

LISTENING TO THE CALL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: ON AMBEDKARITE WOMEN'S SONGS AND POETIC EXPRESSIONS FROM MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

ESCUCHANDO EL LLAMADO A LA JUSTICIA SOCIAL: SOBRE LAS CANCIONES Y
EXPRESIONES POÉTICAS DE LAS MUJERES AMBEDKARITAS DE
MAHARASHTRA, INDIA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to engage with the artistic activism of Ambedkarite feminists from Maharashtra. It tries to analyze some of the modes of their artistic engagement within the other forms of activism of Dalits in Maharashtra in particular and India in general. Drawing on Marathi sources, one of the core interests of the paper is to delve into the social-political worlds of women activists that propagate Ambedkar's core principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. At the same time, the ways in which Dalit women reflect on the questions of caste, gender and patriarchy will be analyzed in the context of the field of artistic (re)production of culture as a counter culture to the mainstream culture of India. Cultural practices of Maharashtra will be analyzed as a departure from the conventional folklore readings in order to differentiate its structured dispositions, bodily nuances and so on. Distinct art forms and poetic engagements among the marginalized sections will be subjected to close reading as

well, especially the genres of Ovi, Powadas, Jalasa, Buddhageet and Bheemgeet. It thus turned into the weapons of the Dalits to unleash their political tirade against the Brahmanic culture. Hence it creates spaces for ontological and epistemic investigations within the rubric of Dalit culture. Thus, the primary and secondary sources and narratives will be deployed while researching artistic activism of Ambedkarite women in the context of songs and poetic expressions. This paper tries to explore the artistic activism of Ambedkarite feminists from Maharashtra.

Resumen

Este artículo intenta comprometerse con el activismo artístico de las feministas ambedkaritas de Maharashtra. Intenta analizar algunos de los modos de su compromiso artístico dentro de las otras formas de activismo de los dalits en Maharashtra en particular y la India en general. Basándose en fuentes marathi, uno de los intereses centrales del artículo es profundizar en los mundos sociopolíticos de las mujeres activistas que propagan los principios fundamentales de libertad, igualdad y fraternidad de Ambedkar. Al mismo tiempo, se analizarán las formas en que las mujeres dalit reflexionan sobre las cuestiones de casta, género y patriarcado en el contexto del campo de la (re)producción artística de la cultura como contracultura a la cultura dominante de la India. Las prácticas culturales de Maharashtra se analizarán como una desviación de las lecturas del folclore convencional para diferenciar sus disposiciones estructuradas, matices corporales, etc. Distintas formas de arte y compromisos poéticos entre las secciones marginadas también serán objeto de una lectura atenta, especialmente los géneros de Ovi, Powadas, Jalasa, Buddhageet y Bheemgeet. Se convirtió así en las armas de los dalits para desatar su diatriba política contra la cultura brahmánica. Por lo tanto, crea espacios para investigaciones ontológicas y epistémicas dentro de la rúbrica de la cultura dalit. Así, las fuentes y narrativas primarias y secundarias se desplegarán mientras se investiga el activismo artístico de las mujeres ambedkaritas en el contexto de las canciones y las expresiones poéticas. Este artículo intenta explorar el activismo artístico de las feministas ambedkaritas de Maharashtra.

Keywords: Artistic activism; Caste; Gender; Culture; Maharashtra; Jalasa; Ambedkarite

Palabras Claves: activismo artístico; Casta; Género; Cultura; Maharashtra; jalasa; ambedkarita

Introduction

Intellectual world across the globe is deeply regulated by the social composition of the elites and their power. Dominant forms of knowledge in India are largely caught in the standardized and Brahmanic-nationalized culture (Ambedkar, 1987). Such forms of art therefore are embedded in privileged forms of culture. They seem uncritical to the politics of art that mediates hegemonic interests and entails certain homogenization and bestow uncritical approach towards the depoliticized diversity within the field of art (Neelakandan S.M, 2018:48-59). Caste thus polarizes the field of art. Those who are dominant in the field of caste and consequential knowledge production determine the ideological nature of art. For instance, Sanil Neelakandan argued that dominant readings on art of the marginalized sections by the dominant caste-class-art scholars in India are unable to capture the dynamics of the oppression of marginalized sections due to the privileged caste-class location of those scholars. Thus, such analysis of the art of the oppressed sections by the scholars from the dominant castes basically depoliticizes the core premise of such art by extricating those arts from the depth of its social and political concerns. Caste determines the nature and ideology of such hierarchical approaches and practices related to art. Art therefore needs to be read from the diverse social trajectories and related power. The oppression of the marginalized caste-classes is also happening through the sadist-privileged realm of hegemonic ideological framework of caste-based culture. Dalits in India have different experiences and perspectives related to culture. Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular are articulating their existential predicaments through diverse and distinct art forms. They also share certain epistemic departures from the hierarchical structure of the Indian culture.

Maharashtra has the legacy of anti-caste political traditions that address the relations of caste, class, gender and cultural questions. One of the fundamental questions that need to be raised in this particular juncture is that whether Dalits have charted their own epistemic trajectory related to the categories of caste and culture? How Dalits are challenging the superiority of the Brahmin intelligentsia? What are the different ways through which anti-caste movement created political awakening among the Dalits in Maharashtra? How its articulations and expressions tend to embrace the idea of the popular culture? What are the ways in which Dalit cultural expression departed from the standardized Marathi language-dominant caste based cultural forms? Therefore, the collective ethos of Dalit cultural forms moves away from the individualist self-centered Brahmanic- cultural tradition. The category of the social and political are central to Dalit thoughts- practice based on the ideology of Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj and B.R. Ambedkar. This paper proposes to engage with the nuances of the debates on Dalit women's encounter within the larger sphere of Dalit culture. It also aims at excavating the cultural tensions that differentiate the sphere of Dalit culture and so-called high/Brahmanic forms of culture. As Lucy Lippard analyzed "[A]ctivist art operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the 'art world.' It is not a new art form so much as it is a massing of energies, suggesting new ways for artists to connect with the sources of energy in their own experience" (Lippard, Cited in Shipley and Mey-Yen, 2023:3). Anti-caste, Dalit assertions in the field of culture through the interventions of Dalit women artists elicit new questions of social and political momentums.

