

# Tracing poetry of protest in India: Dalit, Muslim and feminist perspectives

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## Abstract

Poetry has always been one of the most critical and vivid forms of expression available to humankind, and this paper seeks to trace and explore the origin, history, diversity, and methodology of the various kinds of poetry that were used to register protest or dissent against authority figures in India, particularly through the lens of the Dalit community, Indian Muslims and Indian feminists. The research aims to trace the similarities and differences in the way each of these communities began to use the creative medium of poetry to lodge their disagreements with the regimes, social order, or socio-political norms at various junctures of India's history, from the colonial past to a thriving democracy, while also exploring the contrast between relatively older instances to the contemporary times. Eminent poets whose words have had a lasting impact on their communities' social and political movements have found a place in the article as well, with snippets of their work showcasing the glimpse of the politics of their poetry. The paper also attempts to gauge the intersectional aspects of these three communities' literary work and find gaps and holes in places that have not been researched to a satisfactory degree. The paper concludes with remarks on the changes and latest trends observed by these communities regarding their poetry and protests.

Published by IJRP.ORG. Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of International Journal of Research Publications (IJRP.ORG)

**Keywords:** Poetry; Protest; Muslim; Dalit; Feminism; Democracy; Intersectional perspectives; Political movements

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## 1. Introduction

A variety of metrics and methods are used to calculate a country's performance or the perceived success or failure of its people's struggles to voice their concerns, raise their demands, state their plight, and share their apprehensions. However, these acts of defiance or dissent, often narrowly termed as protest, take various shapes and forms. One of the most creative, most vibrant, and unfortunately, one of the most ignored forms of these protests is the art of poetry. In a country with such a rich cultural, political, and social history as that of India, the art of poetry is as old and as diverse as the civilisations that have developed within and without it. The way poetry has interacted with the working of a nation-state, especially a democratic nation-state, has attracted researchers and philosophers from time immemorial, dating back to the work of Aristotle in Ancient Greece, whence he challenged the Platonic idea of poetry being an obstacle to the pursuit of truth (St Onge, J.

& Moore, J., 2016). Aristotle's *Poetics* was a remarkable contribution to the debate of poetry being an essential element of dissent in a democratic regime (Halliwell, S., 1987). While the global world of literature embraced the idea of poetic expression as a form of dissent, Indian literature and, more specifically, the poetic body of Indian literature evolved itself into a medium of expression, and consequently, protest. From the era of the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro to the postmodern world, poetics and poetry have constantly been used as ammunition to speak out against injustice, societal flaws, social inequalities, inadequate legal remedies, and other shared trauma (Carvalhaes, C., 2016). India is not aloof from this social development. While many of these protests and dissent bear a common identity, such as that of revolutionary poetry raised in unison against British Imperialism during the struggle for independence, India's multitudes of identity leave multiple avenues for different political identities and social communities.

## 2. Perspectives on the poetry of protests:

For the purpose of this article, the sociopolitical communities of Indian Muslims, Indian Dalits, and Indian feminists are selected to analyse the literature created by them in the domain of dissent and protest poetry. Priority has been given to poets that have remained in post-independent India after the partition of 1947. Similarly, poets whose connections to any of these groups could not have been verifiably established have also been avoided.

### 2.1 Dalit perspectives

In his seminal book *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, G Aloysius observes that "the pre-modern Indian society was characterised by a disjunction between society and polity." (Aloysius, G., 1998) Thus irrespective of political structure, the social structure remained constant, making caste hierarchy the fundamental basis of all social relations. It is no wonder then that all social phenomena in Indian society, including protest and dissent, begin with examining the caste factor. 'Dalit' as a term refers to the identity of the otherwise backward castes and tribes which are now called Scheduled Castes, and while it literally means "broken" or "oppressed", it has been reclaimed since the 1930s by prominent Dalit movements and newspapers to resemble solidarity of the oppressed people (Bharati, S. R., 2002).

Romila Thapar argues that the Upanishads and the writings of poet-bards were the first forms of dissent expression in the Indian social structure, not just the first literary form. Upanishads call for adopting means such as *tapas* and *yoga* as a means of salvation as opposed to sacrificial rituals, something that is generally seen as a means to salvation. Nevertheless, Thapar argues that the renunciation of social life and migration to the forest also reflects non-conformity with the prevalent social structure. (Thapar, R., 1981).

