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**HUJIS**

SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY VOLUME ON COMPARATIVE WORLD LITERATURES



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(Hindi University Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies)

A Peer Reviewed, Bi-Lingual, Bi-Annual,  
International Research Journal

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*Patron and Founder*

**Professor Nandini Sahu**

Vice Chancellor, Hindi University, West Bengal

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*Chief Editor:* **Dr. Indrajeet Yadav**

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ज्ञान एकता प्रगति



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**AUTHORS P R E S S**

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## CHAPTER 6

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# The Voices from the Margin: Heera Dom and the Birth of Dalit Bhojpuri Literature

*Dr. Shatrughan Kahar*

### Abstract

Dalit literature, born out of the Dalit Panther movement, provides a powerful platform for the marginalised Dalit community to voice their struggles, pain, and aspirations. Positioned at the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, Dalits have long been denied access to basic rights such as justice, education, and equality. Historically relegated to the status of “untouchables,” their suffering was often ignored by the larger society. The roots of Dalit literature can be traced in Marathi Writings during the Dalit Panther movement. Marathi writers articulated the anguish and oppression faced by their community through various forms of writing, including poems, essays, and stories. This literary movement sparked significant debates regarding its definition and who could authentically represent Dalit voices. While early discussions centered on whether only Dalits themselves could write Dalit literature, figures like Heera Dom, Swami Achhutanand, and later, Om Prakash Valmiki, emerged as pivotal contributors to this genre. Heera Dom, recognised as one of the first Dalit poets of the 19th century, is a significant figure in this narrative. His poem *Achhut Ki Shikayat* stands as a potent expression of the social, economic, and religious injustices faced by Dalits. Written in Bhojpuri and published in the esteemed literary magazine *Saraswati*, this poem critiques both caste-based oppression and divine indifference, raising questions about social and religious hypocrisy. Heera Dom’s work, along with that of other Dalit writers, served as a powerful commentary on the exploitation endured by Dalits, not only by upper-caste Hindus but also by the colonial British rulers who, while presenting a caste-neutral façade, reinforced caste hierarchies through their policies. His poetry challenges the conventional religious narratives and brings to light the collective plight of Dalits, making his voice an essential part of the larger conversation on caste and social justice in India.

*Keywords:* Dalit, Literature, Bhojpuri, Hindi, untouchable.

### Introduction

Dalit literature focuses on the lives and struggles of the Dalit community, and it is believed to have emerged with the Dalit Panther movement. Positioned at the lowest rung of Hindu society, Dalits were denied fundamental rights such as

justice, education, equality, and freedom. In their own religion, they were marked as untouchables. The origins of Dalit literature can be traced to the Marathi language, where, during the Dalit Panther movement, many writers from the Dalit community expressed their pain, suffering, and emotions to the public through articles, poems, essays, biographies, satire, stories, and more.

There were extensive debates regarding the definition of Dalit literature. The central question that emerged was who could write Dalit literature – was it only a person from the Dalit community, drawing from their own experiences, or could it also be written by someone who does so out of sympathy? Some prominent Dalit writers argued that since the upper class had never experienced the pain of Dalits, they were incapable of writing Dalit literature. While this view did not persist for long, it was a significant issue in the early stages.<sup>1</sup> According to Professor Chauthi Ram Yadav, the renaissance in the Hindi region not only carried the voice of anti-imperialist national awakening but also saw the emergence of voices advocating for anti-feudalism and Dalit awakening, which, however, were largely ignored.