Methodology

As a woman researcher from Ambedkariat community, I consider this paper as one that is grounded in the dialogic interactions with the Dalit women artists. Broadly, it is centered around the oral narratives of Dalit women artists to capture the various dimensions of their life that are usually not grappled in the Brahmanic, mainstream-research literature on the relations of caste, gender and art. As an Ambedkariate feminist academician, I position myself in this research as a subject who engages with the subjects from my/Dalit/ Ambedkariat community. Therefore, this paper revisits the questions and interviews based on the core field of Dalit women artists. Oral historical mode is deployed here to unearth the distinct nature of the social world and cultural production of Dalit women activists. Interviews of Dalit women-artists are conducted here to explore the in-depth accounts of their lived experiences. It is based on primary and secondary sources that include narratives, interviews and songs in Marathi language. Dalit women-artistic activists from Maharashtra actively participated in this process.

Politics of Caste, Culture and Dissent

Before engaging with the specificity of Dalit culture in the context of feminist cultural assertion, it is significant to engage with some of the dominant streams of thought on culture in Indian context. Among the central questions that always asked is whether art has created any major social and political change in India? What is the nature of the trope called “progressive cultural movement “in India, considering that intellectual tradition in India has peculiar way of gauging “such movement”? According to K. N. Panikkar, the formation of The All-India Progressive Writer's Association (PWA) in 1936 and Indian People's Theatre

Association (IPTA) in 1940s initiated a new way of interpreting the social and political questions. This pan-Indian movement of culture has shifted to regional/state level groups that reminds of its national-cultural predecessors. However, these new regional/state level groups departed from the earlier cultural-political traditions through their lack of the major cultural activities and established art practitioners. Their ideological position, for Panikkar, is that of “left of the centre” ¹. It is critiqued that progressive cultural movement was not able to capture the attention of the majority of the cultural activists and their cultural expressions across different parts/states within India. Gradually, it resulted in the neutralization of its cultural and intellectual rigor. This transformation led to the isolation of the progressive cultural movement (Panikkar, 2011:14). It needs to be understood that progressive cultural movement is able to gain influence and organizational quality in some states in India such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bengal and Kerala. On the contrary, still it could not address the transforming cultural actuality of diverse populations in India. For instance, it is argued that progressive cultural movement remained outside the social issues based on the discrimination of Dalits, gendered subjugation and oppression of the indigenous communities. Thus, it reproduces the nostalgia and anachronistic readings that are external to the current social and political realities. While addressing the cultural legacy of progressive cultural movement in India, it is observed that it involved with the questions of mass and elitist culture-class based oppression, feudalism, communalism and imperialism (Panikkar, 2011:14-25). This particular position of the left oriented, cultural assertions therefore could not seriously grapple with the issues related to caste and gender linked

¹ See K.N.Panikkar article on Progressive Cultural Movement in India: A Critical Appraisal, p.14.

oppression. Nevertheless, debates in Marathi language of Maharashtra also sharpen the understanding in order to realize caste and hierarchy. The shift from Sanskrit to Marathi under the leadership of Brahmins (Novetzke, 2011) and vernacularisation (Pollock, 1998) created a major impact in the realm of culture in Maharashtra. However, caste system also created the hierarchies of the forms of cultural expressions and politics of acceptance. What are the routes of culture through which Dalits travelled to articulate their social and political utterances? Scholars like Christian Novetzke enquires whether there is any radical shift from the *Bharud*² to that of the current Dalit activism?

The Bhakti movement was originated during the end of the thirteen and the early fourteenth centuries. It was rebellious in nature, having lower caste Saints like Namdev, Ekanath, Tukaram, Chokhamela, Banka, Karmamela, Janabai, Soyarabai, Nirmala and others. It has sparked the intellectual, ethical grounding and situated the individual spiritual liberation and questioned inequality, caste, untouchability and social suffering around in the society (Zelliot and Mokashi -Punekar, 2005:1-51).

Nevertheless, it is observed that the 18th century *Tamasha*³, *Lavani*⁴ songs written by Shahirs⁵ reflect how caste has played major role in the epoch of public performance in Maharashtra. *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, too created its own public interventions (Novetzke, 2011). *Tamasha*, according to Shailaja Paik, needs to be analyzed in relation to the sex-

² Different forms were used by the Bhakti Saints from Maharashtra. One of them is *Bharud*. Bhakti Saints from Maharashtra deployed diverse forms of *Bharud* to educate, aware and enlightened the common masses against all kinds of exploitive, existing socio-political, contemporary issues as well as traditional issues.

³ It is a traditional form of Marathi theatre that includes singing and dancing. It is widely performed by local or travelling theatres which used to be in groups within Maharashtra. It is combination of traditional song and dance. It is a popular music genre in Maharashtra.

⁴ It is combination of traditional song and dance. It is a genre of music which is also very much popular in Maharashtra.

⁵ The one who writes poems/ songs and sometime compose songs.

gender-caste complexity and its production of surplus women and caste slavery. Stigma of caste and the pollution attributed to the *Tamasha*-Dalit women performer is based on the sex-caste-caste complex social milieu. Questions of sexual-caste, violence, vulgarity and low/high culture are also connected to the arena of *Tamasha*. It is further noted that Dalit women *Tamasha* performers represent their oppressive subjectivities and their practices of resistance. Thus, Paik argues that it operates as a precarious labour in the moral economy of the decent-vulgar. Hence, it needs to be problematised in the context of anti-caste assertions, moral questions, integration and standardised-regional, high culture.

