

Writing Revolution: Depiction of Caste and Class in Lal Singh Dil's Selected Poetry

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Abstract

Dalit writers and critics aptly suggest that the Punjabi Dalit poetry is highly progressive and human-centric in nature; it demands justice and equality and revolts against all forms of discrimination issuing from one's caste, class, gender, and religion. Influenced by the liberal ethos induced by early Muslim saints and the teachings of Sikh Gurus, this poetry preaches equity, compassion, love, comradeship, and opposes any dichotomy among human beings. The significant social and political events such as the advent of Ambedkar and Mangoo Ram Mugowalia and the arrival of the Naxalism in Punjab in subsequent years, however, changed the texture of Punjabi Dalit poetry and turned it to be revolutionary. These events made Dalit poets oppose existing power structures and power relations and sing of an imminent revolution. Prominent Dalit poets such as Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Sing Dil were the key figures to evince this transformation in the literary arena. The present paper is an attempt to examine how Dil uses his poetry as an apparatus to spread the revolutionary ideals and to awaken and mobilize the suppressed and muffled Dalits. It also seeks to discover how he represents caste and class in his poetry and what alternatives does he suggest to obliterate prevalent social, economic, political disparities and to liberate Dalits eventually.

Keywords: Depiction, Dalit, Poetry, Caste, Class, Revolution, Power, Transformation.

Lal Singh Dil is generally regarded as one of the greatest revolutionary poets of Punjab. He occupies a significant place in Punjabi letters as his fervent poetry enunciates caste and class issues and inspires not just a generation of suppressed Dalits but also all those speaking up against other forms of oppression. Being a product of the Naxalite movement, which took its root in Punjab in the 1960s, Dil uses poetry as a contrivance to expose rampant social and economic disparities and show the nothingness of Dalit life. He was born in 1943 in a poor *chamar* family at Samrala, a small town in the Malwa region of pre-independence Punjab. His father was an agricultural labourer working for the high caste landlords. He received scanty wages only and the family suffered frequent

financial strife. Though the family was hardly able to procure even the things of basic necessity such as food and clothes, despite that Dil was sent to a school which was something highly exceptional and unconventional for Dalits at that time. He passed the high school examination from the government school at Samrala. He joined A. S. College at Khanna for higher education but could not complete his degree at all. After discontinuing his college study, he started the Junior Teachers' Training course at SHS College in Bahilolpur, but he had to leave without completing it. He also did not accomplish Gyani, an honours course in Punjabi. It was evidently because Dil's family was not able to provide him with the money required to purchase study material and meet other expenses. This was likely one of the main reasons behind his repeatedly failing to complete the courses he joined after matriculation. His instability and frequent mobility also accounted for his failure to secure a government or non-government job, so he worked as an agricultural labourer, as a herder, and also as a tuition teacher for his own subsistence and to support his impoverished family. Dil started poetry writing in his early school days, but he followed it seriously when the surge of the powerful Naxalite Movement stretched to Punjab. He was elated by the advent of Naxalism in Punjab as English Romantic Poets were thrilled by the outbreak of the French Revolution of 1789. In the dream of a just and equalitarian society, Dil saw Naxalism as a new dawn for the impoverished Dalits and other marginalised socio-economic sections. He believed that Marxism addresses current economic and political issues and it is the only panacea to end all evils infecting mankind. He abominated bourgeois society, with all its creative comforts and materialism, and affirmed his faith in the revolution that would bring about a new order and new values. However, Dil was beaten, imprisoned, and severely tortured for his revolutionary disposition and connections, but he did not give up the socio-political actions and writing. For him, writing was a significant component of his revolutionary agenda and itinerary. Consequently, as a prolific Dalit writer, he published three collections of poetry: *Sutlej Di Hawa* 1971, *Bahut Saarey Suraj* 1982 and *Satthar* 1997 respectively. His autobiography *Dastaan* and a collected volume of all his poems titled *Naglok* were published in 1998. His long narrative poem 'Ajj Billa Phir Aaya' which deals with his mounting anxiety and fear creeping in his heart and which offers a realistic picture of his own village Samrala through the experiences of an imaginary figure Billa was published in 2009. In addition, a collection of his three verse plays: *Rano GitanWali*, *Parwane* and *Dukhi Ram* came out in 2012, posthumously.

