

Classic Poetry Series

Namdeo Dhasal
- poems -

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Namdeo Dhasal(15 February 1949 -)

Namdeo Laxman Dhasal (Marathi: नामदेव लखमण धासल) (Namdev Dhasal) is a Marathi poet, writer and Human Rights activist from Maharashtra, India.

Biography

Dhasal was born on February 15, 1949, in a village near Pune, India. A member of the previously called Mahar class, he grew up in dire poverty. He spent his childhood in Golpitha, a red light district in Mumbai, where his father worked for a butcher.

Following the example of the American Black Panther movement, he founded the Dalit Panther with friends in 1972. This militant organization supported its radical political activism with provocative pamphlets. Dhasal was one of the famous and outspoken members of this group.

In 1973, he published his first volume of poetry, Golpitha. More poetry collections followed: Moorkh Mhataryane (By a Foolish Old Man) --inspired by Maoist thoughts--; Tujhi Iyatta Kanchi? (How Educated Are You?); erotic Khel; and Priya Darshini (about the former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi).

Dhasal wrote two novels, and also published pamphlets such as Andhale Shatak (Century of Blindness) and Ambedkari Chalwal (Ambedkarite Movement), which was a reflection on the socialist and communist concepts of Dalit movement founder Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Later, he published two more collections of his poetry: Mi Marale Suryachya Rathache Sat Ghode (I Killed the Seven Horses of the Sun), and Tujhe Boat Dharoon Mi Chalalo Ahe (I'm Walking, Holding Your Finger).

Recently, Dhasal has been writing columns for the Marathi daily Saamana. Earlier, he worked as an editor for the weekly Satyata.

Activist

In 1982, cracks began to appear in the Panther movement. Ideological disputes gained the upper hand and eclipsed the common goal. Dhasal wanted to engender a mass movement and widen the term Dalit to include all oppressed people, but the majority of his comrades insisted on maintaining the exclusivity of their organization.

Serious illness and alcohol addiction of Dhasal overshadowed the following years, during which he wrote very little. In the 1990s, he once again became politically more active.

Dhasal currently holds a national office in the Indian Republican Party, which was formed by the merger of all Dalit parties. In 2006, he publicly joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's call for "Hindu brotherhood".

Literary Style

The Dalit literature tradition is old, though the term "Dalit literature" was introduced only in 1958. Dhasal was greatly inspired by the work of Baburao Bagul, who employed photographic realism to draw attention to the circumstances which those deprived of their rights from birth have to endure. Dhasal's poems broke away from stylistic conventions. He included in his poetry many words and expressions which only the Dalits normally used. Thus, in Golpitha he adapted his language to that of the red light milieu, which shocked middle class readers.

The establishment's assessment of Dhasal's political, as opposed to his artistic achievements may differ drastically, but for the writer they are inextricably linked. In an interview in 1982 he said that if the aim of social struggles was the removal of unhappiness, then poetry was necessary because it expressed that happiness vividly and powerfully. Later he stated, "Poetry is politics." Dhasal adheres to this principle in his private life. He told the photographer Henning Stegmüller, "I enjoy discovering myself. I am happy when I am writing a poem, and I am happy when I am leading a protest of prostitutes fighting for their rights."

Kamatipura

The nocturnal porcupine reclines here
Like an alluring grey bouquet
Wearing the syphilitic sores of centuries
Pushing the calendar away
Forever lost in its own dreams

Man's lost his speech
His god's a shitting skeleton
Will this void ever find a voice, become a voice?

If you wish, keep an iron eye on it to watch
If there's a tear in it, freeze it and save it too
Just looking at its alluring form, one goes berserk
The porcupine wakes up with a start
Attacks you with its sharp aroused bristles
Wounds you all over, through and through
As the night gets ready for its bridegroom, wounds begin to blossom
Unending oceans of flowers roll out
Peacocks continually dance and mate

This is hell
This is a swirling vortex
This is an ugly agony
This is pain wearing a dancer's anklets

Shed your skin, shed your skin from its very roots
Skin yourself
Let these poisoned everlasting wombs become disembodied.
Let not this numbed ball of flesh sprout limbs
Taste this
Potassium cyanide!
As you die at the infinitesimal fraction of a second,
Write down the small 's' that's being forever lowered.

Here queue up they who want to taste
Poison's sweet or salt flavour
Death gathers here, as do words,
In just a minute, it will start pouring here.

O Kamatipura,
Tucking all seasons under your armpit
You squat in the mud here
I go beyond all the pleasures and pains of whoring and wait
For your lotus to bloom.
— A lotus in the mud.

[Translated by Dilip Chitre]

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