Caste in the pre-colonial Maharashtra generated critiques within Maharashtra. For instance, Bhakti movement created its own anti-caste resistance through the *Kirtana*⁶ (Novetzke, 2011, 234-247). Hence Brahmanic dominance is structured through systematic oppression of subordinated section and through the projection of Brahmanic intellectual worlds. Novetzke argued that dominant sections also know how to camouflage their power. Further, Brahmins created its certain “Brahmin double” that combines good and bad Brahmins and maintained the Brahmin power and anti-Brahmin power/resistance against Brahmins in calculated ways (Novetzke, 2011).

Brahmins thus maintained their criticism to the caste hierarchy and through becoming the bad Brahmin; they legitimized their power in the public realms of arts. There were rare attempts like that of Eknath⁷, who indulged in the deviation from the caste to create reform within the caste-Hindu religious order. At the same time, Brahmins attributing the oral

⁶ *Kirtana* is a genre of devotional songs/music that is used to sing in the context of Saints poets.

⁷ One of the Bhakti Saint from Maharashtra.

arena/expressions for the marginalized castes and literacy as the hegemony of the Brahmin (Novetzke, 2011:235-240). This power play of Brahmins in Maharashtra was able to challenge the cultural and political resistance from the lower castes. The genres of *Ovi*⁸, *Palana*⁹ *Powadas*¹⁰, *Jalasa*¹¹, *Buddhageet*¹² and *Bheemgeet*¹³ written in Marathi during the time of Phule- Ambedkar and even in the contemporary context (some of them) do not use the flowery language like that of the dominant Brahmin writers. However, the non-Brahmin movements efforts to reform the society by contesting the culture and religion, thus cultivated the values of equality and rationality in the society (Omvedt, 2004:34).

Dalits' Encounters with the Culture

This section deals with the historical tradition of the anti-caste and Dalit cultural traditions in Maharashtra. Dalit movements and Dalit intellectuals have been trying to capture the specificity of the culture of the Dalits. The plural interpretations related to culture and Dalits from the different part of India demonstrate the democratic nature of the Dalit intellectual articulations. This article does not engage with all those Dalit assertions on culture. However, it limits itself to some of the pan-Indian and Maharashtra Dalit cultural articulations. Dalit literary and political

⁸ Ovi is a genre of Marathi poetry having two types, used in text and folk culture. It has special reference to folk literature and lives of women, it is sung while women used to grind the grains, wheat, jawar and so on.

⁹ While the small child is going to sleep a lullaby or cradle song is sung by the mother most of the time or any other women members in the family.

¹⁰ A Marathi traditional ballad which traces its history, mostly it articulates the contribution of eminent historical or popular figures. It is an admiration and celebration of deeds of those historical and popular figures who served in the interest of people. It is one of the forms of folk culture of Maharashtra.

¹¹ It is gathering of the people to sing the songs in order to bring social change and so on.

¹² Song that are based on the teachings of Buddha and sung by singers, artist, activist and performers and so on. Mostly these people belong to anti-caste tradition.

¹³ Song that articulated the philosophy and praxis of Ambedkar. Similarly, these songs are sung by singers, artist, activist and performers from anti-caste tradition.

movements raise serious critiques to Brahmanic knowledge production on the basis of anti-caste perspectives (Ingole, 2020:93). Contemporary Dalit intelligentsia is continuing their explorations across the disciplines. They are seeking the possible theoretical grounds to foreground the peculiarity of culture related to the life worlds of Dalits. Thus, they are conducting serious perusal of the field of dominant-cultural studies. The emergence of counter culture is suggested in order to overcome the symbolic and epistemic power of the cultural studies within the dominant academic culture. Potentials of Dalit cultural studies for Ingole, is grounded in a framework that can explore the culture and spaces of Dalits. It is analyzed as “anti-disciplinary” because it challenges the caste linked terrains of the discipline and knowledge creation through its “anti-caste” ideology (Ingole, 2020). Intellectuals who theorize the possibilities of anti-caste resistance have generated their own critiques of the art. Such critiques are vital in determining the history of the epistemic orientations related to the culture and art forms of the Dalits. Y.S. Alone interrogates, whether Indian ‘art/s’ are able to challenge the established canons or not. Therefore, it has to be transformed through challenging the meta-narratives (Alone, 2017). They also debunk the ideological dangers inherent in the homogenous space of the Indian art. Therefore, Brahmanical metanarrative of modernity, for Alone, determines the establishment of Indian art. Status-quo is maintained through ‘protected ignorance’ and therefore it arrests the possibilities of genuine critique. As discussed earlier, they are very much conscious of the Brahmanic pretensions that are happening with the cultural explorations of the Dalits. Consequently, naming the art of the marginalized as problematic in nature and it has the tendency to fall into tokenism.

Gopal Guru attempts to position the historical contours of *Kalapathaks*¹⁴. The emergence of Dalit literature in 1970s and 1980s excavates some of the cardinal elements related to the culture and art forms of Dalits. Guru analyses the contradictions of modernity between the literary camps and mud house activists. The complexities aroused due to the conflicts on modernity among the literary circles and mud house activists led to the scant attention towards the popular culture of Dalits. At the same time, it also shared scepticism about the viability of the politics of culture against the hegemonic religious forces in Maharashtra (Guru, 1994:2700). Guru looks at Dalit culture beyond the field of Dalit literature. What are the possibilities that have the power to undermine the homogenization of culture? Whether resistance of the subordinate culture will be neutralized through the dominant culture or not. In addition to these important premises, the cultural assertions of the Dalits will be impacted due to the larger Dalit political assertions in Maharashtra (Guru, 1997). Politics of culture within Dalit political realms also determine the complex interconnections of caste, gender and changing patriarchal spaces among the Dalits. Thus, an important stake here is to understand the gendered nature of the Dalit activism against the caste.