The present paper is an attempt to examine how Dil uses his poetry as a contraption to spread the revolutionary ideals and to awaken and mobilise the suppressed and muffled Dalits. It also seeks to discover how he represents caste and class in his poetry and what alternatives does he suggest to obliterate prevalent social, economic, political disparities and to liberate Dalits eventually. Dil saw the suffering of Dalits and other non-dominant socio-economic groups such as peasants, agricultural labourers, small artisans, small businessmen, domestic helps, women, prostitutes, and tribals from very close quarters, so his poetry is an authentic reflection of their experiences of domination, anguish, and struggles for subsistence. It presents realistic images of the masses who have been positioned at the lowest rungs of Indian society and have traditionally been oppressed and denied access even to basic humanity. Accentuating the range of Dil's poetry T. C. Ghai says, "he has focused for the first time in Punjabi poetry on the lives of people excluded and ignored by history and disinherited from the fruits of civilization, progress, and development for ages—men and women belonging to the wandering tribes of Punjab (Sanasi, Bauaria, Bazigar, Barad, Bangala, Gadhile, Nut etc.), the landless labourers and daily wagers mostly belonging to the lower caste communities" (9). Rajkumar Hans also writes, "Dil was a sensitive poet and his poetry was true to life and the experience of poverty, injustice, and oppression was so real and told so well that he was hailed as the bard of the Naxalite Movement in Punjab" (77). The poet recounts that the precepts of caste and class alienate Dalits from education, land and economic resources and force them to live the lives of famishment and impecunious. He exposes the mechanism of Dalit suffering and voices a powerful rebellion against the hegemony of the high castes that control a huge part of land and property and relegates Dalits to margins in every sphere of life. He is discernibly opposed to what Karl Marx called "the economic original sin of the primitive accumulation of capital" (873). Dil advocates for equal distribution of resources and forthrightly demands a just and viable space for Dalits and other marginalised sections in a dichotomous social and economic systems. He opines that Dalits are not allowed to be economically self-reliant and lead a comfortable and dignified life.

In "The Tale of God and Demon," Dil exposes the abusive feudalism and radically demands that the present inequalitarian system should be smashed and the exploitation of weak by the powerful should be stopped (133-34). Though Dil was much influenced by the Marxist ideology, he did not subsume caste into class as it is usually done by the Marxist writers and activists. It distinguishes him from his fellow revolutionary poets such as Sant Ram Udasi, Avatar Singh

Sandhu Pash and others. Udasi, who hailed from an impoverished *chuhra* (*chuhra* denotes a Dalit caste in India, also known as Bhangis and Valmiki; *chuhras* are mostly poor and landless and do manual scavenging for survival) family, remained preoccupied with class struggle and economic empowerment and his caste concerns lost force. The caste and the fourfold Varna system, which frequently schemed to suppress Dalits, do not come to explicit scrutiny and criticism in his poetry. Meet also writes, Udasi did not foreground his subjective experiences as a Dalit, though he was frequently subjected to caste-based humiliation and violence. His poetry mirrors the economic disparities, extols Marxist ideology and sings of a revolution (647). The same is the case with Pash. Born into a landholding Jat-Sikh family, Pash also preached revolutionary ideals. He did not strive to abrogate social disparities, though he grappled with the issue of caste. In the introduction to *Pash: A Poet of Impossible Dreams* Ghai says, “Pash struggled to end the economic exploitation of the proletariat by capitalists and advocated for the initiation of a classless society” (8). The deliberate blind spot of the caste issue marks the poetry of Udasi and Pash incomplete as it excludes a huge number of masses from its scope. Dil, who also belonged to the same school of thought and ideology, on the other hand, places the caste body at the center of his writing and argues that caste is the root of Dalits’ suffering, their dehumanisation and deprivation. He exposes the nexus of caste and class and shows how brahmanism operates through feudalism and subjugates Dalits. It is the precept of caste that not only dubs Dalits polluting and exposes them to exploitation but also determines their class. Relentless oppression, unflagging unemployment and starvation rampant among Dalits keep them poor and coerce them to submit to dominant socio-economic forces, and to internalise oppression.

