

# Inextinguishable Fires

Looking back on half a century of Marathi Dalit writing

By SHANTA GOKHALE | 1 August 2013

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COURTESY NINAD BAGUL

Baburao Bagul gave Marathi Dalit literature a public face.



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**THE CELEBRATED MARATHI DALIT POET** Namdeo Dhasal recalls the time he and his young friends committed the crime of swimming in a well whose water they, as untouchables, were forbidden to ‘pollute’. In his essay ‘Namdeo’s Mumbai’, the poet and critic Dilip Chitre writes that Dhasal remembers how he and the other boys were mercilessly stoned by the villagers for the crime. To be denied water is to be denied life. So when Dalit writers say their literature is about life, they are talking about a bitter and humiliating struggle for existence. How then are they to feel belonging for this land and its gods?

LS Rokade writes in his poem ‘To Be or Not to be Born’,

I spit on this great civilisation  
Is this land yours, mother,  
only because you were born here?  
Is it mine  
only because I was born to you?  
...  
Sorry mother, but truth to tell,  
I must confess I wondered  
Should I be born  
Should I be born at all into this land?

Trymbak Sapkale says, in a hybrid Marathi-English,

Amhi god maker [We are god makers] bajavato notice tujhyavar [We serve a notice on you]  
negligence of dutychi [For negligence of duty] Your services are not required.

Rokade, Sapkale and others, writing in the 1970s and after, were the angry poets of Maharashtra. But before they arrived, there was a fiery Dalit writer called Baburao Bagul, whose impassioned short stories pitchforked readers out of their well-lit world into one that was dark, desperate and dangerous.

Baburao Bagul was born circa 1930 in a village near Nashik in a very poor family. At the age of ten he was sent to Mumbai to live with his maternal aunt in the Matunga Labour Camp. This was a colony built by the Bombay Municipal Corporation for migrant Dalit labour from the interiors of Maharashtra, located on a piece of marshy, mosquito-infested land abutting Dharavi in central Mumbai. Bagul's school education ended with matriculation, after which he did several odd jobs until he found permanent employment with the railways. The Labour Camp at that time buzzed with intellectual activity. The Communist Party held regular study circles there and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation office was also located there. Marxist and Ambedkarite ideologies came to form the foundation of Bagul's thought, and gave his writing muscle.

In 1963, ten of Bagul's stories appeared in a collection titled *Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti* (When I Concealed My Caste). The book created a stir—Bagul was interviewed by the *Times of India* and *Maharashtra Times*, while the Marathi mainline dailies *Navakal* and *Navashakti* ran editorials about him and his work. It is often said that *Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti* gave a new momentum to Dalit writing. This does not mean that the collection suddenly galvanised Maharashtra's Dalits into writing. Bagul's contemporaries, such as Shankarrao Kharat and Anna Bhau Sathe, were already writing stories that had won them admiration. One of the factors that possibly contributed to the upsurge of Dalit writing in the 1960s is the increase of education among the community, which gave Dalit youth a sense of self-worth. The People's Education Society, of which Ambedkar was chairman, had founded the Siddharth College of Arts and Science in Mumbai in 1946, and the Milind Mahavidyalaya in Aurangabad in 1950, to encourage Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe youth to choose education as a path to a better life. However, what Bagul's stories did do, given the unprecedented media interest in them, was to give Dalit writing a public face. Furthermore, his work showed writers that they could write about their universe of experience without worrying too much about established norms of literary construction and language.

It is 50 years since *Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti* appeared. Its 11th edition was published in April this year, proving that these stories continue to exercise great power over readers' imaginations. Perhaps this is a good time to ask what it is about them that has made the collection such a landmark in Marathi literature, and also an opportune moment to look at the directions in which Dalit literature has moved since the publication of Bagul's collection.

The impact of Bagul's stories comes from the monumental characters he creates, the live-or-die situations he places them in, and the ferociously driven prose in which he describes their ordeals. Bagul's unnamed protagonist in the title story tries to escape cruel discrimination by concealing his caste. When his prospective landlord enquires about his caste, he replies, "How dare you ask me my caste? Me? I am a Mumbaikar. One who fights for truth, dies for it, carries weapons on its behalf, liberates Bharat, gives it power. Do you understand? Or do you want me to repeat myself? Sing to you the ballad of our great deeds?" When his caste is finally revealed, he is beaten to within an inch of his life. Kashya, a knife-carrying Dalit worker, rescues him and asks, "How could you have allowed those men to beat you up like this?" The protagonist replies, "It wasn't they who beat me. It was Manu."