### **Literature Review**

Heera Dom is widely recognised as the first Dalit poet of the first half of the nineteenth century. However, some scholars argue that Swami Achhutanand ‘Harihar’ should be regarded as the first Dalit poet, with his poems written between 1910 and 1927. At one point in India, Swami Achhutanand Harihar’s Dalit movement gained significant attention. His poems fostered a sense of self-respect and pride within the Dalit community. Major works like Mayanand Balidan, Ramrajya Nyay, and Adivansh Ka Danka had a profound impact on Dalit society. A long line of Dalit poets, influenced by Achhutanand, followed, with Jankavi Bihari Lal Harit being the most prominent and widely recognised among them. Dalit literature emerged as a significant literary movement, with leading Dalit writers striving to give it its distinct identity.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of ‘Dalit Discourse’ emerged in the mainstream of Hindi literature in the 1980s and gained significant popularity by the 1990s. Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki’s autobiography *Juthan* was serialised in the renowned literary magazine *Hans*, where it gained widespread acclaim among critics and readers. In 1997, Rajkamal Prakashan published it as a full autobiography, further solidifying its popularity. This marked a turning point, making Dalit literature a prominent subject of discussion. In Dalit literature, writers express the harsh realities of their lives, with the primary aim of exposing the mistreatment they have endured. The renowned Dalit thinker Kanwal Bharti has written: “Dalit literature means literature in which Dalits themselves express their pain, the realities they have encountered in their struggle for life. Dalit literature is the literature of that expression. It is not art for art’s sake but literature of life and the will to live.”<sup>3</sup>

The issues surrounding Dalit life have been addressed in Hindi literature since its early stages. Before independence, writers like Premchand, Nirala, and Yashpal highlighted the problems faced by marginalised communities in their works. After independence, as Indian society began to change, notable writers such as Markandey, Amarkant, Rajendra Yadav, Naimisharay, Omprakash Valmiki, Punni Singh, Prem Kapadia, Dr. Dayanand Batohi, Dr. Tej Singh, Babulal Khanda, and Ramchand continued to write about Dalit life. Among women writers, Usha Chandra, Ramanika Gupta, Rajat Rani 'Minu', Maitreyi Pushpa, and Subhadra Kumari also contributed significantly to this debate.

Premchand was the first writer in whose works Dalit life was given a prominent place. He strongly opposed untouchability, casteism, ostentation, and rituals. His stories such as *Sadgati*, *Kafan*, and *Thakur Ka Kuan* delve deeply into the tragedy of Dalit life while also critiquing the Brahminical mindset. In *Sadgati*, Premchand poignantly portrayed the exploitation and atrocities faced by Chamars, while *Poos ki Raat* and *Kafan* also reflect Dalit resistance. However, Dalit writers generally do not consider Premchand a part of Dalit literature, as they believe he never directly experienced the suffering of Dalits. According to them, "Premchand's tradition will not continue in Dalit literature. Premchand's truth about Dalits was seen through a bird's eye view. Today, Dalits are writing based on their own experiences."<sup>4</sup>

After Premchand, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala's works, such as *Chaturi Chamaar*, *Billesur Bakriha*, and *Kullibhat*, are rich with Dalit consciousness. His poem *Woh Todti Patthar* is considered a milestone in the history of Hindi poetry. Additionally, stories like Yashpal's *Parda*, Rahul Sankrityayan's *Pujari*, and Prabha and Sumer also offer a deep exploration of Dalit life.

It is important to remember that even before Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar's movement, there was a generation of Dalit writers who promoted the Dalit cause through literary works and various social activities. Among them, the names of Hira Dom and Swami Achhutanand 'Harihar', the founder of the *Adi Hindu* movement, are respected for their contributions. By understanding the literary work of these two figures, one can dispel the misconception that Dalit consciousness only emerged with the Dalit literature of the 1970s. In fact, Dalit consciousness had already started making its presence felt in Bhojpuri literature much earlier.