Though deeply embedded in history as seen above, the term 'Dalit poetry' is generally regarded to be coined in a 1958 Dalit literary conference organised in Bombay. Being organised in Maharashtra's capital, Marathi naturally becomes a critical focal point in the study of Dalit poetry. This fact is not surprising given the fact that two significant figures of the Dalit Movement – Jyotirao Phule and Bhim Rao Ambedkar belonged to the state. Additionally, the formation of Dalit Panthers in 1972 led to a resurgence of Dalit politics in Maharashtra, and indeed, the rest of India too. In fact, Dilip Chitre notes that Dalit poetry was written in an environment of bitter clashes between Dalit Panthers and Shiv Sena (Chitre, D., 2007).

A glimpse of this violence can be seen in Daya Pawar's poetry, where he laments to Buddha for being unable to civilise the oppressors through non-violence. The said poem goes as follows:

"Siddhartha,

You made a tyrant like Angulimal

tremble.

We are your humble followers.

How should we confront

this ferocious Angulimal?

O Siddhartha,

If we fight tooth and claw,

Try to understand us.

Try to understand us."

[In Buddhist literature, Angulimal is a robber whom Buddha later humanised]

(Muthukkaruppan, P., 2018) (Pawar, D., 1978)

However, this should not be construed to mean that Dalit poetry was influenced merely by local events or had just a regional appeal. For example, Namdeo Dhasal, in his collection of poetry *The Stupid Old Man Moved Mountains*, attacks feudalism and imperialism. It is generally understood that Dhasal referring to feudalism and imperialism as mountains is an allusion to Chairman Mao Zedong's famous address to the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 11 June, 1945.

A similar universal appeal is exercised by Telugu and Malayalam Dalit poetry which draws substantially from Marxism and Christianity (Muthukkaruppan, P., 2018). Besides being a critique of society, Dalit Poetry is also inherently anti-establishment in nature. This nature needs to be understood in the light of the works of subaltern historiographers like Ranajit Guha and Gyanendra Pandey. The Indian state is seen as inherently Brahmanical. Bagul, therefore, argues that it is problematic to identify Dalit poetry as 'Indian' poetry (Bagul, B., 1992). This is also the explanation Parthasarathi Muthukkaruppan gives of Dalit poetry being generally located in regional, and not national, history. (Muthukkaruppan, P., 2018)

In the contemporary sphere, Dalit poetry has evolved from being an expression of angst and suffering; the modern branch of Dalit poets display assertion of their writings and their fair share in society while also criticising the attempts by the state to deprive them of political agency and dissenting voices, and the general apathy displayed by the majority community towards their socio-politico-economic status. A worthy example here is the work of poet Varavara Rao in Telugu in 1985, where he writes:

"I did not supply the explosives

Nor ideas for that matter

It was you who trod with iron heels

Upon the anthill  
 And from the trampled earth  
 Sprouted the ideas of vengeance

It was you who struck the beehive  
 With your lathi  
 The sound of the scattering bees  
 Exploded in your shaken facade  
 Blotched red with fear

When the victory drum started beating  
 In the heart of the masses  
 You mistook it for a person and trained your guns  
 Revolution echoed from all horizons.”

(The Wire, 2020.)

As Rao still languishes in prison, his words gain deeper meaning reflecting the mechanisms used to silence criticism and solidarity movements of the Dalit community.

## 2.2 Muslim perspectives

Muslims in India have always had a multitude of identities and affiliations: political, religious, sectarian, and national. While the early Muslims came from Central Asian origins such as Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan, and (then) Arabia, their assimilation into Indian society soon created a library of literature in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Hindustani, Bengali, Malayalam, Sindhi, Punjabi, Gujarati, and eventually, English (Robinson, F., 1998). The works of Mirza Ghalib and Mir Taqi Mir mainly were concerned with philosophy and romanticism. However, the manner with which they challenged the then-orthodoxical norm of Islamized verse-form of poetry is considered by literary scholars to be nothing short of cultural protest against religious hegemony. In perhaps the most important study on Ghalib by Ehtisham Husain Rizvi, he states that “It can perhaps never be so easily said that, in as much as he came from a feudal and martial background, and was a Muslim, his ideas and attitude would be predictably and necessarily those of his class and his co-religionists.” (Rizvi, trans. Naim and Memon, 1969)

With the advent and subsequent collapse of various empires of Muslim origin, the introduction of colonialism in India led to a new chapter in Muslim poetry history. A new, rebellious batch of *shayars* and poets took to papers and books to voice their nationalist thoughts for India’s independence. The poetic ode of Syed Shah Muhammad Hasan (1901-1978), popularly known as Bismil Azimabadi, ‘Sarfarooshi Ki Tamanna’ aptly captures the aggression and resistance displayed by the Muslim poets of that time and a love for their country.

