

Of (Marathi) Dalit Literature : In Conversation with GPD

Jondhale Rahul Hiranman

This is a transcribed document of Gopal Purushottam Deshpande's (popularly known as **GPD**) interview. GPD was a well-known Marathi Playwright and an established academic scholar. He was born in Nashik and took his last breath in Pune (2013). GPD studied in reputed universities with the likes of Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. GPD regularly published columns with EPW (Economic and Political Weekly). He has several academic publications to his name, some of which include the following - *Dialectics of Defeat: Problems of Culture in Post-Colonial India*, published by Seagull, Kolkata (2006), *Modern Indian Drama*, published by Sahitya Academy (2004); Marathi plays, such as - *Udhwastha Dharmashala* (1974), *Andharyatra* (1995), *Carcaka Nibandha* (1999) etc.

The subject for GPD's interview was Dalit Literature in Marathi and he was requested by the interviewer, Jondhale Rahul Hiranman (JRH), to share his expertise on some of the contemporary issues concerning the same. Here is the full text of the Interview :

JRH: What is your understanding of Marathi Literature in general and Marathi Dalit Literature in particular?

GPD: To answer this question, ideally, one has to decide what literature aspires to achieve. As far as mainstream Marathi literature and Dalit literature is concerned, yes, there is a contradiction. I think literary studies in Marathi have suffered at both the ends - 'Savarna' circle and 'Dalit' circle. They have suffered at the level of understanding this 'contradiction' between Marathi literature and Dalit literature. The question whether Dalit literature in Marathi is a part of Marathi literature or the view that it is distinctive/separate is something that involves contradiction. To resolve this contradiction a fresh literary history has to be written in Marathi which involves an answer to this contradiction and establishes

the inter-relationship between Marathi literature and Dalit literature as significant movements within Marathi Literary circles. Now, to establish this inter-relationship one needs to think about how the non-Dalit authors were looking at the emergence of Dalit writings. Were they suspicious of such writings and was there a problem with the non-Dalit assessment of the writings produced by the Dalits? The emergence of Dalit Writings in Marathi circle, in fact, did change the very content of literature in Marathi. It challenged the idea of modernity presented in some of the popular Non-Dalit Marathi writers like V. S. Khandekar, B. S. Mardhekar etc. This is one of the things that can be studied and looked at.

Similarly, another significant issue to form the inter-relationship is to locate the development of Dalit literature and politics associated with it. What I mean by 'politics' here is to shade some light on various ideological points of break Dalit literature received with its nomenclature. For example, some Dalit scholars within Marathi circle would not agree with the very nomenclature of the Dalit writings as 'Dalit literature', they would rather say 'Ambedkarite literature' or 'Buddhist literature' etc. This is a complicated position and this needs scrutiny.

JRH: Would you call it a very recent kind of phenomenon?

GPD: No, it is not. There are two layers to understand this. Earlier there were several words in use to distinguish Dalit writings. For example, Phule used the word 'Ati-Sudras', Maharshi Shinde used the word 'Bahujan', Gandhi used the word 'Harijan' and Ambedkar used the word 'Pad-Dalit'. Dalits felt that the word used and associated with Ambedkar appeals more to them and that is how the name itself 'Dalit literature/writings' came into being. This being the case, the difficult question Dalits faced was to identify what constitutes Dalit writings? Is it that only Dalits can produce and represent the Dalit literature? These questions need to be debated here.

As I understand, there was a problem earlier in resolving these issues within the Dalit fold. There was a feeling within the Dalit fold that Brahmin or an upper-caste can't talk about or represent the Dalit problems in their writings. This view made Dalit writings narrower and restrictive in its objective. However, with the passage of time what we see today is that the Dalit intellectuals have realized and Dalit writings have become accommodative to the views of mainstream writers.

The other important question is to define the inclusiveness of Dalit writings - as in whether the Dalit writing represents the community conflicts

within the marginalized groups. To some extent it does represent, but to a larger extent the representation to the uniqueness of experiences of the marginalized groups have not been successful to establish the movement either social or literary. This needs attention from the contemporary Dalit writings.