Bagul's prose style is full of powerful, impassioned strokes that create unforgettable images. In 'Gund': "The road took rapid turns and a paan shop sprang into the angry man's eyes and got trapped there." Later, "He lunged forward and surged straight towards Jayantiben's shanty. Mosquitoes and grime-covered people made way for him. He placed a hand on the poverty-

stricken top of the hut and thrust his massive head through the door.” Damu, the protagonist of the story ‘Bovada’, which is a ritual mythological play, “stood in the wide doorway like a statue of a towering warrior carved out of black rock”.

Girja, a prostitute, needs money desperately. A telegram has arrived with bad news about her son. She washes and makes up her face, stands outside the garden to solicit men.

But as yet, not one of her customers had shown up. She stood chewing paan with a dry mouth, trying miserably to bring colour to her lips. She walked to the tap. Washed her face. Tried to scrub away the sadness. She smiled at the men. Used every art she knew to arouse them. But nobody would come to her. Nobody would ask her her price. Time and men passed her by.

*Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti* was followed in 1969 by Bagul’s second collection of stories, *Maran Swasta Hote Ahe* (Death Is Becoming Cheap), which focused on life in the slums of Mumbai. This collection consolidated his position in the literary world and brought him the Maharashtra State’s Hari Narayan Apte award.

The most prominent amongst Bagul’s contemporaries was Anna Bhau Sathe, the Marxist *shahir* (composer of folk ballads), short story writer and novelist. He, too, lived in the Matunga Labour Camp. His life experiences were no different from Bagul’s. However, unlike Bagul, who wrote with an elemental force and had seemingly no time to spare for embroidering descriptive details into his stories, Sathe wrote in a more conventional style. The following passage from his story ‘Sapla’ (Trap) is an example. ‘Sapla’ is an account of a conflict between the Mahars and caste Hindus of a village over the former’s refusal to haul away a dead bull, one of the traditional duties assigned to Mahars which Ambedkar, who was also from this community, had exhorted them to give up. As a result, the Mahars are ostracised by the villagers. The Mahar leader Hariba is on his way to the taluka town to register a complaint against the caste Hindus. Sathe writes, “It was still dark when Hariba left home for the taluka town. The east had just begun to brighten. A band of light had appeared between the earth and the sky. Enormous clouds drifted high above. Their forms looked fearful as they dashed softly into each other. Birds twittered in the trees lining the path.”

Another contemporary of Bagul’s was the poet Narayan Gangaram Surve. His long poem ‘Majhe Vidyapeeth’ (My University), published in 1966, did for poetry what Bagul had done for fiction, bringing into it life experiences, a worldview and a street language that it had not known before. Abandoned on a footpath in Mumbai as a baby, found and looked after by a mill-worker couple, Surve would go on to win the Padma Shri and Kabir Samman awards. But ‘Majhe Vidyapeeth’ was about the lessons he learned on the streets of Mumbai. Its first two lines are:

I had neither home nor kin, just as much land as I could walk on.  
Shops offered shelter, and municipal footpaths were open, free to use.

And the last two:

Now that I have come into this world, to wander in its harsh reality,  
I have no choice but to live, to belong, giving or taking a few blows.

Around the mid 1950s, Dalit writers began to assert their difference from mainstream writers. Their themes, language and narrative style were unique to themselves, and they were committed to writing about the socio-political issues that affected their lives. The annual Marathi literary conferences did not offer them a platform to debate these issues. These writers felt they needed a separate forum of their own. The first Dalit literary conference held in Bombay in 1958 was the outcome. Baburao Bagul did not attend. In an interview given to Nazareth Misquitta, author of a critical study of Bagul's work published in 2006, he dismissed such conferences as occasions to stand on daises and make speeches. Anna Bhau Sathe not only attended but made the inaugural speech in which he said, "This world, this earth does not stand on the hood of Sheshanag. It stands on the palms of Dalits. The Dalit must be raised to his rightful place in society and writers must stand shoulder to shoulder with the common people to bring this about."