Politicizing Caste, Gender and Culture

How one can interrogate the core insights of the Dalit feminism which can be understood in the context of the cultural production of the Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general? What sorts of critiques are generated through such plural Dalit inquiry associated with culture and

¹⁴ It is troupe of artists who moves from one place to another place in order to perform art – it may be in the form of drama; dance and so on, or in other words, a group/team of artist and performers.

resistance? However, it is remarkable to note that Ambedkar showed keen interest to start literary organization for Dalits (Dhale, cited in Anagha Bhat-Behere, 2017:141). Consequently, the historical contribution done by Dalit movements in Maharashtra shaped poetry, folk songs and musical instruments and further build up the discourse on the cultural interests and expectations of the Dalit masses. It has generated a revolutionary context for the politics of liberation around the ideology of Ambedkar and later phase of Dalit leaders. State played a significant role in the appropriation of Dalit politics and Dalit cultural movements. Dalit movement is instrumental in Dalit cultural agency. Thus, Guru discusses this kind of question in the backdrop of the debates on the cultural contradictions in India. Even today, these are central debates and departure points related to caste, Dalits, art and gender that are valid and extended to other states like Punjab. The emerging Dalit woman-cultural activism can be seen in the interventions of Ginni Mahi from Punjab. According to Ginnie Mahi, "The music is about and by ordinary people, it is about their lives (Mahi, Cited in Sahai 2020). She further argued that "As a human being, I believe in doing the right thing and that is what I did when I chose to sing about Babasaheb Ambedkar's message. It is the media and people who have started calling me a Dalit singer. They pushed this identity in the forefront. I never went around claiming a Dalit identity, this identity claimed me. I don't believe in the caste system but if the action of actively claiming this identity can help a lot of people and give a voice to their problems, I will do it," (Mahi, Cited in Sharma, 2017). The presence of the oppressive contemporary society thus constantly haunts them and it erupt in the form of their cultural resistance.

One must critically differentiate the manner in which culture operates in the Brahmin and non-Brahman realms. It is to be explored to what

extent it has transformed the society to achieve equality. Or is it the cultural appropriation of the Dalit culture by the dominant Brahmanic forces goes on as Guru cautions us in recurrent manner. Nevertheless, some Dalit groups argue that they never got due recognition because upper caste cultural elites have not considered the contribution of Dalits to the field of arts. Therefore, Dalit literary movement attributed cultural identity to the Dalits and it helped them to fight against the Brahmanic forces (Guru, 1997).

The connections between cultural homogenization, inertia of literary culture and the state/political institutions need to be analyzed. The position that foregrounds the subversive potential of the Dalit literary movement against the exploitative Brahminical culture resulted in the sidelining of the investigations related to Dalit popular culture. It explores the nature of the form and content of the theoretical context of the Dalit cultural movement. It further analyses the possibilities of the relations and diversity within the Dalit cultural traditions. Whether Dalit cultural movements have succeeded in creating political consciousness among the masses? The political and cultural development along with Buddhist legacy can be seen in the Maharashtra. At the same time, how these forms of Dalit culture challenged the Brahminic and capitalistic forces. Caste-based society creates its own perceptions about the Dalits. Those constructions show the relations of caste power and existing realities. Guru pointed out the manner in which the proverbs, commonly used in Maharashtra in order to explicate the three intellectual activities are connected to caste-household factors. For instance, reading and writing goes on in a Brahmin; Agricultural activities happens in the house of *Kunbis*¹⁵; singing songs goes on in the home of *Mahars/ Mangs*¹⁶. It also

¹⁵ Kunbi is caste that falls under Shudra category, currently they are known as Bahujans.

¹⁶ Mahar and Mangs are x-untouchables, presently known as Dalits.

inform us that *Mahars* and *Mangs* have created their own cultural traditions. Among them, *Mangs* used to make the musical instruments. *Mahars* have the strong tradition of singing. In addition to the needs of the community people, *Mahars* also had to perform for the feudal lords and they expressed their anger during the precolonial period against the feudal lords through their songs (Guru, 1997). Culture, caste and societal dynamics do operate in distinct ways.

Genealogy of Dalit women's Cultural Interventions: On *Tamashas*, *Lavani*, *Powada*, *Jalasa*

Dalit women performers as creative subjects have been systematically repressed in the history (Singh, 2017:20). However, in the context of Dalit art forms the multiple meanings on *Tamashas*, *Lavani*, *Powada*, *Jalasa* and so on can be found in the Marathi and English writings by the scholars. Historical accounts show us that how the lower caste women had to perform *Tamasha* and *Lavani* due to their stigmatized, lower caste locations. V.K. Bhavé and P.A. Gavai explored how slavery system was existing in the time of Peshwas (Bhavé, 2010; Gavai 1981). The Dalit women were not part of *Tamashas*, *Lavani* and *Jalasa* at the initial stage. In the 18th century, the *Kunbinis*¹⁷ and *Batkins*¹⁸ were predominantly part of in-house/private slavery system who belongs to the Shudra community. They used to look after the children and help in the domestic chores. During the famine, the poor people started selling their domestic articles and women in the markets. Dalits also started imitating them due to poverty. As a result, exploiting ruling castes-classes interpolated

¹⁷ Women from *Kunbi* caste is called as *Kunbinis*. They were slaves brought for the purpose of domestic and agricultural labour.

¹⁸ *Batkins*- known as whore. They were also slaves brought for sexual labour by individuals, or state or Natakshala.

a category of *Batakinis. Ati-Shudras*¹⁹ in order to legitimize the oppression of Shudras as well as ex-untouchables. Eventually, these women become performers in the private spaces and later on shifted to public spaces, in the 'mainstream public' as an entertainer, through festivals such as *Ganesha melas/festivals*. Rege pointed out that it was time of Peshwa regime in which the untouchables -lower caste-Dalit women's body became a site of sexual vulgarity. They (Peshwa rulers) manipulated their bodies to generate the revenue for the state (Rege, 1995:26-27). Therefore, over a period of time, performance operates as the representation of the cultural assertions of diverse caste groups as well. Accordingly, cultural labour and its local networks determine the equations of caste and politics (Prakash, 2019). Caste, culture and gender thus impacted the questions of performance and labour.