The poem was recited in the Calcutta Congress Session in 1920, but gained fame through Ram Prasad Bismil, which, as we will see later, will soon be labelled ironic.

An extract from the poem is:

*"Sarfarooshi ki tamanna ab hamaare dil mein hai*

*Dekhna hai zor kitna baazu-e-qaatil mein hai*

*Ai shaheed-e-mulk-o-millat main tire oopar nisaar*

*Le tire himmat ka charcha ghair ki mahfil mein hai"*

(A desire for revolution is now in our hearts

Let us see what strength the arms of our executioner has

O martyr of the country and the nation, I submit before you

For talks of your courage abound the camp of the enemy)

(Rekhta Organization, n.d.)

Muslim experience in post-colonial India has been shaped by the trauma of partition and the subsequent rise of Right-Wing Hindu Nationalist forces. The Urdu poetry, with an apparently ironic mixture of the frustration of unequal treatment on the one hand, and expressing deep love for the country, on the other hand, stands out in this regard.

A key theme of Muslim poetry has been the destruction caused by the series of anti-Muslim communal violence in India (Hasan, M., 1988). This begins from the anti-Muslim violence during 1946-47 itself. Much of the poetry of Urdu poet Kalim Aajiz (1926 - 2015), who lost his entire family during the 1946 communal violence in Bihar, is centred around the personal loss caused by the violence, which he has summarised as:

*Ghazal jo sunta hai meri Aajiz wo mujh ko hairat se dekhta hai*

*Ke dil pe guzri hai kya qayamat magar jabeen par shikan nahi hai*

(The person listening to my poetry stares at me in astonishment

That what a terrible fate he has suffered, but there is no wrinkle on his forehead)

This should not be taken as an expression of the loss of a single individual. It represents the loss experienced by a wide section of Muslim society.

Another poet who has written on this theme is Bashir Badr (b. 1935). Perhaps the most popular couplet on this theme is Badr's following couplet which he wrote after his house was burnt down in communal violence in Meerut -

*Log toot jaate hain ek ghar banane mein*

*Tum taras nahi khaate bastiyan jalane mein*

(People [break down/extinguish their entire energy]? in making just one house

And yet you don't take pity in burning down entire neighbourhoods)

In the same poem, he also lamented the helplessness of Indian Muslims that they have no option but to vote for the same politicians who have provoked and supported such anti – Muslim violence:

*Faakhta ki majburi ye bhi kah nahi sakti*

*Kaun saanp rahta hai uske aashiyane mein*

(The dove is so helpless that it can't even speak out

The name of the snake who lives in his nest)

The 1980s saw an unprecedented rise of the Right-Wing Hindu Nationalists, which culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. This has happened despite the assurances offered by the government that the mosque won't be harmed – assurances on which Muslims had patiently contended. Poet Manzar Bhopali (b. 1959) protested this betrayal as:

*Hamara sabr tumhe khaak mein mila dega*

*Hamare sabr ka tujh ko asar nahi maloom*

(Our patience will ruin you

You are unaware of the effect it has)

Another key theme of resistance that gained momentum in Muslim poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the allegation of terrorism being stamped over the entire Muslim community, especially after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Coupled with this was the targeting of a host of Muslim youth being wrongly booked under terror charges, spending long years in prison, and then being finally acquitted by the courts. Protesting this criminalisation of Muslims, a renowned Urdu poet Rahat Indori (1950 – 2020) wrote in one of his poems:

*Ye jo laakhon karoron paanch waqton ke namazi hain*

*Agar sach much mein dehshatgard ban jaayen to kya hoga*

(These lakhs and crores of those who pray five times a day

Do you have any idea what would happen if they were actually terrorists?)

In recent years, the imminent fear from a seemingly exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens caused Muslims in India to be alarmed. Coupled with that, the atmosphere of hateful

propaganda and instances of hate crimes against Muslims has led to a new generation of Muslim poets-cum-protestors.

Aamir Aziz's poem *Sab Yaad Rakha Jayega*, originally written in Urdu, was recited by Pink Floyd's Roger Waters and explained the sentiments of the times as such:

"Kill us, we will become ghosts and write

of your killings, with all the evidence.

You write jokes in court;

We will write 'justice' on the walls.

We will speak so loudly that even the deaf will hear.

We will write so clearly that even the blind will read.

You write 'injustice' on the earth;

We will write 'revolution' in the sky.