One of the questions raised at the conference was how to define the term 'Dalit literature'. After much heated discussion it was resolved that Dalit literature was literature written by Dalits or non-Dalits dealing with the life of Dalits. This definition was discussed in other fora and efforts were made by writers to sharpen it further. Collectively and individually, they identified four values which Dalit literature, in order to be so called, should uphold—rejection of the establishment, protest against injustice, rebellion against the caste system, and the scientific temper. The playwright and academic Datta Bhagat categorically linked Dalit literature to the Ambedkarite movement. In his book, *Dalit Sahitya: Disha Ani Dishantar* (Dalit Literature: Directions and Departures, 1992), he concluded that Dalit literature could be defined as "the expression of an intense desire, born of a complete understanding and assimilation of Dr Ambedkar's thought and world view, to know the self and the socio-political reality that surrounded the self."

To assert that Dalit literature was distinct from upper-caste literature was simultaneously to reject the criteria that had evolved to assess the latter. The Dalit poet and critic Keshav Meshram stated in the March–April 1970 issue of the Dalit literary journal *Asmitadarsha*, "Marathi criticism is inadequate to the task of assessing Dalit literature." Bhagat agrees, but hastens to point out the pitfalls attached to dismissing existing criteria. He argues that writing about Dalit life from an Ambedkarite perspective and rejecting established literary standards does not mean that writers should forget they are, first and foremost, artists. If upper-caste critics found Dalit literature too rough and raw for their palates, that was as it should be. But at the same time, he contends, Dalit writers cannot accept the notion that the unique moral value of their subject matter will, by itself, qualify their work as Dalit literature.

**ALTHOUGH THE PUBLICATION** of Baburao Bagul's short stories was a watershed moment in the history of Dalit literature, the short story as a literary form did not find immediate favour with young writers. Through the 1960s and 1970s, the form through which they largely chose to express their anger and protest was poetry. While the literary magazines of the establishment—the prestigious *Satyakatha* and *Mouj*—had no place for their disruptive poetry, little magazines offered them a ready platform. These little magazines were irregular periodicals, sometimes no more than two-page fliers, published by rebellious writers who considered the writing that appeared in *Satyakatha* and *Mouj* stuffy and without literary merit. Some 23 such magazines were published between 1955 and 1969, amongst them Namdeo Dhasal's *Vidroha*.

Dhasal's first collection of poems, *Golpitha*, published in 1972, was the next literary landmark in Dalit literature after Bagul's *Jewha Mi Jaat Choral Hoti*. *Golpitha* is the area in and around Kamathipura, Mumbai's oldest red light district, where Dhasal grew up. Dilip Chitre, in his essay

‘Poetry of the Scum of the Earth’, which appeared in the book *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld* (2007), wrote, “As a practising poet and a reader of my contemporary Marathi poets, I was dazzled by *Golpitha*. More than three decades later, when I wrote an introduction to the book, I said that it would be a contender for as high an award as the Nobel Prize for literature.” *Golpitha* blew the roof off readers’ heads, deliberately destroying every fond notion of poetry nurtured by upper-caste writers. It lies beyond my powers to do justice to any of the poems that fell from Dhasal’s pen like live sparks from an inextinguishable fire. But I will attempt to translate the last part of the long poem, ‘Maansaana’ (Man Must). In the early part of the poem, Dhasal hammers out a stomach-churning list of sins and crimes man must commit before he can attain humanity. And then:

Let the filth of these deeds swell like a universal boil,  
Ripen, burst and drain away.  
Then, of those who remain,  
No man shall enslave another, loot another,  
Call another black or white, Brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, sudra,  
Launch parties, build houses, forget blood relations  
Commit the crime of not recognising mothers and sisters.  
Man shall snuggle against the sky his grandfather,  
The earth his grandmother,  
To live in peace, harmony and joy  
And do such deeds as will make the sun and moon look pale.  
Man shall crack a sesame seed to share with all,  
Compose a hymn to man.  
Man shall sing about man.