In “The Unemployed,” poet realistically portrays how Dalits have conditioned themselves to live in an imperious social, political and economic milieu. They have habituated themselves to suppress their hunger, their anguish and to smile even in severe pain and suffering. They have trained themselves to conceal their indignation and say sweet things to please their masters. They have toughened themselves and walk in the battered shoes and cover their emaciated bodies by worn out clothes or rags only (54). Dalits, who mostly work as agricultural labourers, are subjected to severe economic exploitation by the high caste feudal lords. They force hapless Dalits to work incessantly and do not pay them properly for their slogging. The workers have to implore their employers to get their meagre wages and leftover food mostly given to them for the discharge of their duties as born slaves. Constant oppression leaves no space

for the economic advancement of Dalits and it does not allow them lead a happy, dignified life though they are strong, honest, and assiduous. He argues that it is mainly because Dalits imbibed deceitful Hindu religious codes and conventions and submitted to them silently. The toxic Hindu religious texts such as *Manusmriti* legitimised caste, class-based disparities, and exploitation that devoured Dalit rights and autonomy. Dil scorns acrimonious Manuism and fraudulent Varna theory that discounted Dalits' personhood, denied them humanity, and thwarted their progression in every sphere of life. He reiterates that it is because of the noxious caste codes dictated particularly by Manu that Dalits still are poor, deprived and marginalised. The codes of Manu did not allow Dalits to own property, earn money and join esteemed and gainful professions. Ridiculing the implications of Manuism in "Exclusion" Dil writes:

Almost none from our caste
can be found
in any team
in any film
in any respectable profession.
Roots of this plant of Manuvad
lie in patalalok
and its head touches sky

Manu says:

Don't let them rise
If they do
pull them down quickly. (184)

The poet argues that the illusive religious theories such as that of sin and previous birth were imposed so forcibly and deviously on Dalits that they accepted them as a divine order, their religion and something spontaneous and preordained. They never challenged these concocted stories and did not attempt to devise effective strategies to fight against hegemonic socio-economic forces. In "We are Great Wrestlers" the poet shows unequivocally how Dalits lacked well planned collective efforts to eradicate rampant disparities and to liberate themselves from the strictures of caste and class. The tactics they employed to fight against caste and casteist forces were deadly and ineffectual (159). In addition, the internal caste divides also accounted for Dalits' suppression and perpetual enslavement. Dalits unheeded the fact that they are equally victimised by the prejudice of caste of and kept on fighting against each other. They realised the need of unity

and brotherhood only when they suffered impecuniousness, humiliation and dehumanisation personally. In “Two Brothers,” the poet elucidates it through the story of two brothers who loathed each other and eventually fell the victims of caste and class authority (144). It is interesting to note that Dil approves of the theory of Aryan invasion and maintains that Dalits, the native Indians have been subjugated by the Aryans, the alien relentless assailants. The conquering Aryans initiated a socio-economic and cultural system that established their authority over Dalits, dehumanised them and dubbed as lowly and polluting. The poet scorns the Aryans’ fraudulences to subjugate Dalits and rejects the culture that they imposed deceitfully on them. He maintains that the Dalits are not the subject without culture and history as they have always been delineated in traditional Indian literature. They always had a rich cultural heritage that was scraped by the alien assailants to expunge their identity and perpetuate their slavery.

In “Culture High and Low” poet sings of a utopia that the indigenous Indian lost after the Aryan incursions. The egalitarian society that Dil extols, was in some way related to *nagas*, the serpent people, inhabiting *naglok*—the lowest region of the Puranic underworld. He argues that the dwellers of *naglok* were happy and had socio-economic parities and justice. They were treacherously enslaved by Aryans and their distinctive equalitarian culture and identity also were pulverized callously (121-23). Dil reiterates that the native establishments in general were democratic as they preserve no social, economic and gender hierarchy and treated every individual as equal irrespective of birth and material possession. Gender also was not a concern for them, women were honoured and granted agency. Poet argues that the women who are now termed Adivasi were once free and empowered like queens. His “The Aboriginal Society” is the finest illustration of his views of indigenous civilization which is written as:

