

In 1966, a rather dishevelled teenager turned up at Dilip Chitre's house and alarmed the poet's wife with his enquiries after her husband, with the brusque manner in which he announced that his name was Namdeo Dhasal, and his "brash shirt of gaudily printed cotton". He returned the next day announcing, "I am a poet and a taxi-driver. I know you as a poet. I thought you would be interested in my poetry." Thus began the friendship that has resulted in this rather sumptuous volume. Dhasal went on to publish several volumes of poetry, beginning with the much-acclaimed *Golpitha*, and to achieve something of a presence in Maharashtra politics with the founding of Dalit Panthers, a radical group that took some inspiration from the Black Panthers. Chitre brings together in this volume some 40-odd poems from the books that Dhasal published, his essay on the poet's Mumbai, a reconstructed interview with Dhasal that originally appeared in the Marathi literary magazine *Anustubh*, and a dozen photographs by Henning Stegmüller drawn from the world that figures in the poems.

When Dhasal disposes of religion and property in four lines (*Man, one should tear off all the pages of the sacred books in the world/And give them to people for wiping shit off their arses when done/Remove sticks from anybody's fence and go in there to shit and piss, and muck it up/Menstruate there, cough out phlegm, sneeze out goo*) and then returns to make motions of grace over poetry (*Man, one should act so bright as to make the Sun and Moon seem pale/One should share each morsel of food with everyone else, one should compose a hymn/To humanity itself, man, man should sing only the song of man*), Lawrence Ferlinghetti's well-known conceit of poet as acrobat (*Constantly risking absurdity/and death/whenever he performs/above the heads/of his audience/the poet like an acrobat/climbs on rime/to a high wire of his own making/ and balancing on eyebeams/above a sea of faces/paces his way/to the other side of the day*) takes on the quality of unintended annotation to his life and works.

Even in that rough translation, improvised by Charu in a busy hotel lobby, the poem was moving. It was much more moving to Charu. He said that the voice was absolutely new in Marathi....In the poem Charu had translated, the mingled suggestions of sex and degradation were harsh and undermining, and the ideas of untouchability and brothel-area sex, childbirth and rags, all coming together, were like an assault.

The toes that you see curling in mingled discomfort and connection in the lines above—written in response to Dhasal's poem 'On the Way to the Dargah' (*And I grew up/Like a human with his fuse blown up/On the shit in the street/Saying, Give five paisa./Take five curses*)—belong to V.S. Naipaul. Naipaul met Dhasal in 1988, aided by Charu Deshpande as interpreter, while working on *India: A Million Mutinies Now* and devotes a good 25 pages of the book to his encounters with Dhasal's poetry, to his chats with Mallika, Dhasal's wife, and to the belief, arising from conversations with the

# Collapse of the primordial sun

**Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld**

**Poems 1972-2006**

**Selected, introduced and translated by Dilip Chitre**

**Photographs by Henning Stegmüller**

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poet, that "he was the prisoner of an Indian past no one outside could truly understand....a prisoner of India with its multiplicity of movements and desperate needs". Interestingly, Chitre attributes the origins of the volume under consideration to a conversation with Stegmüller over Naipaul's book and its omissions.

Naipaul's complicated reactions—a combination of empathy, extreme discomfort and some incomprehension—are perhaps emblematic. Dhasal employs an aesthetic of fracture, of audacious violence with language and with the conventions of poetry towards writing into existence the continuing alienation of Dalits seduced by the shiny assurances of a still-new nation. His poems are written so as not to allow you the peace of understanding that can come either from seeing Dalits as entirely folkloric in their capacity for freedom, or from partaking in the national fantasy where Dalits mill around wearing the beatific smiles you last saw on extras in the film *City of Joy*. Dhasal channels the spoken, irreverent energy associated with forms such as the *tamasha* (one poem in this

volume explicitly acknowledges the form) into cohabitation with Baudelaire's visions and with the public poetry of Whitman, Lorca, Ginsberg and Neruda. He makes no concessions towards your need to be reassured that Beauty still matters and can be found in poetry, and will therefore not afford you the luxury of going without wincing. These lines offer the sharpest insight on the relationship that is possible between Dhasal and his readers:

*I am a venereal sore in the private part of language/ The living spirit looking out of hundreds of thousands of sad, pitiful eyes/has shaken me/I am broken by the revolt exploding inside me/ There's no moonlight anywhere;/ There's no water anywhere./ A rabid fox is tearing my flesh off with its teeth;/ And a terrible venom-like cruelty/ Spreads out from my monkey-bone.*

Like several other poets of his generation, Dhasal is drawn irresistibly into conversation with Ambedkar. These extended apostrophes produce clarity about how the Dalit achieves writing (*I plunge a sharpened shovel into*

*my own heart too/ And soak the pages of your life with warm blood /And arouse the only honest thing in me*). The man in the perpetually blue suit is often History personified and thus an appropriate companion in interpreting the present, (*Do leaders in a movement wear the same shirt?/And have the same ink and letters used about them, and their feet and shoes*); he is also the sufficient elevation from which new manifestos for writing may be announced and the true measure of all that the writer achieves (*If I don't uproot this society of mere onlookers/a hard rock will separate you and me: and I will not be able to see your radiant disc*).

