

NAMDEV DHASAL: THE FIRE OF POETRY AND ACTIVISM AGAINST CASTE

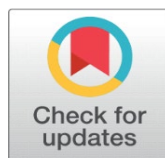
Dr. Amol Ramesh Bute ¹  , Dr. Lakshmanarao Banana ²  , Dr. Chaduvula Srinivasarao ³  , Dr. Eswara Rao Majji ⁴  

¹ Senior Assistant Professor of English, Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities, GMR Institute of Technology, (GMRIT)-Deemed to be University, Rajam, Andhra Pradesh, India

² Assistant Professor of English, Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities, GMR Institute of Technology, (GMRIT)-Deemed to be University, Rajam, Andhra Pradesh, India

³ Assistant Professor of English, Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities, GMR Institute of Technology, (GMRIT)-Deemed to be University, Rajam, Andhra Pradesh, India

⁴ Assistant Professor of English, Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities, GMR Institute of Technology, (GMRIT)-Deemed to be University, Rajam, Andhra Pradesh, India



Received 16 December 2025

Accepted 28 March 2026

Published 03 April 2026

Corresponding Author

Dr. Chaduvula Srinivasarao,
srinivasarao.ch@gmr.it.edu.in

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i3s.2026.7095](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v7.i3s.2026.7095)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Namdev Dhasal is known as an important figure in Indian literature. Simultaneously, he was the social activist. His works represented the untouchability and goes beyond the boundaries of art and politics. He is a co-founder of the Dalit Panther Movement and the author of groundbreaking works like Golpitha. He used his poetry to challenge the rooted hierarchies of the caste system and redefine Dalit identity. He born into the Mahar community in Maharashtra. His lived experiences of marginalization and oppression deeply influenced his writing, which is characterized by its raw, steady portrayal of Dalit life and its militant call for social justice. This paper try to explore how the poetry of Dhasal dismantles caste-based oppression and reimagines dalit identity as one of resistance and empowerment. By analyzing his major works within the context of the Dalit Panther Movement, this study aims to shed light on his unique contribution to both literature and social justice, as well as his enduring legacy in the fight for caste equality.

Keywords: Dalit, Golpitha, Dalit Panther Movement, Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Namdev Dhasal is known as a towering figure in Indian literature and social activism. His works exceed the boundaries of art and politics. He is a co-founder of the Dalit Panther Movement and the author of groundbreaking works

like Golpitha. He used his poetry to challenge the rooted hierarchies of the caste system and redefine Dalit identity. He born into the Mahar community in Maharashtra. His lived experiences of marginalization and oppression deeply influenced his writing, which is characterized by its raw, steady portrayal of Dalit life and its militant call for social justice. This paper try to explore how the poetry of Dhasal dismantles caste-based oppression and reimagines dalit identity as one of resistance and empowerment. By analyzing his major works within the context of the Dalit Panther Movement, this study aims to shed light on his unique contribution to both literature and social justice, as well as his enduring legacy in the fight for caste equality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literary and political contributions of Namdev Dhasal have been widely studied within dalit and postcolonial scholarship. Scholars like Eleanor Zelliot and Sharmila Rege appreciated him as a pivotal figure in Dalit literature, underlining his revolutionary poetics in works like Golpitha. Dilip Chitre and Aniket Jaaware analyze his revolutionary language and urban imagery. Toral Gajarawala links his poetry to global resistance movements, while Gopal Guru explores how his writing asserts Dalit modernity. However, most scholarship focuses on Golpitha, leaving later works under examined, and few studies explore his linguistic hybridity or intersectional gender themes.

Critical gaps remain in understanding Dhasal's experimental fusion of Marathi-Hindi, his transnational parallels with poets like Amiri Baraka, and his engagement with Dalit women's struggles. When the theoretical frameworks analysis, it is found that Subaltern Studies of Spivak, and Guha decodes his articulation of marginalized voices. Postcolonial Theory given by Fanon and Bhabha frames his anti-caste resistance as decolonial praxis. Dalit Aesthetics expressed by Limbale examines his rejection of Brahminical literary norms. Marxist critiques especially presented by Gramsci highlight class-caste intersections, while feminist lenses given by Crenshaw and Rege scrutinize gender in his works. These approaches collectively illuminate his legacy as both a literary innovator and an essential social critic.

3. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The poetry of Namdev Dhasal arose from the brutal realities caste system. In India, Dalits, formerly known as untouchables, faced separation and economic oppression. Although the constitutional reforms happens but the post-independence era saw limited progress in caste equity. In the 1960s and 70s, many Dalits began to feel disappointed with Gandhi's way of treating them like helpless children and with the false promises of major political parties. This led them to start strong and radical protests. During this time, Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, and Raja Dhale co-founded The Dalit Panther Movement (1972) and gave a new turning point to the society. It was modeled on the Black Panther and latter it combined Marxist class critique with anti-caste militancy by using art and literature as weapons. His work, Golpitha published in 1972 and became the cultural manifesto of the movement. His work exposed underworld brothels and slums of Mumbai as sites of caste apartheid. The Panthers redefined the identity of untouchability from passive victimhood to confident rebellion that influenced to the later movements like the Bahujan Samaj Party.

Dhasal grew up in Kamathipura, Mumbai where many sex workers, laborers, and dalit migrants lived. He saw and experienced the life in and around him which impacted on him a lot and helped to shape his bold and honest style of poetry. Born into the Mahar community, which is a dalit caste, he witnessed caste-based violence, poverty, and urban exploitation firsthand. His father's menial labor and his mother's struggles as a homemaker emphasized the juncture of caste and class oppression. These experiences fired his rejection of sanitized literary traditions; instead, he embraced the "aesthetics of the gutter"—using coarse language, visceral imagery e.g., rotting flesh, sewage, and street slang to mirror Dalit lived reality. His poems, like "Man, You Should Explode", channel rage against caste humiliation, while "Cruelty" reflects on inherited trauma. Even his later works, like Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi (2010), retained this rawness, though with deeper existential reflections. His life and work remain a testament to art as resistance.

Though the Panthers fragmented by the 1980s, their impact endured. Poetry of Dhasal inspired generations of Dalit writers like Meena Kandasamy and Suraj Yengde and intersectional movements. His works forced Indian literature to confront caste oppression unflinchingly, bridging grassroots activism. In a present day, as caste violence persists, his verses remain a rallying cry—proving that poetry can be both a mirror to society's wounds and a hammer to shatter its hierarchies.

4. LITERARY STYLE AND INFLUENCES

Namdev Dhasal's poetry is raw, rebellious, and unapologetic, breaking away from traditional literary norms to voice the pain and rage of the oppressed. His language is deliberately coarse, filled with brutal imagery that captures the harsh realities of Dalit life, the red-light districts of Mumbai, and the struggles of the working class. Unlike conventional poets who seek beauty in suffering, he refuses to romanticize pain—he throws it in the reader's face, demanding confrontation. The miserable life of the downtrodden has been depicted as "so beggarly" that it feels like "nausea to be human". They even cannot fill their "shriveled gut even with dirt". His sarcasm finds its best expression in the following lines.

"Each new just day supports them as if bribed--
not a sigh slips through the fingers of day's plenty
as are cut down."

His poem Golpitha exemplifies the directness:

"I drink liquor, I wander free, I get seizures,
but I refuse to live within the false decency of this cursed world."

His poetry does not just describe oppression; it fights against it, often oscillating between violent resistance and philosophical reflection. His work is deeply influenced by Ambedkarite thought, Marxism, and Western modernist poetry. He used poetry as a weapon expressing the suffocation of Dalit life in lines like

"Where all words have fallen, where solitary love has departed."

His poetry also reflects Marxist themes, particularly the exploitation of laborers and the alienation of the poor. He saw caste and class oppression as interconnected, rejecting both in favor of a radical, egalitarian society. His anger was directed not only at Brahmanical patriarchy but also at capitalist structures that kept the working class in perpetual suffering.

Literary style of Dhasal also bears traces of Western modernist poets like Allen Ginsberg and T.S. Eliot, incorporating free verse, surreal imagery, and experimental structures. Like the Beat poets, he used unfiltered, provocative language to challenge social norms and moral hypocrisy. His avant-garde approach, fused with Dalit consciousness, made him a unique voice in Indian literature. Through his poetry, he not only exposed the darkness of society but also ignited a fire of resistance that continues to inspire movements for justice and equality today.