Everything will be remembered;

Everything recorded."

(The Statesman, 2020)

With the current political climate communalising the divide between majority and minority communities in India, the revival of revolutionary writings of the likes of Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) and Habib Jalib (1928 - 1993) has continued to inspire and invigorate not just a new branch of Muslim resistance but an enhanced solidarity.

### ***2.3 Feminist perspectives***

The best definition of feminism, in a nutshell, has to be no definition. With the evolving history of mankind, womankind has evolved simultaneously in a plethora of ways and directions, and while there are conventional theories as those which originated in Europe (French Revolution) and the United States, the multifaceted notion of rights and fundamentalism renders a universal document of feminism to be obsolete. Nonetheless, the crux of feminist movements has been primarily summarised as follows by Sarbani Guha Ghoshal:

- “(i) an effort to make women a self-conscious category;
  - (ii) a force to generate a rational sensible attitude towards women;
  - (iii) an approach to view the women in their own positions;
  - (iv) an approach to view the women through their own perspectives”
- (Ghoshal, 2005)

In light of Mary Wollstonecraft's work in 'The Vindication of the Rights of Women', feminist depictions have been displayed in various historical and religious texts that predate modern feminist theory. Lopemudra, an

essential character in *Rig Veda* shows signs of feminist autonomy while arguing with her husband over not fulfilling her sexual needs. David Lorenzen has also argued how the Bhakti Movement (8AD-17AD) needs to be viewed over and above its relation with religious philosophy, and consider it a medium of social and political protest. (Lorenzen, D.N., 1987)

Akka Mahadevi (c.1130–1160), a prominent Kannada poet of the Bhakti era, abandoned her marriage and roamed without clothes, with her body covered only by her hair. (Mudaliar, C.,1991).

“To the shameless girl  
Wearing Mallikarjuna’s light, you fool  
Where is the need for cover and jewel?”

People,  
male and female,  
blush when a cloth covering their shame  
comes loose

When the lord of lives  
lives drowned without a face  
In the world, how can you be modest?

When all the world is the eye of the lord,  
onlooking everywhere, what can you  
cover and conceal?” (Ramaswamy, V., 1996)

In the British Raj era, the influx of western philosophy and social policy led to a widespread introduction of modern feminist discourse, and many female poets began to touch upon issues of female education, backward religious practices, and child marriage. Like many of their male compatriots, Indian women were also rebelling against the British colonisation, and their different identities of womanhood played a significant role in the way they wrote.

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) were among iconic poets in the ocean of Indian literature who defied gender norms to be key figures in not just the fight for independence but also for the unflinching way they raised their voice and opinions. "As long as I have life, as long as blood flows through this arm of mine, I shall not leave the cause of freedom...I am only a woman, only a poet. But as a woman, I give to you the weapons of faith and courage and the shield of fortitude. And as a poet, I fling out the banner of song and sound, the bugle call to battle. How shall I kindle the flame which shall waken you men from slavery..." she described herself, and her words have remained true to this day. (Awasthi, 2018)

Pritam wrote the following lines in Punjabi, translated by Smita Agarwal, while describing the harrowing effects of the partition on Indian women:

I exhort you, Waris Shah, speak from your grave today.  
Add a new page to your book of love, today.



Once, a daughter of Punjab wept, you wrote your saga of love that day;  
A thousand daughters weep, calling out to you, today.  
Arise, O friend of the afflicted; arise and see the state of Punjab:  
Corpses, strewn in fields, bloody, flows the Chenab.  
Someone filled the five rivers with poison; this water now irrigates our soil

...  
The flute that played songs of love is lost; all Raanjha's, knowing how to play it, having  
forgot.

Blood has rained on the soil, graves are oozing blood;  
Distraught princesses of love, cry their hearts out, at tombs.  
All the Quaidons have become thieves of beauty and love today,  
Where can we find another one like Waris Shah, today.  
Waris Shah! Only you can speak from the depths of the grave,  
To you I say today: add a new page to your epic of love, this day.

(Pritam, A. et al, 1968)

Early feminist poetry in contemporary India had primarily focused on societal evils that have been passed on through generations. The issues of female infanticide, torture for dowry, and sexual harassment on the streets, equal opportunities and rights in the workplace, coincided with the rise of second-wave feminism in the western world. The case of a woman's brutal rape on 16 December, 2012, in the national capital of Delhi, referred to in the mainstream media as Nirbhaya, evoked spontaneous protests for the emancipation of women's rights and liberties.

