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Mahatma Gandhi in Poems of Jhaverchand Meghani:

A Retrospective Study

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi emerged as one very important political figure in the beginning of 20th century but his influence was not limited to one strata of Indian life. On one hand entire Gujarat was chanting the mantra of Satyagraha and non-cooperation, the litterateurs of Gujarat were deeply influenced by the life and ideology of Mahatma Gandhi where Jhaverchand Meghani is not an exception. The poet, one of the most popular of the era, also wrote some remarkable poems on the person himself i.e. Mahatma Gandhi, while there were many which reverberated the ideology. Present paper endeavours to critically examine these poems originally written in Gujarati language by Jhaverchand Meghani with retrospection to contemporary poetical and sociological milieu.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Jhaverchand Meghani, Poems, Communalism



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Gujarati poetry, with its history of almost eight centuries, going through the linguistic phases of *Prakrit* to *Apbhramsa* to older and modern versions, was mostly indulged into religious and historical subjects till the middle of nineteenth century. In the later part of this century, however, poets like Dalpatram and Narmad brought the 'modernity' into Gujarati poetry in terms of subjective and socialistic approaches. The influence of western, especially British Romantic poets was received aptly by poets of Pandit age. N.B. Divetiya, 'Kant', B.K. Thakor, Kalapi amongst many other poets gave a new height to personal/subjective lyric in Gujarati language. However, the drastic change, with reference to not only literature but society and polity of India, too, appeared in 1915 when Mahatma Gandhi with his veteran experience of Satyagraha, tried and tested in South Africa, arrived in India to settle down. Following were the years of his missionary life to liberate India politically, culturally, economically and intellectually from the foreign powers. As the freedom movement of India advanced, literature—especially Gujarati literature being closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi's experiments—also changed its course. To discuss Gujarati poetry in particular, the supercilious romanticism and sweetening songs of nature slowly became a matter of past. Mansukhlal Jhaveri records this change in History of Gujarati Literature in the following manner:

...the scope of poetry enlarged in the Gandhian era; and it was realized that poetry lay not in the greatness or majesty of a subject but in the poet's eye and in his approach towards it. In the preceding era, man was often contrasted with nature;



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nature was free, beautiful and happy; while man was everywhere in chains and miserable. The discordance of his life marred the harmonious music of the universe. The poet of the Gandhian era got himself rid of this belief; and considered man, not as an entity dependant on nature, but as a part of the universal whole. (147)

Nationalism of this era too differed from the previous Pandit Yuga. Nationalism in this age slowly realized that cooperating British government was not going to be fruitful and India's best interest lied in being free from the yoke of the foreign rule. Nationalism of this era became all-embracing with universal brotherhood and humanism. Very unusually for any subjugated people, poets of this age rarely incites any hatred towards the opponent and totally tried to erase boundaries of class, caste and creed. The major attributes of Gandhian Era can be listed as follows:

- Simple, lucid language instead of scholarly, glossy language of Pandit Yuga
- Inclination towards realism instead of flights of imagination and excessive emotions
- Expansion of subject-matter
- Empathetic description and depiction of rural society instead of keeping only urban, aristocratic readers in mind
- Respect for oppressed, poor, women, labourers and untouchables and sympathy for their destitution
- Propagating socialism, universal brotherhood, freedom, swadeshi and of course, Gandhian philosophy



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Meghani's many collection, there is one, and unfortunately his last too, appears in 1943 entitled *Bapu na Parna*. This collection is, as the title carries the name, all about Mahatma Gandhi. As discusses earlier, Mahatma Gandhi has not only influenced people but the major litterateurs of his age profoundly and Meghani was not an exception. He respected the Gandhian ideology and occasionally recorded the events and condition of Mahatma Gandhi quite a few times in his poems. Meghani, although an active participant in freedom movement, denies to be a devotee of Mahatma Gandhi or even a follower. He clearly states in the preface to this collection:

I can say about these poems I wrote about Mahatma Gandhi that I am not his follower. I am not a student or follower of his political thoughts or spiritualism. It is just not possible for me to worship anyone in poetry like Tulsidas or our very own saint of Saurashtra, Ram Bava did in their poems. I have only objectively depicted, of course with my dedication, his (Mahatma Gandhi's) attitude, rationale, personal pain and agony. (Meghani *Sona* 419)