That aboriginal society,
the one Shiva himself had founded.
No one was excluded.
There was no differentiation.
Everyone knew
they were all the progeny of one Father.
Today’s society is full of discrimination
Filled with hatred,
high and low, this caste and that caste,
You and I. (192)

Dil exalts traditional Dravidians or pre-Aryan tribal societies and commends native heroes such as *Ravan*, that are reviled and depicted as anti-heroes. He high points that the highly casteist and conceited Aryan kings such Ram meted out atrocities and inflicted injustices on the natives. He finds Ram's killing of Ravan unjust and wicked. He questions the godhood of Rama as he finds it horrendous that Ram, who himself was God, killed Ravan instead of washing his alleged sins off.

He esteems Ravan as a virtuous king and finds it unjustified that his descendants (Dalits) are still being punished and despised for his deeds or so-called sins (131). Dil ignores or does not question Rama's ruthless assassination of Dalit intellectual Shambuk rishi, but he scorns the Aryans for their general dominating and demeaning attitude towards indigenous Indians. He rejects cultural hegemony; his Dalit characters assert their original identity as native Indians though they are despised for it. In "The Women of Kudeli Village," the Dalit women, for instance, wear black and express their love for it despite knowing that it is the colour traditionally associated with evil and is considered desecrate, and demonic (100). Dalit women are aware that they are the posterities of the people having black complexion, so their adherence to black is an assertion of their identity and also a powerful protest against hegemonic culture and social establishment.

It is worth nothing that Dil was writing at the time when Dalit movement, which originated in Maharashtra, was spreading in other states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Bengal and a corpus of Dalit literature was being produced in many vernacular languages, but he did not even mention Ambedkar and Dalit Panther. Though he appealed to Dalits to educate and organise themselves and protest collectively, he did not subscribe to Ambedkar model overtly. For him, intercaste marriages and inter-dining as suggested by Ambedkar to annihilate caste is not the only stratagem to eradicate rampant caste, class disparities and empower Dalits. They may be effective measures to abrogate prevailing disparities gradually, but it is only a powerful revolution that can overthrow discriminatory institutions promptly and can initiate a just and egalitarian system. His poetry speaks of an imminent revolution and appeals to the suppressed Dalit masses to come out and revolt against their oppressors. The poet refers to Banda Singh Bahadur, the great Sikh warrior, to inspire silenced Dalits and spread revolutionary fervour among them. In "To Jagirdars" he writes:

Thousands of striving people
had appealed to Banda Bahadur
that the jagirdars
were sucking their blood.
In anger Banda had rebuked them:
You are in thousands
and they a handful
Why are you helpless?
Can't you suck their blood?
When jagirdars heard this
They had Banda arrested. (191)

Besides caste, class and religious domination, Dalits also are the victims of political oppression and marginalisation. Poet says that the modern political parties that are high caste dominated do not work for Dalit empowerment. It is ironical that they usurp power by using Dalits' vote and suppress Dalits when they get into power. They use the government agencies such as police to terrorize Dalits and asphyxiate their dissent and uprising. The Dalits demanding their rights are put in prisons and are tortured in numerous ways. Dil's poetry mirrors his experiences as a Dalit revolutionary and speaks about his own torments when he was imprisoned after Birla Seed Farm Agitation of 1969 and a violent attack on *Chamkaur* police station (*Chamkaur* also known as *Chamkaur Sahib* is a sub divisional town in Rupnagar district in modern Punjab. The Naxalites attacked Chamkaur police station in 1969 to register their protest and revolutionize their demand for economic equality. Dil was hold responsible for this violent attack and was booked, imprisoned and tortured by the police) in same year. He describes how he suffered greater persecution and more severe violent actions from police as compared to other high caste rebellions because it was considered highly arrogant and sacrilegious for a Dalit to speak of revolution and transform society. His poems such as "Proof," "The Prison Wall" and many others are authentic illustrations on his experiences as a Dalit dissenter and prisoner (82, 113). Poet is highly critical of the existing caste based political system. He maintains that even Dalit leaders also are swayed by the high caste politicians, they also join hands with the casteist forces for money and for their petty personal gains and oppress their own brethren. Dalits, who have no access to political power, lead the lives of sub-human beings deliberately alienated from economic and general development. State as a savior is nowhere visible in Dil's poetry, but it is present everywhere as an arch oppressor. Being a staunch Marxist, Dil writes of the

struggle between economic classes and brings out the distress of suppressed and destitute masses living in villages far away from modern urban civilization and development. Ghai aptly says:

