discourse travel?

NP It has spread everywhere nowadays. But again, language and distance are barriers. Let one more generation take over, *dalit* discourse will bloom with English as its lingua franca.

JS What is the role of little magazines in the *dalit* movement of Gujarat?

NP I have already answered, but again with meagre resources available to the *dalits*, they are the most important vehicles of providing new ideas and information, new literature for *dalit* movements. Thanks to the access to internet now to those *dalits* who can afford, but these little magazines are and were the only source to poor *dalits* for self-education and inspiration.

JS Can subaltern populations speak? If so, can they retain their position as subaltern?

NP Yes, subalterns can speak. It can speak for themselves as well as through their representatives. And what a nonsensical assumption: 'can they retain their position as subaltern?' You mean just because they are able to speak, just because they speak for themselves, their subaltern-ness disappears by magic? Their subaltern-ness has not happened on a single parameter to their disability to speak for themselves. They have started speaking, and yet they have not ceased to be subaltern.

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