VIDHYAYANA

This collection contains only 16 poems and most of them are repeated from early collections. *Khama Khama Lakhvar* (*Millions of Praises*) is a poem appearing to be an encomiastic work written in *Dodhiya Duha*, which is a popular three-lined verse format in bardic and folk poetry, excels all the laudatory and describes the characteristics of a true leader in general. The poem written on 69th birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, doesn't use the name even once and that's what makes the poem one in its class. Meghani reproaches the quality of a bad leader in the first stanza:



VIDHYAYANA

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*Making other like a sheep and himself the shepherd,
All others are poor one and he poses like their guard;
Keep hell for reward; To such a leader sinful one.*

But then, Meghani gives a poetically beautiful list of how a leader treats his countrymen. Especially, the uniqueness of Mahatma Gandhi is reflected exquisitely in the following stanzas:

*May disciples be brighter and the sons grow day and night;
Such things remained in words but followers not in sight;
Giving knowledge with delight; such mentor I haven't seen but once.*

*You served all to God: Your victory and defeat;
Bejeweled the heart with blood and face with smile so sweet;
Though, soul of yours in heat; your smile has concealed all your pain.*



VIDHYAYANA

As Meghani claims in preface, he may not be a follower but he truly has a deeper insight into Mahatma Gandhi's psyche for which this poem stands as a proof. There might be very few poems—and there are many written in praise of Mahatma Gandhi— which shows the unique Gandhian spirituality, statesmanship and emotional attitude at once as compared to this poem.

Bapu no Bardo (Mahatma Gandhi's Back) is somewhat a weaker poem compared to the previous one discussed above. Drawing inspiration from a photograph where Mahatma Gandhi is spotted backwards to the camera. Written in a three-lined verse format of *Anjani Kavya*, Meghani explains wonderment over photographer's interest in back in the first few stanzas and then makes



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the back speak. Meghani tries to bring out the stiffness and firmness of Mahatma Gandhi's character, which he successfully does, but as a poem it fails to provide any lyrical or philosophical charm.

Parajit nu Gaan (Song of Defeated) is written in 1934 when Mahatma Gandhi was returning to Mumbai after his first imprisonment. The poem surpasses the event and tries to evoke the pen/throat to sing the praises for a defeated soldier. Here also, there is no direct mention of Mahatma Gandhi and poem stands as a unique expression rarely found in Gujarati poetry where poet insists on welcoming the defeated. As per footnote, Meghani had the following lines of Tagore reverberating in his mind while he wrote this poem but this one is not a translation:

"My Master has bidden me to stand by the wayside and sing the songs of defeat".

Mata Taro Betdo Aave (O Mother, Your Son is Coming), a longer poem matches in its charm with some of Meghani's best poems. Again, Meghani creates an insightful picture of Gandhi without mentioning his name at all. Entire poem is sung by motherland addressed to the entire nation or world. The mother, India here, addresses various natural elements and describes the agony and suffering of her son i.e. Mahatma Gandhi here. As mentioned in the footnote, the poem was written after Mahatma Gandhi's infertile return from Round Table Conference in 1931 but Meghani, in this sonorous lyric, surpasses any historical event and enthrones Mahatma Gandhi as the dearest son of motherland who has spent his life in sheer suffering and conflicts for the welfare of the fellow countrymen. The hyperbole, as reflected in following lines, do not stand as a



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block but aptly connotes the life of Mahatma Gandhi:

*You drank deceit and insults too, and treacherous potions, all
You drank the fatal poisons too, but still you did not fall.
All seven hells would tremble and the sea would touch the sky;
All continents would be lava-clad and shaking earth will cry.
"Help us! O Protector of cows!" would be cry everywhere;
All lions and ferocious bulls will run here and there...*

Conclusion:

There are very few Gujarati poets apart from Meghani who so poetically and faithfully reflected the temperament of the age. It was Mahatma Gandhi who gave the title of *Rashtriya Shayar* (National Poet) for which Manubhai Pancholi, a renowned novelist and historian of Gujarat remarks:

By 'Rashtriya Shayar' Gandhiji would mean that our nation is divided in two classes—educated and uneducated; the one who can build a bridge between the two is Rashtriya Shayar. (Selaraka 70)

Above statement perfectly explains how Meghani's poetry was reflective of Gandhian ideology. Without being a Gandhian follower in a very conservative manner Meghani indeed builds a bridge between any two classes and his sympathies never ceased to flow for the weak and poor which was ultimately the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi as well.



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VIDHYAYANA