Svati Chakraborty wrote a moving song to capture the essence of the anti-rape emotion prevalent in India with,

*"Reeti ki zanjeere kha gayi zang  
Nyaay ke mandir bhi ho gaye bhang  
Zamaana chale na chale mere sang  
Bolungi halla, awaaz dabangg  
Bekhauff azaad hai kehna mujhe  
Bekhauff azaad hai rehna mujhe"*

(The chains of tradition lie in rust  
The temples of justice collapsed in dust  
I care not if society walks by my side  
I will wreck havoc, my voice a battle-cry  
Fearless and free I want to speak  
Fearless and free I want to be)  
(YRF Music, 2014)

Another important aspect of the anguish expressed in the poetry landscape of India was regarding the unequal opportunities presented to the male and female members of Indian societal structures, particularly in families with a traditional patriarchal stronghold. The highlighting of cases where political sexism and misogyny, especially in regards to the sexual autonomy of women, disparity in education and industrial sector, and workplace settings which led to women employees being sexually abused, harassed or overlooked for

incentives, ignited the fire of campaigns such as #MeToo and #TimesUp in India, which was primarily considered a domain of the global West. (Krook, 2019)

The advent of popular internet media such as YouTube and the rise in popularity of slam poetry events and open mic forums, such as Button Poetry in Europe and the USA, and UnErase Poetry in India, led to a new class of feminist poets, poets who brought in a viewership as well as a readership to issues of contemporary feminist discourse. (Hoffman, T., 2001).

Aranya Johar (b. 1998) wrote and performed a poem called A Brown Girl's Guide To Gender invoked the emotions felt by a lot of young women and girls, where she writes,

“Yet, I am silenced.  
 For all we boil down to is sexual interaction.  
 Not just me, my mother, sisters, friends,  
 All quicken their pace post 8:30 in the evening.  
 My mom tells me to wear skirts out less often.  
 Nirbhaya and more, left forgotten.  
 We don't want to be another of India's daughters, do we?  
 So I wear my jeans long and wear my tops high.  
 Don't show my cleavage or a hint of my thighs.  
 Risking not my virginity, but my life.”

(UnErase Poetry, 2017)

With women's rights and human rights finally becoming synonymous in India, the literature of feminist poetry, especially the unapologetic protest poetry, is bound to increase and improve.

### 3. Intersections, scope of further research, and conclusion

While the measure of some protest poetry was universal, as noted earlier in the article with the example of anti-colonial sentiment, the analysis of the poetry of protests of particular communities and groups in India leaves a lot to be desired from the purview of their intersections. Muslims, Dalits, and feminists don't exist as binaries or rigid blocks, but move across their intermingled politics. Hence, a Dalit may also present her poetry from a feminist viewpoint. A feminist may also portray her struggles as a Muslim. Furthermore, a Muslim may demand rights for himself and Dalits, considering they are both on the lower end of the socio-political strata, divided by religion, united by oppression.

Hence, it is important to note that while the identities of their politics and their history is an essential mould and indicator for either Muslims, Dalits, or feminists, these identities are not the defining or restricting traits for their poetry of protests. They can be protesting multiple oppressions at the same time. For example, as Rege noted and Halder built upon, a Dalit woman bears the “double catastrophe” of being a woman and a Dalit. (Rege, S., 1987) (Halder, D., 2019). Protesting against the patriarchy and casteism, and expressing her struggle and anger in words, prominent Dalit poet and novelist Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) wrote:

“Up there.  
 Reverberate and sound as loud

as snail shells crackling under nailed boots  
 and perhaps as distinct and defenseless.  
 This double catastrophe projected in sights  
 and shrieks evokes...  
 No response.

Those above are (mostly)  
 indifferent bastards.”

Similarly, the writings of Hira Bansode (b. 1939), Sukirtharani (b. 1973), Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), Rasheed Jahan (1905-1952), and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) present us with examples over how the womb of Dalit and Muslim agony has provided inspiration from many female-centric poetic movements of dissent during pre-independence and post-independence. Dalit and Muslim women had started working on their literature in the mid-1900s as a form of protest against the prevailing form of the difference between a normal woman and a Dalit or Muslim woman. Registering their protests in their writing, these women formed a new perspective of feminism in India, reminding them about their fight against caste, class and gender discriminations.

Even now, the writings and politics of these socio-religious groups are broadly viewed in isolation, and there is a need to evaluate the literature of dissent produced by the trials and tribulations faced by its members not just in isolation, but in an interconnected, intersectional, and interwoven context.

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