Before he wrote the poems in *Golpitha*, Dhasal had written lyrical poetry that adhered to the rules of *chhand shastra* (prosody). In an interview with poets Satish Kalsekar and Pradnya Daya Pawar—daughter of the poet Daya Pawar—that appears at the end of the first edition of *Golpitha*, he explains the shift. “I moved from the traditional track to this track because of an incident in my life involving a girl. I suffered a terrible heart-break on account of the caste hierarchy. Even in the Praja Socialist Party in which I was a prominent worker, I realised that members who called themselves progressive were as casteist as anybody else. I raged then, went berserk, decided to throw away all shackles, including those of prosody, wrote a poem as and when it came. Sharpened my weapons. Started writing recklessly.”

A month after *Golpitha* appeared, writers JV Pawar, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle and Dhasal co-founded the Dalit Panther, a movement for social transformation. The name of the militant movement indicated its kinship with the Black Panthers of America. The Black Panthers were demanding land, bread, housing, education, clothing and, above all, social justice and peace. The Dalit Panthers were fighting for the same things. The founders wrote angry, provocative prose and poetry. Raja Dhale wrote an article in the magazine *Sadhana*, deriding the national flag. Such writings brought cathartic relief to Dalit youth who had not received the benefits they'd expected following the country's independence. The politics of Maharashtra had passed into the hands of Marathas, who dominated every sector of the rural economy, including banks, marketing federations and sugar cooperatives. If rural life before this had been feudal and therefore oppressive for Dalits, the new economy dominated by cooperatives had no place for farmers with small holdings, which is all that Dalits had. One kind of exclusion had been replaced by another. In this situation, the Dalit Panthers became a rallying point for young Dalits, and, as Arjun

Dangle wrote, “Maharashtra was once again charged with discussions on Dalit literature and language.”

Sadly, the Dalit Panther literary movement turned out to be no different from the faction-ridden Republican Party of India. Internal differences caused Namdeo Dhasal to be thrown out. Only ten years after its formation, the Dalit Panther stood dissolved. However, while the movement was alive, it brought Dalit lives and Dalit issues to the forefront once again.

The poet Daya Pawar’s autobiography, *Baluta*, the next landmark in Dalit literature, was published in 1978, hitting upper-caste critics and readers alike between the eyes. *Baluta* was the first autobiography to be written by a Dalit. Pawar’s graphic description of life in the maharwada, a place outside villages reserved for Dalits, shocked readers and still does. ‘Baluta’ is a term for the system of traditional village duties that Dalits had to perform for a share in the village produce. Unlike *Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti*, which was not followed by short story collections of comparable power, *Baluta* inaugurated a stream of explosive autobiographical narratives. It was never easy to tell these personal stories of humiliation and oppression. At one point in *Baluta*, Pawar writes, “What I had seen of the life of Mahars in my childhood has cut a permanent gash in my heart. The past will never be erased. It will go only when I go. The layers of abjectness that you see on my face even today have their source in those times. Hard as you might scrub them, all you will do is draw blood. They will not come off.” However, Pawar balances his personal pain with the thought that telling these stories is politically important: “Some Dalits feel such stories are like digging up a garbage dump. But if a man does not know his past, he will not know which direction he must take in the future.”

Dalits who had moved up the economic ladder into the middle-class, and who were ashamed of their past and resented its being made public, were among the most vociferous in their criticisms of *Baluta*. This class of Dalits has come to be known as ‘Dalit Brahmin’. Yet one among them, the educationist, economist and policy maker Narendra Jadhav, has himself authored an autobiography, *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi* (Our Father and We, 1993). As the title indicates, it tells the story of how he and his siblings grew up under the influence of their Ambedkarite father, Damodar Runjaji Jadhav. In writing this autobiography, Jadhav drew on his father’s meticulous diary notes about the events of his life, keeping his father’s dialect intact. Ten years later he published an expanded version of the book in English, incorporating into it stories related by his mother. This version ends with an interesting postscript written by his 16-year-old daughter, Apoorva. Born in Bloomington, Indiana, she has this to say about her identity: “I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion or caste.”

And yet it is not so easy to forget that even today Dalits are considered outcastes by caste Hindus. Urmila Pawar, a major voice in contemporary Dalit literature, recounts in her autobiography *Aydaan* (Basket, 2003), the aftermath of her daughter Manini’s birthday party to which she had invited the child’s classmate Kishori and her older brother. On returning home, the brother told his mother that there were portraits of Gautam Buddha and Ambedkar in the Pawar home. The following day, the mother arrived at Urmila Pawar’s house, stood outside the door and said tersely, “Next time my daughter visits you, please don’t give her anything to eat. We are Marathas and we don’t allow it.”

