

Representation of Urban Ecology as Caste-Ecology in Namdeo Dhasal's Poetry

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Abstract: *Namdeo Dhasal (1949–2014), one of Marathi literature's most radical voices, pushes this into the urban realm. His poetry maps the city as ecological terrain — not pristine or pastoral, but formed by refuse, sewage, manual scavenging, cremation grounds, congested tenements, and laboring bodies. For Dalits in Dhasal's poems, ecology is inseparable from caste: pollution, displacement, and environmental abuse are also social instruments of exclusion. This paper argues that Namdeo Dhasal's urban poetry reconceptualizes ecology through the lived, caste-inflected experience of the city's marginalized. Reading Dhasal not as an abstract nature poet but as an urban ecologist, I show how his poems convert streets, drains, scavenging grounds, cremation ghats, and slums into ecological sites where caste violence, labour exploitation, and bodily precarity are enacted and contested. Through close readings of representative poems and sustained attention to imagery, register, and form, the paper demonstrates how Dhasal reframes environmental categories (land, waste, water, air) as instruments and archives of caste power, producing what I call "urban caste-ecology." The study situates Dhasal's work within Dalit literary practice and environmental humanities, arguing that recognizing caste as an ecological factor expands both Dalit criticism and eco-criticism.*

Keywords: Namdeo Dhasal; Dalit literature; urban ecology; caste; waste; slums; environmental justice; Marathi poetry

1. Introduction

Ecocriticism has traditionally focused on the relationship between human beings and nature, but in recent decades scholars have increasingly turned to urban ecologies—the cultural, material, and ecological networks of cities. In India, this inquiry must also take into account the deeply caste-structured nature of space. Namdeo Dhasal (1949–2014), founder of the Dalit Panther movement, grew up in the slums of Bombay and vividly captured the brutal realities of marginalized lives. His poetry brings together urban topographies, ecological degradation, and caste violence, producing what can be described as a caste-ecology—a framework where ecological experience is inseparable from caste identity. Traditional eco-criticism often locates nature in rural landscapes, forests, rivers, and “wilderness,” sometimes eliding social hierarchies tied to resource access. Dalit writing has long challenged such romanticized ecologies by insisting that access to land, water, and sanitation is mediated by caste. Namdeo Dhasal (1949–2014), one of Marathi literature's most radical voices, pushes this critique into the urban realm. His poetry maps the city as ecological terrain — not pristine or pastoral, but formed by refuse, sewage, manual scavenging, cremation grounds, congested tenements, and laboring bodies. For Dalits in Dhasal's poems, ecology is inseparable from caste: pollution, displacement, and environmental abuse are also social instruments of exclusion.

This paper pursues two linked aims. First, it reads Dhasal's urban imagery as ecological detail that reveals caste hierarchies: drains, gutters, slaughterhouse bones, and cremation ashes all become markers of untouchability and social death. Second, it argues that Dhasal's poetic strategies — visceral diction, jagged lines, anaphora, and collage — enact an ethical demand: to witness and to reframe urban environmental justice as caste justice. Through close readings of specific poems and thematic analysis, the paper

develops a vocabulary for “urban caste-ecology” and shows its implications for literary and environmental studies.

Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), his first collection, is set in the infamous red-light district of Bombay. The area itself is an urban ecosystem of poverty, sex work, disease, and survival, functioning as an ecological space where marginalized lives are trapped. In his poetry, ecology is not the pastoral nature of forests and rivers but the concrete ecology of sewage, garbage, and urban filth, linked directly to caste oppression. For example, in “Man, You Should Explode,” Dhasal writes: “Man, you should explode / Yourself to bits to start all over again.” This explosion is not only existential but ecological: the urban order built on caste, where Dalits are forced into the dirtiest labor and living conditions, must be destroyed to allow for renewal.

The idea of pollution—central to caste ideology—translates into urban ecology in Dhasal's poems. The Dalit body, historically marked as “untouchable,” is forced into polluted spaces: cleaning drains, handling carcasses, or inhabiting slums near dumping grounds. The ecological distribution of urban spaces is thus caste-based.

In *Golpitha*, the urban landscape is one of “sewage, shit, and sweat,” where marginalized communities are tied to the ecology of waste. Dhasal's representation suggests that caste operates as an ecological determinant—deciding who lives where, who breathes clean air, and who is condemned to filth. Dhasal does not merely depict Dalits as victims of this caste-ecology; his poetry is also a call to resist. By reclaiming the imagery of filth and pollution, he challenges the upper-caste ecological imagination that romanticizes nature while ignoring the ecological violence inflicted on Dalits. In “Mandakini Patil: A Dalit Woman,” Dhasal writes: “She wipes the shit of the city, / yet the city calls her dirty.”

This inversion exposes how caste-ecology functions: Dalits maintain the ecology of the city, yet they are symbolically

and physically cast out of its “clean” spaces. The poem becomes an ecological critique of caste hypocrisy.

Dhasal’s Bombay is not merely a site of caste oppression; it is also a site of survival, community, and struggle. His poetry reveals how Dalits forge alternative ecologies of solidarity in spaces marked by neglect. The slum, though degraded in the upper-caste imagination, becomes a space of cultural assertion in his verse. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege have noted that Dhasal’s work “maps the city through the consciousness of the Dalit poor” (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, 2006). His poetic ecology destabilizes conventional urban narratives by centering Dalit experiences of space and environment.

Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry transforms the ecological imagination of Indian literature. By representing the urban as an ecological system structured by caste, he shows how environmental degradation, waste, and spatial segregation are not neutral phenomena but deeply casteist in nature. His caste-ecology framework is both diagnostic and revolutionary—it diagnoses how caste shapes the ecological experience of Dalits in cities, and it calls for an explosive reordering of that ecology. In doing so, Dhasal provides a powerful model for rethinking ecocriticism in the Indian context, insisting that urban ecology cannot be separated from caste.

References

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