### **Bhojpur: The Land, Language and It's People**

The Bhojpuri speaking region, as identified by G. A. Grierson covered the districts of Azamgarh, Banaras, Ghazipur, Ballia, The eastern parts of Faizabad and Jaunpur, northern Mirzapur, Shahabad and Saran. Bhojpuri was also spoken by majority of the inhabitants in the trans-Ghaghra districts of Gorakhpur and Basti in UP.<sup>5</sup>

The Bhojpuri language is spoken across an area of approximately 50,000 square miles in India. While its main center extends from the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh to the western districts of Bihar, Bhojpuri has also gained recognition abroad due to the migration of Bhojpuri-speaking people. The region where Bhojpuri is spoken is historically associated with the Bhoja kings, originally from Ujjain (Malwa), who established a city in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, making the area known as Bhojpur. The language spoken by the people here is Bhojpuri. Due to significant migration during the colonial period, Bhojpuri influence extended far beyond its native regions, spreading to places as distant as the Caribbean, Mauritius, South Africa, and Fiji in the 19th century. Approximately 120 million people speak Bhojpuri, making it a linguistically rich language.<sup>6</sup> The Bhojpuri language has evolved through interactions with various regions and their languages. Just as Hindi has influenced Bhojpuri in India, it has also absorbed elements from English and French in Mauritius and Dutch in Suriname. This dynamic exchange makes Bhojpuri a living, breathing language.

Although Bhojpuri speakers primarily study in Khadi Hindi for education and livelihood, their mother tongue remains deeply embedded in their daily lives. Political, social, and religious festivals, as well as community gatherings, are conducted in Bhojpuri. Conversations, advice, and discussions all take place in this language. Women sing Bhojpuri songs on auspicious occasions, infusing them with deep respect and joy. Marriage celebrations feature traditional dramas and dances performed in Bhojpuri. Similarly, the rain songs (Kajali) sung during the monsoon in Mirzapur, Benares, and Balia districts are also in Bhojpuri.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond festivities, Bhojpuri serves as a medium for expressing life's struggles and hardships. It is an inseparable part of the speakers' identity and way of life. This tradition is exemplified in Heera Dom's poem *Achhut ka Shikayat*, which carries the essence of Bhojpuri linguistic heritage.

### **Achhut Ki Shikayat: A Milestone in Bhojpuri Dalit Poetry**

The first half of the twentieth century played a crucial role in shaping Hindi literature. During this period, Acharya Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi steered literature in a new direction through his editorial work in *Saraswati* magazine. By publishing the works of many unknown writers, he provided them with literary recognition. As the saying goes, "*Art breathes life into those whom history erases. It echoes the voices of those silenced by history.*"<sup>8</sup>

In the September 1914 issue of *Saraswati* (Part 15, Volume 2, pp. 512-513), Dwivedi published the poem *Achhut Ki Shikayat* by an anonymous poet from Patna, Heera Dom. The publication of this poem demonstrated that art can preserve voices marginalised by history. Written in Bhojpuri, it was likely the first Bhojpuri composition to appear in *Saraswati*.

At that time, there was no distinct trend of Dalit literature in Hindi. Yet, the profound sensitivity of this poem moved Dwivedi Ji to publish it. It was hard to imagine that a person from the Dom caste could have written a poem that boldly challenged the casteism and feudalism entrenched in society. Despite this, Achhut Ki Shikayat holds a significant place for its sharp expression and social critique. Given its subject matter and rebellious tone, critics regard it as the first poem of Hindi Dalit literature.

Heera Dom, is regarded as the first Dalit poet of the early nineteenth century. He was born around 1885 in Danapur, Patna district, Bihar.<sup>9</sup> However, much of his biography remains unknown. Dr. Mataprasad has referred to him as a resident of Varanasi, while Dr. Ramvilas Sharma and other scholars, including Ramanika Gupta, identify him as a native of Patna.<sup>10</sup>

His only Bhojpuri poem, which offers a rational critique of the social, economic, and religious disparities of the time, was published in the renowned literary magazine Saraswati.<sup>11</sup> This poem poignantly highlights these inconsistencies and ironies.