JRH: Would you like to reflect upon the emergence of Marathi Dalit Literature: its form and role?

GPD: The Marathi Dalit literature played two kinds of role as far as I can see. One of the first roles is to do with the use of language and the second is with the use of experience/s. You see the use of language by the Dalit writers in Marathi was such a major contribution that shook the sphere of standard Marathi language. As a reader, I feel language use by the Dalit writers in their works is poignantly discovered and used innovatively to communicate the distress. Sometimes, in fact, many a times, I don't understand the poignancy and innovativeness embedded within such writing. I have to put my fingers on various things or take the help of someone who can help me out with its meaning. For example, the language use is region specific and/or community specific – Mahar dialect; it adds an aesthetic value to the language use. This consciousness of language use has to be preserved by the Dalit writers.

The second role Dalit literature played is regarding its distinctive character of speaking out. The question here is - what do you speak out? You speak out your experiences. And the experiences are so potent that it acquired a literary value. Recording of the experiences with the use of innovative language gave new recreational voice to Dalit literature.

JRH: Mainstream Marathi literature until 1920s was referred as 'Lalit Sahitya' (literature for entertainment) by certain Dalit and progressive writers. These writers constituted the idea that literature for entertainment did not bother much about representing issues pertaining to Dalits. What do you think about this?

GPD: My answer is 'Yes' and 'No.' 'No' because writers like S. M. Mate and G. D. Madgulkar wrote during 1920s and they did reflect about issues relating to lower castes, though indirectly. 'Yes' because the upper castes in the beginning did not know what to do while writing about caste issues. Sometimes, the notion was formed that someone who lived closely with oppression would be able to speak and write about it (in its language) far more poignantly than someone who is not. Hence, to say that there is no mention in the writing or all writing was merely pleasure may

not be entirely true. For example, Mate's concern for an 'Asprusha' cannot be underrated; it may not be as poignant as the Dalit author. Similarly, when Warlekar writes about a Brahmin family, he writes about women's victimization within the family – this is not purely for entertainment. Such notions create a divide between the literary experiences of the given people. I don't think any form of writing, mainstream or Dalit gains anything by this divide.

JRH: Do you think mainstream writing is bridging the gap and establishing a link between both the literatures – mainstream and Dalit?

GPD: It all depends on what you mean by establishing a link. If by establishing a link you mean, are they writing about Dalits? - Then, no. However, there is an effort to do that. It's a different thing that it may not be poignant and as skillful as the Dalit writers themselves. The other thing is about inclusiveness of Marathi literature. I don't think that modern Marathi poetry would omit Dalit poets such as Namdeo Dhasal or Daya Pawar. While saying this, I also agree that mainstream Marathi literature began with resistance to writing about lower castes and by lower castes. But, it has turned out to be accommodative in the modern times. Dalit writing is being studied for various academic purposes now. Nonetheless, upper caste writers' views on Dalits in their writings is being studied and/or scrutinized by the Dalit intellectuals as well. I think some such things are not contradictions but surely confrontations. I think confrontations leading to healthy debate are very much like establishing links.

JRH: How according to you, the mainstream writers/critics have perceived Dalit Literature as protest literature or literature of revolt?

GPD: The mainstream writers/critics have perceived Dalit literature as literature of revolt. However, I want to talk about the complexity your question brings. Your question assumes that Dalit literature was essentially a literature of revolt. I'm not certain about this assumption. It is possible to frame a different argument/view of what you say. I think for Dalit writers it was important to establish an alternative culture within Marathi writings. The idea of the protest was very much there but it was in the Dalit socio-political movement not necessarily in literature. Sometimes, this idea naturally becomes the part of Dalit writings/literature. You will see the major influence of Dalit movement on Dalit writings when the movement itself was at peak. The same scenario changes and reduces as the movement calms down also. Technically it is true that one cannot separate the impact of Dalit social movement on the writings that are produced – literature goes along with the movement. For example, look at

Dalit Panther movement and its impact on the Dalit writings. The writings grew with the movement and helped in creating alternative writing culture. However, the point to be noted here is how skillfully the idea of protest/revolt was and is being used by the writers. Now, mainstream writers may not have appreciated this thinking that their writing is well poised on aesthetic potion. However, there is this sense instilled that Dalit language is a powerful language and it needs such attention.