The modern urban world, as well as the world of wealth or even minimal affluence, is almost completely absent from Dil's poetry, as also from his imagination. His poetry delineates mostly the lives of people from whom modernity and urban life are non-existent, or almost irrelevant, even as dream. For most of them, life revolves around agricultural land, which does not belong to them but to which they are tied down by chains of servitude for subsistence and survival. For them life does not mean much beyond this. Most of them belong to the landless Dalit and many wanderings tribal communities mostly invisible in the mainstream media, and until recently in history and literature. (16)

Dil exposes every discriminatory institution and law and speaks for all those who are deprived and positioned on social, economic, and political margins. It is worth mentioning that he is not limited to addressing the caste and class conflicts; he looks beyond these two repressive ideologies and is extremely sensitive to the gendered issues. He shows how women have to suffer distinctively and more severely in casteist, feudalistic and masculine society. He was well aware that Dalit women are the worst victims of these institutions as besides being women they also are poor and untouchables. The percept of gender exposes them to both internal and external patriarchy and poverty accounts for their exploitation in every sphere of life. Poet argues that the Dalit women working as physical labourer are coerced to slog without food, rest and proper wages. Besides, they also are molested and raped by their high caste employers who treacherously forces them to surrender their bodies to them and also ensnare them by expressing pseudo-love for them. The poet exposes the whole mechanism of Dalit women's suffering and victimisation and advises them not to fall in love with the high caste men as they usually betray them in the name of love. He also shows the plight of tribal women. Like Dalit, the tribal women also are the victims of oppression and marginalisation and they also are subjected to sexual exploitation both within their own and mainstream society. Dil is highly sensitive to the issues of other socially ostracised and economically underprivileged women such as prostitutes. His liberal and equalitarian views of women are evident when he offers dignity and humanitarian attitude towards prostitutes who are

generally despised and are held impure or fallen within chauvinistic patriarchal set-up. For him, prostitutes are not merely the sex machines for the male amusement, rather they are equal human beings deserving dignity in life. Sukhdev Singh also says:

Lal Singh Dil, through the subtle paly of his satire and tone of dissent, rejects our established ideals of beauty and femininity. He overturns the feudal image of woman as a weakling and an object of sensual pleasure . . . When he calls the prostitutes as his own and the revolution's sisters and daughter, he hits out at the hypocritical upholders of morality, who in fact, themselves disrobe unsuspecting and innocent female. (38)

Dil unfetters women from demeaning patriarchal precepts such as virginity and chastity and strongly advocate for their agency and integrity. His equalitarian and deferential attitude towards women in general is further evident when he recognises women's role and holds them strong and more powerful than men. In "A Wonder" poet calls woman a miracle of this world and maintains that it is only a woman who makes life beautiful and worth living on earth:

Woman is a wonder of this world
(All else is much less)
that has given us life's elixir since the beginning
filling new colours in this picture ever since.
Eyes haven't tired looking at her for ages
desire becoming more intense.
People say that the earth rests on a bull's horns.
I disagree.
I am firm
that woman carries the earth upon her hands.
That's why the earth smells of a woman's body. (120)

It is noted that Dil's poetry is an authentic depiction of the pitiable life condition of Dalits and their subjection to the precepts of caste and class, but it is not dominated by the cynicism or morbidity. The poet does not write just to evoke pathos and portray Dalits as wretched, passive and silent recipients of hunger, humiliation, dehumanisation, injustices and violence. His description of Dalit life is a strategic endeavour to unmask and encounter caste and class dominated power structures that exclude Dalits. His poetry exhibits a strong optimism and resonances an obstreperous assertion of Dalit rights, dignity and

identity. It also entails his smouldering indignation and exhibits a strong determination to demolish all kinds of discriminations prevailing in different spheres of Dalit life. According to Rajesh Sharma:

Dil unflinchingly faces the specific abnormality of his times, which consists as much of capitalism's "dispossessive" brutalities executed on an unimaginable scale as of the seductions of its spectacle, and he strives to create a poetic form that might be able to answer adequately the impossible demands of the times. He does not renounce affirmation, using it instead to defy the insufferable. Sometimes, of course, the abnormality of the present lends a peculiar poignancy to the affirmation – which occasionally blooms into celebration – of life, however tenuously lived. (66)

The poet reiterates that *Dalits* are no more flaccid and hapless, they are rising powerfully with the spread of education and Dalit consciousness. They oppose their social and economic exclusion resolutely and demand justice and equality.

In "A Song," poet avows the human rights of Dalits and demands that they should be allowed an equal access to economic resources and should not be exploited and deprived of the basic necessities, and dignity in life (106). Dil emphasises the essential of a collective struggle of Dalits to eradicate socio-economic differences and attain equity. In "The Red East" he appeals to suppressed and marginalised sections of society to come together and fight collectively against the oppressors. For him, the people living in slums, working in fields and mills and cleaning drains and lavatories are capable of bringing about the revolution and smashing existing discriminatory systems (81). Dil's poems such as "Nammah," "A Wonder," and "KanglaTeli" overturn the myth of peasants, workers and women being weak and helpless. His commoners such as Kangla come out victorious in their epic fight against their extremely powerful opponents. Kangla fought bravely against Raja Bhoj who molested and abducted his young, beautiful and chaste wife Rehmatan. Though he could not rescue his wife who kills herself by jumping down the window before king can seduce her, he did not let his fury dwindle and finally kills the king for whom he was considered no match at all (73-78). Dil's representation of the story of Raja Bhoj and KanglaTeli suggests that the poor and suppressed Dalits are powerful and can overthrow existing unjust social, economic and political systems if they fight courageously as Kangla did. It is to encourage Dalits that Dil presents hoi

polloi such as Kangla as strong and powerful protagonist. It is apparent that poet strives to prepare the ground for the outbreak of powerful revolution and to sabotage existing power structures. He wants revolutionary writers to join suppressed Dalit masses as he is aware that they can play a pivotal role in awakening, organising and mobilising them.

In “To Sant Ram Udasi and Other Poets of My Traditions” poet appeals to his comrade writers to spread the revolutionary ideals and mobilise masses:

Some words cannot die
but only those sung by a revolutionary.
Why shed tears?
Why talk of humiliations?
You’re a unique sun
That spreads light all around.
This tower of red light
would light the whole world forever. (137)

It is noted that Dil’s poetry evinces a heightened caste and class consciousness and exhibits a strong revolutionary fervour. It not only locates the roots of Dalit suffering but also presents a realistic picture of contemporary discriminatory Indian society. The poet shows how the land-owning jat zamindars who control a considerable part of land and resources have replaced the marauding Aryans as unscrupulous persecutors. He also shows that the contemporary social, economic and political events such as the rise of Hindutva and the advent of Green Revolution have impacted Dalits negatively and have created havoc with their lives. He is pained to see that the powerfully emerging Hindutva promotes violence against Dalits and forces them to capitulate their identity, and autonomy. For him, the religious and cultural chauvinism perpetuates Dalits as others and thwart their pursuit of education and economic progression. The Green Revolution also has affected Dalits negatively. It left them and other landless people without employment which has accounted for severe drug addiction and untimely deaths among desperate youth in Punjab. Poet is pained to witness the worsening life condition of Dalits and strives to end it. He suggests retaliation and the use of counter-violence as essential implements for Dalits to emancipate themselves. Sukhdev Singh also writes:

Like other poets of revolutionary movement, he too approves of the use of counter-violence to seek liberation from repression. In his poems like “Sutlej Di Hawa” (Breeze from the Sutlej), “Rihai Di Khushi Vich Geet” (A Song to

Celebrate Release), “Belachak” (Inflexible), “Kangla Teli”, “Lal Poorav” (The Red East) and “Uthan Guerrilley” (Let Guerrillas Rise) he pleads for a politics of armed guerrilla warfare and revenge (40-41).