Dhasal seems to anticipate the obvious question—what difference can the poetry of mere anger make to Dalit lives?—in the role that he builds for himself as bearer of memories. His poems display an acute awareness of Dalit journeys; from the regulated tyrannies of the village to the freedom to be perpetually underfoot in the city (*These enticing nooses come from everywhere to strangle me/Generation after untouchable generation has resulted in me /And this is how I lost the village of my dreams/its green mynah/its green tree*). The bearer of these memories makes ambitious journeys between the present and the past to retrieve the unwritten and to confound those who are already rising in readiness to deny this history (*One goes through the length of the settlement to the courtyard of childhood/To play with shaggy red-haired puppies, /And to inhale mango-blossoms that burst before raw mangoes appear on the tree/And to catch and slay the frightening anti-shadows*).

This role is not without its risks. One could agree with the Italian Marxist Alberto Asor Rosa while he twists a knife gently into the vast body constituted by his ideological forebears with the words: "For poetry, when it is great, speaks a language in which things—the hard things of struggle and daily existence—have already assumed the exclusive value of a symbol, of a gigantic metaphor of the world; and the price, often tragic, of its greatness is that what it says escapes from practice, never to return to it."

Dhasal seems to have lived his life in a passionate and exhausting quarrel with ideas such as these. He talks of writing poetry as an indivisible part of life, just as breaking bread might be inevitably conjoined with all the other things that one cares about. This idea of the poet who lives as a whole person is not without charm though there are those who might point to how all this fine talk is contradicted by Dhasal's bizarre shifts in political allegiance and by his somewhat stormy personal life.

In a review of this compilation for *Frontline*, Sudhanva Deshpande draws parallels between Filippo Marinetti and Ezra Pound, whose literary credentials became suspect due to their collaborations with Fascism, and Dhasal's own political accommodations with the Hindu Right in the 1990s. I wonder if this parallel is entirely fair. The nation in which we hold citizenship willy-nilly affirms the centrality of Sanskrit civilisation rather than the dialectic between the Sanskrit and other traditions and is thus always fascist under the skin. The Hindu Right derives its legitimacy and its momentum from this accommodation. The differences between Left, Centre-Left and Right in such a nation are merely differences



*Namdeo Dhasal (centre) with Dilip Chitre (left) and his favourite kebabi Nawab (right). Photograph by Henning Stegmüller*

of degree, not of kind. Dhasal's only error may have been pragmatism—before it became electorally fashionable. His interviews from this period acknowledge that the dynamics between Mahars and the other Dalit castes were a major reason behind the decision and this demands some serious scrutiny. Deshpande is, however, quite right to bring up Dilip Chitre's coy silence over this issue.

Chitre is equally shy about mentioning Dhasal's wife, Mallika Sheikh, and her frank account of their life together, titled *I Want to Destroy Myself*. The only acknowledgement of her existence seems to be among the photographs. The one thing that filters through in Naipaul's gossipy and rather disturbing version of this tumultuous companionship is Dhasal's steadfast refusal to suppress his wife's unflattering portrait of him or to respond with a touched-up version of his own life. In his desire to stick to Dhasal's poetry and to ignore the grey areas of the poet's life, Chitre paints himself into a corner. It might have been far more illuminating to throw these things together with the poetry, to thus allow the poem of Dhasal's life to emerge.

Chitre says that the volume is meant for the untutored reader, and not the expert. While the selection does offer the reader a good idea of Dhasal's changing concerns, there is perhaps room for some quibbling. The volume devotes little attention to the conversation that Dhasal joined with other Dalit poets when he began writing. That apart, Chitre's well-known translation of Tukaram worked so well primarily because it held you by the hand and guided you through the poet-saint's world. I am as untutored as they come, and I know that I would have liked to bury myself in footnotes and to read in closer detail about the idiolect spun from many languages that Dhasal favours and to 'see' the challenge that it poses to translators. The long-winded prosing that Chitre offers instead of glossing and footnoting is an inadequate compensation.

My other quibble is about Chitre's sudden ascent into Rasa theory, into offering us *bibhatsa* like it is the Fruit of Knowledge in reading Dhasal's poetry. This is especially disconcerting because it comes a few paragraphs after he speaks of Dalit orature, and the subterranean regions that Dhasal mines for his poetry. The point to Rasa theory is its constant celebration of the stable cosmos that reader and writer share, of that little *vaikunta* of leisure that runs on the engine of caste exclusion. If there is one thing that Dhasal consistently offers, it is the reminder that the reader shares very little with him. Dhasal's poetry demands effort towards an entirely new poetics, and not a tired schedule featuring the obviously inappropriate.

These quibbles cannot take very much away from the sturdiness with which Chitre demonstrates that Dhasal is an original. The poet who could say "*I agree that my formidable organ is/ Rotten and festering:/You may keep it in your art galleries;/You may keep my innards hung/On bayonets, if you wish:/I will witness to my heart's content, the/ Primordial Sun collapse in the end, crying/Who has sheared and enclosed people in a glass paperweight?*" is worth revisiting several times over while we figure out what sort of world we would like to live in. ■