#### Achhut Ki Shikayat/Complaint of the Untouchable

In Bhojpuri Dialect	Translated in English
Hamni Ke Rati Din Dukhva Bhogat Bani, Hamni Ke Sehebe Se Minti Sunaibi. Hamni Ke Dukh Bhagvanaon N Dekhtabe, Hamni Ke Kable Kalesva Uthaibi. Padari Saheb Ke Kachahri Men Jaibijan, Bedhrm Hoke Rangrej Bni Jaibi Hay Ram! Dhrm N Chhodat Bnt Baje, Bedharm Hoke Kaise Munhva Dikhaibi Khambhava Ke Phaari Pahalaad Ke Banchavale Jaan, Graah Ke Munh Se Gajaraaj Ke Bachavale. Dhoteen Jurajodhana Kai Bhai Chhorat Rahai, Paragat Hoke Tahaan Kapada Badhavale. Marale Ravanavaan Kai Palale Bhabhikhana Ke, Kaanee Anguree Pai Dhaike Pathara Uthavale. Kahanva Satal Baate Sunat Na Vaate Ab, Dom Jaani Hamanee Ke Chhue Se Derile. Hamni Ke Rati Din Mehnt Krilejan,	We suffer every day and night, Hoping the Saheb hears our plight. Even God ignores our pain, How long must we endure in vain? If we step into the pastor's hall, They'll call us heretics, not ours at all. Oh Lord! We cannot leave our way, How will we face the world that day? The one who broke the pillar to save Prahlad, Who freed the elephant from the crocodile's jaws, Who came when Dushasan pulled Draupadi's robe, And covered her in endless cloth, The one who defeated Ravana to protect Vibhishan, Who lifted a mountain on his little finger – Where is that God now? Why does he not hear us? Is he afraid to touch us, thinking we are Doms? We toil hard day and night, Yet earn only two rupees in sight. The Thakur sleeps in comfort and ease, While we till his land to make it increase. When the ruler's army comes around, We are forced to serve, hands tightly bound. Silenced, we suffer in endless plight,

<p>Duaigo Rupyva Darmha Men Paibi. Thakure Ke Sukhaset Ghar Men Satal Banin, Hamni Ke Joti Joti Khetiya Kamaibi. Hakime Ke Laskari Utarl Banin. Jet Uaion Begariya Mein Pakaral Jaibi. Munh Banhi Aisan Naukriya Krt Banin, E Kul Khabari Sarkar Ke Sunaibi.</p> <p>Babhane Ke Lekhe Ham Bhikhiya Na Maangavajaan, Thakure Ke Lekhe Nahin Lauri Chalaibi. Sahua Ke Lekhe Nahi Daandee Ham Maarabajaan, Ahira Ke Lekhe Nahin Gaiya Choraibi. Bhantoo Ke Lekhe Na Kabitt Ham Jorabajaan, Pagadee Na Baanhi Ke Kachaharee Mein Jaibi. Apane Pasinava Kai Paisa Kamaibajaan, Ghar Bhar Mili Juli Baanti-Chonti Khaibi.</p> <p>Hadava Masuiya Kai Dehiyaan Hai Hamanee Kai, Okaarai Kai Dehiyaan Babhanon Kai Baaneen. Okara Kai Ghare Ghare Pujava Hokhat Baaje, Sagarai Ilakava Bhilain Jijmaanee. Hamanee Ke Inara Ke Nigiche Na Jailejaan, Paanke Mein Se Bhari-Bhari Piataanee Paanee. Panaheen Se Piti Piti Haath God Turi Dailain, Hamanee Ke Etanee Kaahee Ke Halakaanee..</p>	<p>But we'll tell the government our fight. We won't beg like the Brahmins, Nor wield sticks like the Thakurs. We won't deceive like the Sahus, Or steal cows like the Ahirs. We won't flatter with poetry like the Bhaats, Nor file false cases in court with turbans on. We will earn through our hard work, And share our bread with family and all. Our bodies, too, are made of flesh and bone, Just like the Brahmin's – no different, no unknown. Yet, he is honored in every home, With patrons everywhere he roams. We are barred from the village well, Forced to drink from the mud's dark spell. Beaten down, our bodies bruised, Why must we suffer such abuse?</p>
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### The main content of the poem

We suffer day and night, and we will take our plea to Saheb – be it God or the British government. Yet even God seems blind to our pain. How much longer must we endure this suffering? If we seek justice in the pastor's court, we risk losing our faith and becoming one of the Christian. Oh Lord! Abandoning our religion is impossible – how will we face the world as apostates?