5. VARIOUS THEMES

The poetry of Namdev Dhasal is a constant attack on the caste system, exposing its brutality without compromise. Mainstream Indian poets often bypass the realities of caste oppression but he places it at the center of his work and make it impossible to ignore. He gives voice to the Dalits who are otherwise silenced by society. His poetry reflects his deep disappointment with a world which refuses to treat all humans with dignity. In his powerful words,

" मनुष्याने माणसासारखा जगावं हे त्याला अजून कळतं नाही "
("Humans have yet to understand how to live like humans."),

He expresses the deep-rooted inhumanity of caste-based discrimination. He is inspired with the ideology of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar but he does not simply seek reform like him. His imagery is state forward presenting the everyday suffering of Dalits. His poetry does not beautify oppression with poetic metaphors but it forces the reader into the immorality and violence that define the lives of the marginalized. His collection Golpitha captures the streets of Mumbai, filled with poverty, crime, and exploitation, especially of Dalit women. He describes their fate in painful clarity:

नशिब कुत्र्याच्या जगात नाही, या अत्रताने किती सांगायचं?
("There is no fate in a dog's world—how much more do I need to say?").

By comparing Dalit lives to stray dogs, he exposes their dehumanization, where even their existence is seen as worthless. His poetry does not allow the privileged to turn away; instead, it demands that they confront the horrors of the caste system. His poetry aims to disturb, provoke, and ultimately ignite rebellion.

He described a world in which blood, dirt, and broken bodies are symbols of systemic violence. Through troubling realism, he represents the lifelong suffering of Dalits, particularly the sexual exploitation of women by upper-caste men.

His words burn with anger and urgency, refusing to let oppression remain invisible.

"Learn to put your hands into the fire of the world's violent words,"

he declares, calling for active resistance against injustice. His poetry is more than literature; it is a weapon, a testament to centuries of suffering, and a battle cry for revolution. His work is proving that caste-based oppression is not an artifact of the past but a persistent reality that demands constant resistance.

6. IMPACT AND LEGACY

The contribution of Namdev Dhasal in Indian literature and social activism is unparalleled. He left an ever-lasting impact on Dalit literature, Marathi poetry, and political movements. His works revolutionized Dalit poetry. He infused it with a raw, rebellious, and unreformed voice, which helped to challenge the caste system and social inequalities. Earlier dalit writers were focusing on the personal sufferings but his poetry was clearly political and aggressive, demanding justice rather than looking for sympathy. He broke the traditional literary norms by using of colloquial Marathi, street slang, and explicit imagery and created a new form of expression that resonated with the oppressed. He summarized his lifelong commitment to social justice by saying

"I burn in only one fire, and its name is equality,"

His influence ranges beyond the Dalit literature into mainstream Marathi poetry. He motivates his contemporary poets to address caste oppression, urban struggles, and social injustice with greater honesty and urgency.

In the present era, modern poets, writers, and scholars continue to participate with the literary work of Dhasal. They are interpreting his literary works in contemporary socio-political contexts. His poetry is frequently referenced in anti-caste movements, feminist discourses, and labor struggles. Many contemporary Dalit poets, such as Arun Kamble, Daya Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy, appreciate him for creating the way for Dalit literary voice. His work is also studied in universities across India and internationally. Some critics talk about the extremity of his language and imagery, but many critics denied the power of his voice. His poetry continues to inspire new generations of activists, poets, and artists, ensuring that his fight for justice and equality remains alive in Indian literature and social movements.

7. CONCLUSION

Namdev Dhasal was a revolutionary poet and activist who reshaped Dalit literature, Marathi poetry, and activism. His uncooked, unreformed verses exposed caste oppression, social injustice, and urban poverty. His poetry provided realistic situation of the society. As he was the co-founder of the Dalit Panther movement, he justified his role in describing actual situations more effectively and giving the voice to caste discrimination. At present, his words are very effective in anti-caste movements, academic discourse, and literature. His poetry continues to inspire to the society by ensuring that the fight against caste inequality remains alive. As long as discrimination persists, his legacy will endure, fueling resistance and the demand for a more just society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Chitre, D. (1982). The Architecture of Anger: On Namdeo Dhasal's Golpitha. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 17(1A), 93–95.
- Chitre, D. (1997). The Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal. *Indian Literature*, 40(5), 145–151.
- Dhasal, N., and Chitre, D. (2014). Namdeo on Namdeo. *Indian Literature*, 58(1), 34–44.
- Dhasal, N. (2011). *A Current of Blood* (D. Chitre, Trans.). Navayana Publishing.
- Dhasal, N. (2007). *Golpitha* (D. Chitre, Trans.). Navayana.
- Jaaware, A. (2018). *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*. Fordham University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823282265.001.0001>
- Limbale, S. (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (A. Mukherjee, Trans.). Orient Blackswan.
- Rege, S. (2006). *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (xx–xx). University of Illinois Press.