Mahatama Jotiba Phule challenged the aforementioned dominant, Brahmanic culture through the establishment of the Sataysodhaok Samaj in the year 1873 (O'Hanlon:1985, 220). He composed a Powada²⁰ on King Shivaji as one who practiced equality across all castes-class, gender and religions. As Gail Omvedt argues that Satayasodhak Tamasha used to offer critique to the religious traditions (Omvedt: 1979, 210). On the other hand, Sharmila Rege argues that Ganesh Mela/festivals have taken the shape of the popular culture. It was promoted by Peshwas to propagate the Hindu nationalism, Brahmanical patriarchy and Hindu ideology (Rege: 2000, 198). They also addressed the evil systems of sati, child marriage, widowhood, and widow remarriages and so on. The Satayasodhak Jalasa (truth-seeker) emerged as an alternative public

¹⁹ It is Marathi word, the *Ati-Shudra* category was coined by Phule in the context of Dalits. Here the argument is that how shift taken place from *Shudars* to *Ati-Shudars*.

²⁰ A traditional ballad / song that traces the history, here to praise the contribution of Shivaji Maharaj.

culture (Rege: 2000). After the death of Phule in 1890, the visibility of Sathyashodhak Jalsa started declining. But it was again revived in 1910 by Chattarpati Shahu Maharaj, with specific focus on Satyasodhok Jalasa's which has further given birth to Ambedkari Jalasa's (Thakur, 2005:7). These counter cultures were never become a center of the focus, nor it was of any interest for the researcher of the mainstream Brahmanical cultural practices. The Ambedkari Jalasas were dealing with the question of livelihood, rural to urban migration, everyday practice of untouchability, purity and impurity, drinking water issues related to well, pond and so on. It addressed the caste, class, gender hierarchy and focused on issues of equality through education. The Ambedkari Jalasa has taken its birth in the 1930s and flourished to address the schadenfreude of Brahmanical, unequal, unjust society. It has history of more than hundred years.

What are the stakes of artistic activism of Dalit women in the larger background of the Brahmanic and colonial understanding of Indian culture? Is it possible to foreground social theoretical grounds that generate critical and reflexive readings on such forms of art and activism? This section will examine the genealogy of Dalit women's artistic activism that goes back to the pioneering events in the history of Dalit artistic activism.

Dalit women's engagement with culture has been studied through different modes/ practices. Guru discusses about the *Ovi* and *Palana* of the Dalit women artists in the backdrop of the Dalit cultural interventions. The caste and gender issues related to politics and culture are the prime focus of it. Asha Thorats' article in Marathi "*Stree Lok Geetathil Umatnara Ambedkari Chalvaliche Padsasaad*" (Reflections and imprints on the Ambedkarite movement through women folk songs) argues that even after the hardship in day-to-day life, Dalit women are

forced to face insult from the upper/dominant castes-classes due to their lower caste location in the Hindu religion. She positions Dalit women's struggle for self-respect and social justice as part of their serious engagements with Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings and practice. She also analyses how Dalit women artists/singers deployed the motto "to educate, agitate and organize" in order to inculcate the revolutionary zeal among the Dalit women. Thus, they pronounced the political idioms related to Dalit questions in emphatic fashion.

Dalit women became aware of the societal obstacles through such songs. At the same time, Thorat discusses about Babasaheb Ambedkar's axioms related to education in the songs and observe that how women from Dalit community invoke the category of education as an important instrument in the knowledge production system to live a respectful life. The following translations are done from Marathi language.

For instance, the *Bheemgeet* says:

"Hey child, you should learn and write,

Babasaheb says that knowledge is wealth"

"my brother is wearing the suit, boot and coat,

how can I withheld the gratitude for Babasaheb" (Thorat:p.120)

Therefore, Asha Thorat argues that Dalit life was like a desert without any hope abounds with injustice, sorrows and difficulties. Still Dalits are part of the India. They were constantly exploited by the upper/ dominant castes/classes. They have been living like slaves for survival. Further she notes that how Ambedkar radically altered their wretched lives. It transformed them into political beings. The following lines from the *Ovi*

encapsulate their social-political imaginations related to Babasaheb Ambedkar;

“You constantly call the God,

what God has given to you?

Its futile.

Don't touch the feet of the God

Bheemraya has brought the light through

Buddha” (Thorat: p.120).

Babasaheb liberated the untouchables from superstitions. Honest and sincere Dalit women's dedication to Babasaheb can be seen through their songs. However, Thorat further argues that the Dalit women who worked with Babasaheb express their deep gratitude to him in the following lines.

The song reads as:

“Why the water from the *Chavdar* tank²¹ become red,

the blood of Babasaheb spilled there,

the flame of the Bheem is coming through that pond,

all human beings are looking at that tank,

Oh mothers and sisters carry that flame in your hands,

let's go there, water has become red,

the water of Mahad is tasty...” (Thorat:p.120-21)

²¹ It is located in Mahad, where Babasaheb Ambedkar with his community members asserted for the dalits' rights to access water from public tanks.

The above-mentioned lines depict the oppressive past of the Dalits. They were not allowed to take water public/private wells, rivers etc. Thus, Thorat also shows us how they (Dalit women) through their songs express their tribute to Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. The *Ovi* and *Palana* of the Dalit women singers' collective reflect on the Dalit women's everyday forms of activism.