Who was the one who saved Prahlad by breaking the pillar, rescued Gajraj from the jaws of the crocodile, appeared to extend a cloth when Dushasan was disrobing Draupadi, killed Ravana and protected Vibhishan, and lifted a mountain with His little finger? Where is that God now? Is He sleeping and not listening to us, or is He avoiding us, thinking we are Doms?

We work tirelessly day and night and earn only Rs. 2. Meanwhile, the Thakur sleeps peacefully in his home while we toil in his fields, making them productive. And when the ruler's army arrives, we are caught and forced into labour. We are performing this work with our hands tied, but we will make sure the government hears the whole truth.

We will not beg like Brahmins, nor wield lathis like Thakurs. We will not cheat with sticks like the Sahun (Baniyas), nor steal cattle like the Ahirs. We will not flatter others by composing poems like the Bhaats, nor will we go to court, wearing turbans, to file false cases. We will earn our livelihood through our own hard work and share it with our entire family.

Our bodies are made of flesh and bones, just like a Brahmin's. He is revered in every home, and his patrons are spread across the entire region. Yet, we are not even allowed near the well, and we are forced to drink water from the mud. Our hands and legs are broken from being beaten with shoes. Why are we subjected to such suffering and injustice?

### **Analysing the Core Themes of Heera Dom's Poem**

This poem is not merely the voice of Heera Dom; it echoes the collective aspirations of the entire Dalit community. Unlike conventional supplications to a divine power, their grievances were directed toward the British government, in whom they placed their trust. The British administration maintained a relatively favorable and cooperative stance toward Dalits.

Colonial rule in India significantly altered the caste system. It dismantled its pre-colonial political context while simultaneously reinforcing caste hierarchies through new institutions, policies, and knowledge systems. Initially, British non-interventionist policies theoretically created caste-neutral opportunities, such as equal legal rights, access to education, and public employment. However, these advantages were largely monopolised by the upper castes, who possessed the resources and literacy to benefit from them. At the same time, Hindu personal law continued to uphold caste privileges.

British ethnographic studies, particularly those led by figures like Herbert Risley, racialised caste by linking higher castes to Aryan ancestry and lower castes to indigenous origins. This classification was institutionalised through decennial censuses, which sought to enumerate and fix castes within a rigid hierarchy. Consequently, caste associations emerged, lobbying for higher status within the

colonial framework, thereby transforming caste into a modern tool of social identity and organisation.

Over the time, these caste associations evolved into agents of modernisation, shifting their focus from religious concerns to secular objectives, including political education. Princely states such as Mysore and Kolhapur introduced caste-based reservations in public employment to address historical disadvantages, a practice later adopted by the colonial administration. Additionally, the British implemented policies of “protective discrimination” for the so-called “depressed classes,” offering special schools, reserved government jobs, and legislative representation – culminating in the separate electorates under the 1932 Communal Award. These measures disrupted traditional caste hierarchies, creating tensions between entrenched power structures and emerging social mobility.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps this explains why Heera Dom not only highlighted the Dalits’ plight before the British but also protested against divine injustice, lamenting how even God seemed indifferent to their suffering. However, seeking justice in the priest’s court posed another challenge. Their solution to escaping Brahminical oppression was religious conversion. As the Charter Act of 1833 had granted missionaries unrestricted rights to operate in India, and they actively sought to convert Indians, particularly Dalits, through various means.<sup>13</sup> and perhaps that’s why the following lines from Achhut Ki Shikayat reflect his dilemma:

“If we step into the pastor’s hall,  
They’ll call us heretics, not ours at all.  
Oh Lord! We cannot leave our way,  
How will we face the world that day?”