JRH: Would you like to ponder over some of the key issues in Marathi Dalit writings, such as, Dalit criticism or Dalit intervention? This is in connection with the expression 'Dalit Sahityche Thamblepan' (the process of being stopped), you have used at times in our conversation.

GPD: The key issue in Marathi Dalit writing in light of its criticism/intervention has to do with disconnect between the Dalit movement and the Dalit writing, which is probably not taken seriously. As we see during Dalit Panthers, both were connected well, which is not the current scenario. There seem to be a distance between Dalit movement and Dalit writing and it keeps growing. There are efforts to stabilize the divide, however, these needs to be intensified.

JRH: How do you read Dalit writings produced during 1960s-70s? What is its status today?

GPD: 1960s-70s and even 1980s, you have someone like Bagul, Dhale, Datta Bhagat etc. You can see their writings influenced by the social movement, addressing the society outside one's own community, looking at the Dalit themselves and trying to discuss the problems or the contradiction within and outside the movement. You had poetry, plays and the short-stories where Ambedkar and Gandhi were discussed. You had writers like Sanjay Pawar who discussed issues like reservation. In all these writings you see a degree of certain awareness and consciousness of the movement. When such writing is available it is expected in the current times that you proceed ahead and give it a new shape and avoid making it monotonous. The heights that Bagul, Anna Bhau Sathe or Dhasal has reached are yet to be reached by others. This is what I call as 'Thamblepan' (the process of being stopped). This expression is originally used by Datta Bhagat and what he meant was slowing down of the internal dynamism of the Dalit writings in the current times.

JRH: Would you like to talk about the 'Little Magazine Movement', the 'Dalit Panthers', 'Namantar' (Renaming) Movement and so on?

GPD: Little Magazine movement and Dalit Panther movement are two separate issues though they are connected in some way. Dalit Panthers came up with a band, survived for a while and disappeared. It was Panther's fate because they lacked substantial ideology. Activists within the movement sworn in by Ambedkarite ideology without knowing what it is. This is increasingly happening in Maharashtra where people are fighting with each other in the name of Ambedkar. This is partially the reason why the movement is affected. Other major problem faced within the Dalit movement is its inter-relationship with other social movements. There was a section of Dalit panthers who tried avoiding assimilating/involving with other social movements. There was another group who tried projecting Ambedkar anti-communist. This divide didn't allow the movement to have bigger mass space; this in my opinion led to very hypothetical forums, not true forums. To conclude, it was not the communists who held the movement back but the people from middle caste, the congress party and the BJP led by 'Savarna' ideology.

JRH: Would you like to delve upon the conflict between dalits and OBC's in Maharashtra, especially in connection with Khairlanji Massacre?

GPD: This is a difficult question to answer. Look, everyone knows that there is conflict between OBC's and Dalits and Khairlanji massacre is one such example. There is no question that the massacre was atrocious and highly condemnable. What happened in Khairlanji is a clear case of caste conflict generated through power relations of land holding and agrarian advancement of Ati-shudra community. In my opinion, there must a dialogue and debate between Dalits and OBS's about such conflicts on a larger scale.

JRH: What do you think about assessing Dalit Literature in the sociological framework? Analyzing Dalit Literature from a literary or an academic point of view fails to present a complete perspective in assessing it - What do you think?

GPD: The sociological framework may help; however, I'm not certain whether social reality or social truth must necessarily help understand literature better. Reading and understanding literature may in turn help understand social reality. Your question presupposes a direct one to one relationship between the social reality and the literary reality. I would suggest that such a relation does not exist. If at all you insist me to take a position, I would rather uphold studying literary perspective first and then the social perspective, not the other way round.