It describes as follows:

My first *Ovi* is dedicated to Gautam Buddha

We have embraced Buddha Dhamma which teaches humanity

My second *Ovi* is dedicated to Jotiba Phule

Who handed over the truth to us

My third *Ovi* is dedicated Ambedkar Baba

Who wrote and given the Constitution of India

I sing the fourth *Ovi* for Ramai

Gratitude to you mother, who stood as a shadow to Babasaheb Ambedkar and left us (Thorat: p.121)

These songs can not be classified in to any particular genre. These Dalit women artists are also not trained in the field of classical music/or so called high (caste) culture. It has historical connotations. Those songs also engage with the social and political questions in subtle and metaphorical fashion. They explicate the lives of Dalits through the songs to unfold the quotidian forms of caste, class, gender and patriarchy.

Capturing the Social and Political Worlds of Ambedkarite Women: On Some Biographical and Cultural Distinctions

This section and its subsections analyze some of the biographical and cultural distinctions of the Dalit women artists- activists. Their trajectory and cultural diversity within the larger framework of culture, caste and gender express the visible and latent cultural aspirations and possibilities of the liberation from the proliferation of caste ideology-atrocities.

An artist from Dalit community carries the vicissitudes of the culture and community through their cultural practices. The following arguments are drawn from the interview of Shital Sathe that was conducted by Rasika Ajotkar and published in the *Journal of Feminist Review* in 2018. Shital Sathe is one of the prominent Dalit women artist activists. As Shital Sathe recollects her initial days of writing poems and explored the stark realities related to hunger through her poems. Sathe entered into the arena of music becoming part of the performance of the songs of pioneering dalit artists such as Sambhaji Bhagat, Vilas Ghogrea, Vamandada Kardak in *Kabir Kala Manch* and with that of *Safai Kamgars* organization (The scavenger workers organization). She and her colleagues realized the necessity of understanding the politics through music. The members in the group started reading the seminal works by Karl Marx, Jotiba Phule, B.R.Ambedkar and Annabhau Sathe. Through such gradual politicization, Shital Sathe started writing and composing songs. While discussing about the space of *Shahiri* in the protest music tradition, Sathe observed that majority of the genres of music and popular forms of culture are embedded in the culture of the caste. In order to illuminate her position on the role of caste in the musicality, she cites the example of the sub-genre, *Powada* that has emerged as one that from the Dalit and peasant castes. She traces the genealogy of the *Shahiri*

to that of its role in inspiring the soldiers for war during the period of Shivaji. Sathe positions her approach to *Shahiri* as different, protest genre of Dalit-Bahujan's that predates to Phule's *Powada* about Shivaji and *Jalsa* tradition.

A *Shahir*, for Shital Sathe, is the becoming of a poet who is responsible for his/her own words. She further analyses that a *Shahir* is different from a singer because s/he writes and sings her/his own songs. Sathe discusses about the role of marginal and oppressed castes in creating music and popular art. She emphasizes the relations of social location and musical production while discussing about the importance of words or vocabulary in the music. Those subordinated sections expressed their own worlds through their musical productions. She is conscious of the ways in which Brahmanism and capitalism appropriate the music of the marginalized sections. She argues that oral culture and struggles of the castes in the periphery of hierarchical systems have to map through rigorous vocabulary. She returns to the history and recollects Tukaram's aphorism that sees words as the wealth jewel and weapon in the homes. Words are the wealth that can only be given to the people etc. Sathe emphasizes on the integral role of work in the larger, social-political struggles. How far this revolt music has impacted the women from the subordinated sections? Her music represents the genre of *Vidrohi* (revolutionary) *Shahiri Jalsa* (Ajotkar: 2018).

Sathe pointed out that women from the audience approach her after the performance and their gesture are different from that of the audience which goes to male *Shahirs*. Women share their desire to become a singer like Shital Sathe. A lady told her that she does not want to wear *mangalsutra*²² that symbolizes patriarchy driven slavery/conformist

²² Its black beads which are tied during marriage ceremony, those women who wear that mean, it indicates that women are married women.

values related to heterosexual-endogamous marriages. Perspectives of Ambedkar on gender, patriarchy and subjugation of women are thus conveyed through the powerful songs. Sathe considers that such songs have the potential to challenge the orthodox Hindu religious culture. Music thus nurtures certain solidarity among women as well. Collective sense therefore calls for the responsibility. Dalit women artists are forcefully arguing about the relations between the annihilation of the caste and the oppression of women. Sathe reiterates Ambedkar's perspectives that read women as "the gateways of (caste system)-religion" (see for more details Ambedkar: 1979, BAWS, Vol.1). It is opined that sexuality is central to the political institutions and there are undeniable interlinkages between sexuality and the state. She is conscious of the contradictions between the theory and the practice. She argues that the patriarchy and caste that are challenged through her songs need to be critiqued from the home as well. For instances, a number of songs sung by her describes about the role of Hindu religion, contribution of Manu²³

According to her, it is Ambedkar who logically explained these debates in his pathbreaking work, 'The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman: Who was Responsible for It?'. Even today's Indian society on daily basis are facing atrocities, violence, caste discrimination, social -economic and political problems as citizens of largest democracy. Thus, Shital Sathe is conscious and vigilant, the ways in which politics of surveillance on social and political movements are taking its shape. It is argued that their questions are unanswered by the ruling classes and they are being suppressed because the hegemonic classes have not answered to their

²³ Manu, who codified laws that degraded women and untouchables' positions, also it divides the society based on graduation and hierarchy of caste and class and gender.

questions. She also articulates the ideological underpinnings of her music.

She believes in the Sharad Patil's path breaking perspectives based on Karl Marx, Mahatma Phule and B.R. Ambedkar and also on the Indian constitution and democracy. Shital Sathe is conscious about the questions of caste, class and freedom as well (Ajotikar, 2018: 154-162). Therefore, one can argue that Sathe invokes the synthesis of Marx, Phule and Ambedkar's vision within Dalit feminism which is distinct from other Ambedkariate feminist/women from the community. It can be realized that Shital Sathe raised the fundamental questions on several issues- equality, justice, caste, class, gender, religion, patriarchy, poverty, social-economic-political subjugation in the present context and also pointing out to shrinking spaces of democracy and its disastrous impact on citizens. Therefore, in Arendian sense, art activism can be analysed as the space of appearance and common world that reactivates and reclaims the public spaces (Shipley and Mey-Yen, 2023:17) which strengthens the citizenship.