Though conversion remained an alternative, Heera Dom chose not to take that path. His racial pride prevented him from abandoning his identity, reinforcing his determination to seek justice within the framework of his own community.

In the second stanza, Heera Dom recalls several mythological instances where God intervened to protect devotees – saving Prahlad by tearing through a pillar, rescuing an elephant from a crocodile, extending Draupadi’s garment to shield her from humiliation, killing Ravana to protect Vibhishan, and lifting Govardhan mountain on his little finger. These acts of divine intervention symbolised justice and protection for the righteous, yet Heera Dom questions why the same God remains silent in the face of caste oppression. His anguish is evident as he asks whether God refuses to help Dalits simply because they belong to an “untouchable” caste. This powerful critique highlights the hypocrisy within religious beliefs, where God is worshipped for his past acts of justice but appears indifferent to the suffering of marginalised communities in the present. He believes that even God has been corrupted by the influence of the Manuvadi

system, which upholds caste hierarchies. He suggests that this influence has made God hesitant to touch Dalits, reinforcing the deep-seated discrimination they face even in the realm of faith. And that's why he questioning "Is he afraid to touch us, thinking we are Doms?" the third stanza of *Achhut Ki Shikayat* by Heera Dom sheds light on the deep-rooted class and caste exploitation faced by Dalits. He vividly describes how Dalits work tirelessly from morning to night but receive meager wages – only two rupees – barely enough to survive. Meanwhile, the Thakur (landlord), who owns the land but does no physical labour, lives in comfort, sleeping peacefully while Dalits toil in his fields, making them productive. This stark contrast highlights the economic exploitation embedded within the caste system.

Beyond agricultural labour, Dalits were also subjected to forced labour (*begar*) under British rule. When the ruler's army arrived, Dalits were often taken against their will and made to work without pay. Despite their hard work, they remained trapped in poverty, unable to afford even two meals a day with dignity. Heera Dom raises a fundamental question – why does the one who works the hardest remain hungry, while the one who does no work enjoys luxury? In doing so, he not only criticizes caste-based oppression but also highlights class disparity, showing how the landowning elites benefited from the labour of the marginalised. The poem also reflects a historical reality, as forced labour was a common practice under British rule, particularly imposed on Dalits by landlords and authorities. Through his poetry, Heera Dom exposes this injustice and demands recognition of the struggles faced by the oppressed.

Despite his deep frustration with caste oppression and economic exploitation, Heera Dom ultimately places his trust in the British government. He believes that if the colonial rulers become aware of these injustices, they will intervene and ensure justice. This reflects the perception among some marginalised communities that British rule, despite its exploitative nature, offered certain legal protections and opportunities unavailable under the rigid caste system. His statement, "But we'll tell the government our fight," expresses hope that appealing to the colonial administration might bring relief from the oppressive dominance of landlords and upper castes.

In the fourth stanza, Heera Dom critiques the professions of various higher castes and the morally questionable ways in which they earn their living. He compares their methods of survival with the honest, hardworking labour of Dalits. Heera Dom declares that unlike a Brahmin, who begs for a living, or a Thakur, who lives by violence and war, he will not resort to deceit like a Baniya (Sahu), who cheats others for profit, nor will he engage in theft like the Ahirs, who steal cows. He also refuses to flatter or compose poems for personal gain like the Bhaats, nor will he go to court with false claims, like those who manipulate the system for their benefit.

Instead, Heera Dom asserts that he will earn his livelihood through honest labour, by sweating and working hard, and will share his earnings with his family. He draws a sharp contrast between the honest work of Dalits and the corrupt methods used by the so-called higher castes. The actions of the higher castes are depicted as dishonorable, and Heera Dom questions why God fails to see this and allow such injustices. In stark contrast, the Dalit worker, despite enduring hardships, earns food through dignity and labour and shares it with others. This juxtaposition emphasises Heera Dom's anger at the societal inequalities and the hypocrisy he perceives in the caste system.