He demands not only social, economic and political parity and justice but also strives to re-establish Dalit cultural heritage and socio-economic traditions that allow an equal space for all without any consideration of birth, class and gender. The poet strives to demolish all inequalitarian institutions and laws and demands structural transformations in existing power structures and establishments. As also mentioned earlier, Dil’s poetry voices the distress of impoverished Dalits, condemns rampant inequalities, injustice and discriminations and demonstrates rebellion against them. It is because of this intention that his poetry is unconventional in its theme, subject matter, images, symbol, and even in the use of language. It subverts received poetic traditions and deals with the subject that was unheeded or was considered unpoetic by the high caste and class writers. Sukhdev Singh aptly says that Dil:

[N]ot only outrightly rejects the dominant, unequal socio-economic and Brahmanical dispensation that has reduced people like him to objects of contumely and debasement, his rebellious spirit does not even recognize as valid the long established and commonly accepted truths, traditions, belief systems, moral and aesthetic values and myths. Dissent is the central tenet that drives his awareness of life and his creative expression. (29)

Dil’s poetic art is highly mature and skilled. His poetry is rich in the use of symbols and images drawn from nature, but it is not merely a sensual description of beauty, nature and love. Being a poet of masses, he poeticized what he suffered and witnessed as a poor Dalit in caste and class afflicted Indian society. Yogesh Maitreya also says, “Nurtured as a poet during the Naxalite movement in Punjab, Dil’s poetic imagination is solely held together by the needle and thread of his experiences, of being born and raised a Dalit” (5). He constructs the new images of reality and depicts life as it is lived by the impoverished Dalits. Ronki Ram also writes, “His poetry is full of imagery of hard life, poverty, isolation, struggle, grief for the hapless, and faith in the victory of the toiling people” (8). He uses sarcasm, irony and laughter as apparatus to mock the institutions of caste and class and register a protest against them. His poetry brings out the agony of countless suffering Dalits and reverberates a strong voice of dissent striving for the transformation of prejudiced social, economic

and political structures and for the initiation of a system that is just and egalitarian. Ghai says that Dil's poetry "makes us hear one such voice that questions, rejects, overturns and subverts many traditional and mainstream notions of state, nationalism, religion, art, culture and society" (Translator's Note 46). Though poet strikes at the roots of discriminations and revolts against social, economic, political, religious and cultural establishments, it is constructive in nature, it does not spread hatred and incite the feeling of vengeance against any individual.

Emphasizing this feature of Dil's poetry, Hans rightly says that Dil's poetry, his Dalit consciousness and sense of identity are "free from the feelings of hatred, vengeance and malice" (77). Finally, it can be affirmed that Dil was great poetic genius of the twentieth century who used his art to showcase the sufferings of Dalits and vocalise their demand of justice and equality. His poetry presents a holistic view of society and unflinchingly speaks of the distressed life of non-dominant socio-economic groups such as peasants, working classes, small artisans, sex workers and forest dwellers. It reveals how Dalits perceive caste as an exploitative institution and the cause of their distress and how they struggle to annihilate it to liberate themselves.

Dil's articulation of gendered issues offers a voice to Dalit women's distinctive suffering and evinces a vivacious feminist standpoint. It widens the scope of his poetry, brings it new images, symbols and metaphors and also challenges numerous traditional beliefs. It, for instance, deconstructs the long-preserved myth that women are weak and should be controlled and protected by men. The poet depicts women as strong enough to bring about a revolution, to devastate discriminatory institutions and thus emancipate themselves. Dil successfully detects the roots of the suffering of socially and economically disadvantaged and othered masses and strikes at them. He voices a strong and sustained protest against all forms of exploitation and strives to initiate a just and egalitarian system. He suggests an assortment of Marxism and Ambedkarism as a political alternative for Dalits which seeks a structural transformation in existing power structures and relations. Like other Dalit writers, Dil also suggests atheism as a religious alternative as he finds every faith exclusionary and biased against Dalits. It is worth noting that though Dil undergoes countless pangs of hunger, humiliation and endured severe violence and atrocities, but despite that, he is spirited and full of promises. His poetry exhibits strong positivism and speaks of an imminent revolution that will ultimately smash all discriminatory institutions and will liberate Dalits from the constraints of caste and class.

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