Re-reading the Past and the Contemporary

The following section is based on the archival work of 'People's Archive of Rural India' (PARI), an organization who conducted a project on Jatyavarchi Ovi (Grind mill songs project).

The second biography discusses about Parvati Bhardargi's *Ovi* and her way of apprehending the caste and gender via Dalit histories. Parvati Bhadarge's *Ovi* on Babasaheb Ambedkar and Ramabai remembers the rare moments in their life. Memory thus becomes the homage to those who sacrificed the lives for the Dalit community. Such act of memorizing via an *Ovi* possesses certain energy to enliven the present moments. The

Ovi is biographical and political in nature. It maps the nuances of the Dalit lives in relation to the life of Ambedkar and Ramabai. It discusses about their marriage, the conditions of both families, their hardships etc. Narrator imagines the different periods in their life. She also imagines Ambedkar as a child and her brother and Ramabai (first wife of Ambedkar) as her sister-in-law. Dalit women hence identify with the history of the anti-caste assertions and also attempts to replace such identification with the contemporary conditions of the Dalits as well. Diachronic and synchronic engagements with the caste and gendered realities operate as rudimentary aspect of Dalit women's cultural pursuits. Past and present of the existence based on caste are central to the Dalit cultural expressions. For instance, Savi Savarkar's paintings are analyzed for its critical engagements with the Dalit questions. Saurab Dube analyzed that "It should be clear that the reach of Savi's work far exceeds the simple documentation of the past and the present, reaching beyond mere images of social expression. Rather, in tune with the Walter Benjamin's advocacy that "to articulate the past (and the present) ...is to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, cited in Dube, 2013).

Another Dalit woman, Kusum Sonawane, a singer and an artist-activist too, invoke the complex milieus of Dalit worlds through her songs. Kusum Sonawane and her team of women from Mulshi Taluka sing fourteen *Ovis* that reflect on B.R. Ambedkar's history of the annihilation of caste and equality. One of the important lines in the *Ovi* says

"Bheemmai's (mother of Ambedkar) son (Babasaheb Ambedkar) achieved a noble feat/From Delhi. The capital of India, he established equality in the land".

She also says about her familial duties before the recording of the *Jatyavarchi* Ovis. She received accolades for working an organization called *Garib Dongi Sanghatana*, or the rural poor in the hilly areas of Pune. PARI organization team members noticed the images and posters of Jotiba Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule and a copy of Constitution of India in her home. They demonstrate her consciousness about the political history of Dalits. It is analyzed that it reflects the idea of “*Darjyachi aani Sandichi Samaanta* (Equality of status and opportunity) (PARI, Year). Her *Ovi* praises about the role of Ambedkar in assuring voting rights and reservations for the Dalit. It provided jobs for the Dalits. Reservation also kindled confidence in the Dalit women to speak in the public realms. They consider it all happened due to the diamond (the simile here shows their passionate approach), son of Ramji (Babasaheb Ambedkar's father) and Bheemmai (mother of Babasaheb Ambedkar), and Babasaheb Ambedkar. His educational accomplishments from the London School of Economics and Columbia University are also remembered in the *Ovi*. Ambedkar's historical intervention in the Round Table Conference for the depressed classes is also mentioned. His political struggles for the entry to Kalaram Temple and the stiff opposition from the Brahmins towards the entry of untouchables to the temple is also discussed to mark the Dalit history. They also criticize that birth into a particular caste is not the fault of any individual. One of the interesting aspects of the *Ovi* is that it mocks at the deity made out of the stone in the Kalaram temple as one that symbolizes the heartless/lifeless nature of the Hindu religion. Still, untouchables are not able to enter Hindu temples irrespective of their Constitutional rights.

Another Dalit woman artist-activist Radha Borkhade's *Ovis* are important because it delves into the world of Buddhism. She dedicates

her *Ovi* to the radical approaches of Lord Buddha. She analyses Lord Buddha as one who liberated the untouchables from the ignominy of caste. She also discusses about the leadership of B R Ambedkar that empowered the Dalits to fight against the caste-based oppression. Borkhade also speaks about Buddhism as a way of life and the importance of *Dhamma*. She also sings about the role of *Sangha* and the importance of *Panchasheel* (*The Five Precepts of Buddhas teaching*) to abstain from vices. She also demonstrates Ramabai Ambedkar as a mother respected by the Dalits (PARI1996) and shares her interests in Buddhist scriptures, her journey to see Buddhist heritage places like Ajanta, Ellora (these are caves located in Aurangabad, in Maharashtra), *Dikshabhoomi* ²⁴. She discusses about the selfless journey of Buddha for the larger humanity.

Dalit woman-artist activist, Lilabai in her *Ovi*'s exhort the need to be treated equally in the society. Respect for Ambedkar and his revolutionary ways are welcomed. She describes Ambedkar as "Guru (*teacher*) and Bhau (*brother*)" as a teacher and a brother. She considers singing about Ambedkar as a purification of individual self. Ambedkar's dedication to Lord Buddha and the imageries of Buddhist dress code are central to her *Ovis*. She strongly condemns the upper castes for pushing the Dalits into menial forms of labour. She sees Ambedkar as a person with strong convictions with values, morals and ethics (PARI, 1996). These revolutionary ways of articulating the truths of the Dalit lives provide aura to the Dalit woman artist activists.

²⁴ A place of historical legacy in Nagpur where Babasaheb Ambedkar did conversion to Buddhism.