At the end of the poem, Heera Dom poignantly addresses the social inequalities and the arbitrary divisions that exist between humans based on caste. He makes a powerful and scientific point that both Brahmins and Dalits share the same flesh and bones, yet untouchability is practiced against Dalits while Brahmins are revered and worshipped. This rhetorical question challenges the logic behind caste-based discrimination and highlights its absurdity. By making this argument, Heera Dom aligns himself with the ideology of previous saint-poets like Kabir and Raidas, who also vehemently criticized the social hierarchies and called for equality among all humans.

Heera Dom goes on to depict the severe and humiliating restrictions placed on Dalits, such as being denied access to wells where higher castes draw water, forcing them to drink dirty water instead. If they dare to defy these rules, they are subjected to violent punishment – beaten with sticks and shoes, and their limbs broken. This stark portrayal of cruelty and dehumanisation emphasises the intense suffering Dalits endured.

The poem ends with deep, unresolved questions that linger in the air: Why is this so? These questions remain unanswered by mainstream society, the British government, or even the so-called divine powers. The poem, filled with frustration, anger, and pain, reflects the emotions of Dalits during that time, expressing their deep anguish and the injustices they faced. It stands as a powerful critique of the caste system and a call for social change, a cry for justice that went unheard in an oppressive society.

Heera Dom's poem "Achhut Ki Shikayat" profoundly captures Dalit sensibility, critiquing the Brahminical feudal system while shedding light on the painful condition of Dalits. In this work, Heera Dom courageously exposes the social inequalities of his time. At a time when Dalits were denied even the right to voice their opinions, Heera Dom fearlessly commented on the societal contradictions, making this poem a symbol of the fight for freedom of expression. Before India's independence, there was no one to listen to the suffering of the Dalits, and this poem brings that suffering to the forefront, standing as a crucial historical document.

In the poem, Heera Dom directs questions at the upper-caste society, questions that remain unanswered. These aren't mere complaints – because complaints can carry elements of falsehood – but rather, they represent an authentic historical account, revealing the true nature of society. His questioning exposes the flaws and weaknesses within the upper-caste social structure.

Dr. Ram Vilas Sharma's observation is significant, as he states, "This poem vividly portrays the consciousness of the rural working class... The resistance expressed in this poem reveals the mechanisms of exploitation, emphasises the workers' contributions, and conveys a sense of self-respect through irony. Such themes are unparalleled in Hindi poetry."<sup>14</sup>

Madan Kashyap's remarks are also noteworthy: "Heera Dom, in addition to his anger, exposes the false deceit of religious conversion. In feudal society, labour is relegated to the lowest level, while immoral deeds are ironically deemed signs of superiority. In this poem, Heera Dom critiques the distortions of feudalism by honoring labour and condemning wrongdoing. What makes this poem particularly striking is that it is grounded in personal experience, without relying on intellectual discourse, thereby demonstrating that the concept of God is intrinsically tied to class ideology."<sup>15</sup>

This poem not only addresses the issues of its time but also reflects deep contemplation on the pervasive inequalities in society.

## Conclusion

Heera Dom's work, particularly his poem "Achhut Ki Shikayat", serves as a profound critique of the caste system and the marginalisation faced by Dalits in Indian society. As a figure within the early wave of Dalit literature, Heera Dom highlighted the profound sense of alienation and the inhumane treatment endured by the Dalit community. His work, which directly challenged the social norms of his time, reflected the everyday struggles and painful realities of being an untouchable in a deeply hierarchical society. The anguish expressed in "Achhut Ki Shikayat" is not just a personal lament but a collective outcry against the systemic oppression Dalits faced, as well as a challenge to divine and social justice. Heera Dom's poetic voice, alongside the early Dalit writers, laid the foundation for the broader Dalit literary movement that emerged in the 20th century, offering a space for the marginalised to assert their identity and demand equality. His contributions remain significant not only in the realm of literature but also in the ongoing fight for social justice and equality for Dalits in contemporary India.

## Notes

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