From small incidents like this in educated, urban, middle-class Dalit homes to atrocities like the lynching of four members of the Bhotmange family in Khairlanji in September 2006, exhaustively recorded by Anand Teltumbde in his book *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter*

*Crop* (2008), the upper-castes continue to discriminate against and oppress Dalits. And women have come to realise that they are doubly oppressed—by upper castes and by their own men. Consequently, the Dalit feminist voice has grown increasingly strong over the years. In *Aydaan*, Urmila Pawar writes of the incident that sprang the first crack in her marriage. She had scored good marks in her Bachelor's examination and was planning to join a Master's programme. Her husband told her there was no need to study further; stay at home and look after the children's studies, he said. Knowing that she was perfectly capable of balancing home, work and higher education, she replied, "Why don't you pay some attention to the home for a change? It will help if you don't go to the bar for a drink every evening but come home and look after the children's studies yourself."

There is also another issue that has been exercising Dalit minds in recent years: can Dalits afford to be rigidly exclusive and paint themselves into a corner? Why should politically committed writers hold so determinedly apart, not only from upper-caste literature but also from Dalits who are not politically committed but are fine writers all the same? Years ago Raosaheb Kasbe, author of *Ambedkar ani Marx* (Ambedkar and Marx, 1985), wondered whether it was not possible to, for example, examine Grace and Dhasal or Grace and Pawar together. The late poet Manik Godghate, who had assumed the pen name Grace, was born a Dalit but wrote subjective, expressionistic poetry shorn of socio-political context. Yet he was a very fine poet, and a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, among several other awards.

An allied question of social relations has also come to the fore in recent times. As some Dalits have moved from village to city, educated themselves and entered middle-class professions, they have encountered and grown close to members of the upper castes, inevitably leading to inter-caste relationships often ending in marriage. Sanjay Pawar's play *Kon Mhanta Takka Dila* (Who Says I Gave a Coin), first performed in 1990, deals with the caste conflict arising out of an educated Dalit youth's relationship with a Brahmin girl. Pradnya Daya Pawar's short story 'Vihar' from her collection *Afwa Khari Tharavi Mhanoon* (So That Rumour Might Prove True, 2010), deals with the reverse theme. Here a Dalit activist, Karuna, falls in love with Sagar, a Brahmin scholar and sympathiser of the Dalit cause. She belongs to a Bauddha nationalist outfit whose members are pledged to marrying only neo-Buddhists from the nomadic tribes. Karuna's decision to marry Sagar upsets the leader and her co-workers, but is supported by her Ambedkarite sister Sujata, who believes that caste rigidity will harm the larger cause of equality and a just society. The Dalit playwright Premanand Gajvi's *Kirwant*, first performed in 1991, deals with the lives of a sub-caste of Brahmins called Kirwants, who are shunned by their caste fellows because they perform funeral rites. He maintains that they, too, are Dalits. When he wrote the play, some Dalit critics reproached him for 'defecting' to the other side. In this context, Gajvi articulated the dilemma of the Dalit artist in an interview with me in 1990: "Can I be an artist at all or must I always be a man who was born into a particular caste? As an artist, do I have the freedom to write about any issue or subject that touches my heart and conscience, or must I always write according to a pre-set agenda?"

Gajvi asserts that Ambedkar, who inspired Dalits to convert to Buddhism, stood for progress. "If our people converted to Buddhism in 1956, why should they continue to write about their lives before they converted?" he asks. The argument against this is that all Dalits have not converted, nor has the old life ended for many of those who have. After all, caste still remains the strongest factor in determining social relations in our society. Even Mohandas Gandhi, with all the moral force at his command, made little difference to entrenched caste attitudes.



Looking back over the last 50 years, it would not be wrong to say that Marathi Dalit writers have authored some of the most ground-breaking poetry, fiction and autobiographical works in the language. Baburao Bagul's *Jewha Mi Jaat Chorali Hoti* is still being read 50 years after it was published and five years after his death. Contemporary writers such as Pradnya Daya Pawar and Kumar Anil are writing inventive poetry and fiction. And Namdeo Dhasal, 64, arguably the most celebrated living Marathi Dalit writer, is reported to be writing his autobiography.