Struggles in Life and Music

How the Ambedkariat artistic activist taking forward the legacy of Ambekar's idea of equality, freedom, justice through their singings should be recognized to differentiate such forms of artistic activism. One of the leading Marathi singers, Kadubai Kharat, whose interview was taken in the month of April, 2022 in Maharashtra. She was born in an extremely poor Dalit family. Her father and mother were artists and use to sing *Bhakti* songs. She inherited music as a child at the age of eight. She narrates her journey which was extremely difficult from her childhood. She faced major difficulties after she lost her parents and husband. The very basic issue of survival with her three children haunted her. She says, she has to beg for food and thus she started singing. Caste based occupation; performance and culture are strangely determining her life chances. In fact, in the initial stage, she uses *Ikatari* (an instrument) sing songs of Ambedkar walking from one to other slums wherever her community members are living.

It is her words, the Ambedkarite community has been instrumental in promoting her as an 'artist' and retain her art and activism. She says, she owes a million of thanks to Babasaheb Ambedkar. Her songs revisit the thoughts and ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar. She has dedicated her life to propagate Ambedkar's message through singing songs. She reminds us the struggle of Ramaai (first wife of Babasaheb Ambedkar) who used to go and collect wood sticks, makes cow dung cakes for the survival of the family and manages the entire household).

She has sung lot of songs. Her two songs are selected here to demonstrate how she narrates the philosophy of Ambedkar that motivate her and entire Dalit community.

In her song “*Mazyra Bhimaana Sonyan Bharli Oti* “(In English, *Bheem who filled my basket with gold*)

She describes the life of Dalit women:

as one who is carrying child in hand,

having broom in another hand,

carrying a basket with cow dang over head

Not having enough cloths

No food, So much poverty

It creates the awkward situation for the mother;

it is my Bheem, my father who is Bheem,

who filled my basket with gold

My *lugade* ²⁵, a cloth is teared out,

having many knots

Now the child has become officer

and daughter-in-law become also officer

Now they talk about knowledge

it is my Bheem, my father who is Bheem,

who filled my basket with gold

How much and how long I should tell you,

tell you mother

I have done so much labour

Even than I was not getting the left-over food,

²⁵ It is a Marathi word, a traditional nine-yard sari which women use to wear and most of rural Indian women can be seen wearing even today.

It is Bheem who gave us loaves of bread
Also full of bowls
It is my Bheem, my father who is Bheem,
who filled my basket with gold

These songs describe the life of Dalit women. It provides vivid description of dense poverty, lack of food, dearth of cloths, life of Dalit children, broom and basket of cow dung over the head etc that are central to day-to-day life of Dalit women. It is about the life that deny their (Dalit) existence. The songs appreciate but how Babasaheb's arrival rescued them from all kinds of suffering. Thus, Kadubai Kharat's work reminds of the perspective that asserts "art should come into the so-called real world as a tool" (Bruguera, cited in Shipley and Mey-Yen, 2023:1).

Kadubai Kharat expressed her profound gratitude to Babasaheb, who taught *Manuski*²⁶

Who say, Oh human being, be humane?
So, the lesson of humanity is taught by Babasaheb to all of us.
One of her famous songs "*Babasaheb's Ambedkar signature*"
She says that what we eat,
it has signature of Babasaheb Ambedkar
We have profound gratitude to Bheem,
in addition, gratitude to his parents
You and I eat the bread

²⁶ This Marathi word has profound meaning. It can be translated as humanity. It signifies to be humane, to respect each other, treat everyone with dignity and respect and assert for self-respect as well.

Which has signature of Bheem

Yesterday we were shy

We were in the outskirts

Hardly any dignity and respect

Our life was like dogs

Living life like dogs

You got value, dignity and respect

Because of whom

You and I eat the bread

Which has signature of Bheem

This signature is magical

The world has changed

The poverty has to run away

The prosperity has arrived in every door

Yesterday your life was like dogs

You did not have permission to educate

Babasaheb brought laws and contributed so much

Today many officers have come to our community from villages.

Trajectory of the struggles in the past and the impact of the self-esteem in the contemporary, caste-based India are meticulously conveyed through the artists like Kadubai Kharat. World of Ambedkarite women-artists thus consciously engage with the dialectic of the oppressive past and its new forms in the neoliberal phase of capitalism.

Conclusion

Ambedkarite women-artists from Maharashtra are questioning the field of culture in India that is embedded within the realm of caste through their powerful cultural interventions such as *powada*, *jalsa*, *ovi* and *palana*. They are creating certain political consciousness among the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular to oust the hegemony of caste, culture and gender. They are building up the political consciousness among the other marginal, Bahujan, minorities communities and compelling them to think and re-think to claim the Constitutional rights. Ambedkarite women-artists are also raising rigorous critique to the mainstream-dominant-progressive art and its non-committal approach that justifies the vicious connections of caste, class, gender and culture. They are re-articulating the history of the anti-caste struggles through their cultural productions to create radical awareness about the contemporary ideological forms and practices of caste. These cultural predicaments of Ambedkarite women artists position rigorous critique to caste and economic order. They have been vocal about the disastrous connections of capitalism and its impact like that of *Rastafari's* debunking of race and capitalism (Daynes, 2016:19). These peculiar groups of Dalit women artists also unearth the linkages between caste, Dalit community, gender and patriarchy the manner in which the *Rastafari* exposed the macro-realities of the racially oppressed sections (Chude-Sokei, cited in Daynes, 2016:204). On the contrary to the *Rastafari* culture's approach to religion ((Daynes, 2016:206), Ambedkarite women artists are projecting the spiritual-moral order ingrained the Anti-caste, Buddhist assertions. They are thus also challenging the dominant, patriarchal Hindu religion and its totalitarian patriarchal approach towards the women in general and Dalit women in particular. Broadly, they are invoking a social-political realm that treats them with quality.

Thus, they are imagining new political space that engages with the big questions of social justice. Social and political awakening consequently becomes the basis of such Dalit women artistic-activism. At the same time, they are providing direction to number of social-political movements to critically think about the shrinking spaces in the democracy.

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