

Intersecting Dalit and Cultural Studies: De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space¹

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Abstract

The paper begins with the context in which Dalit culture and resistance emerges and the way brahmanical social order tries to maintain their *status quo* through established cultural inequalities with the dominance of power and knowledge. By invoking different claims of dominant epistemologies re-articulated by Dalit intellectuals and locating the cultural past of Dalit humiliation, this paper examines the anti-caste discourse and the Dalit cultural resistance from the colonial and postcolonial time. With an attempt to bring in the intersections of Dalit and cultural studies, the paper argues that by challenging brahmanical cultural knowledge production, Dalits can reclaim power and knowledge in relation with the 'politics of difference'. The Dalit aesthetic decenters the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives. Further, it attempts to de-brahmanize the established disciplinary space by bringing the discourse of Dalit experience of caste and humiliation into mainstream academia. Lastly, drawing from the interdisciplinary context, the paper has elaborated the possibility of the making of a field of Dalit Cultural Studies as a step forward- a newer way for the cultural resistance of the oppressed.

Keywords

Dalit culture, de-brahmanization, anti-caste, interdisciplinary, Dalit studies, resistance

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The most important strategy of the Dalit movement is a coupling of the cultural theory of despair with the politics of hope...Ambedkar himself provided the ideological basis for this cultural theory of despair...the intellectual biography of Ambedkar and the ideological topography of the Dalit movement merge together to produce a rage-filled reading of Indian history and culture.

(Nagaraj, 2010, pp.105-106).

There are historical reasons that gave a structural advantage to the top of the twice-born (TTB), which is the section of the upper layer of the social hierarchy in India, in consolidating its privileged position in doing theory. Historically accumulated cultural inequalities seem to have reinforced Dalit epistemological closure. This in effect left the realm of reflectivity entirely free for the TTB. Such closure has its sanction in Manu's thinking.

(Guru, 2012, p.16).

[...]if experience and knowledge are inextricably interlinked in social sciences, then the location of the knowledge producer, the researcher, in social structure is crucial from the perspective of production of knowledge. That is, the perspective from below is necessitated due to the politics of location. The process of production of knowledge and the advantages emanating out of one's location in social structure are invariably linked.

(as cited in Kumar, 2014, p. 25).

[...] in search of the debris of history. I am wiping the dust off past conversations to remember some of what was shared in the old days...To bear the burden of memory one must willingly journey to places long uninhabited, searching the debris of history for traces of the unforgettable, all knowledge of which has been suppressed.

(Hooks, 1992 /2015, pp. 166-172).

Introduction

When it comes to intellect and power in India, one is bound to see the production of knowledge coming from renowned, mainstream public intellectuals as legitimate. This can be attributed to many factors such as early English-language initiation, upper-caste elite networks in academia and in think tanks, higher qualifications in specialized disciplines, access to foreign education, etc. This set context inhibits us from considering local knowledge systems of marginalized people, who have a rich cultural history passed on from one generation to the next. In a Brahmanical society, cultural reproduction is a reality of the Dalit lived experience(s), and until the recent Dalit literary movement, had not come out in the mainstream literary and political circles. The social handicaps of caste and discrimination made it easily possible for upper castes to keep the lower castes subjugated. The historical difference in treatment made it possible to define culture in a singular manner (that is spirituality and Brahmanical religiosity) while disregarding the Dalit culture entirely.²

The four epigraphs given at the beginning of this paper set the context in which Dalit 'cultural theory of despair' (Nagaraj, 2010) emerges and the way the 'top of the twice born' (Guru, 2012) have looked at the historical and cultural inequalities through privileged knowledge production and the way they try to maintain their *status quo*. It

is a 'politics of location' (as cited in Kumar, 2014) which has given the privilege to the cultural elites in the game of knowledge making processes. Therefore, one must go for the journey of 'searching the debris of history' (Hooks, 1992/2015) in order to understand the strategies by which knowledge and culture of the marginalized communities is erased and suppressed.

Phule-Ambedkar Ideology and Indian Academia

The crusaders of anti-caste movement in Maharashtra, Jotirao Phule through his path-breaking text *Gulamgiri (Slavery; 1873)*, and B.R. Ambedkar in his phenomenal text *Revolution and Counter Revolution (1987)* have tried to deconstruct the dominant brahmanical culture and knowledge production. Both of these anti-caste thinkers present the cultural critique of 'graded inequality' i.e. caste order through which the twice born have exploited the masses. Phule and Ambedkar's writings contextualize the cultural hierarchies through which *savarnas* have kept themselves in the privileged position while *shudra-atishudra*³ and women – in other words *avarnas*, have remained at the lower level of social status. Phule's power and knowledge discourse attempts to deconstruct the *shetji-bhatji* (bania-brahmin) nexus. Following Phule, Dr B.R. Ambedkar through his writing and resistance explains the organized and controlled system of brahmanical power. Considering the brahmanical social order as a subject of scrutiny, Ambedkar created the possible domain to debunk the 'cultural hegemony' of the twice born castes.

Inspired by the anti-caste thoughts, the Dalit literary and political movement is a radical response to the brahmanical knowledge production. The Dalit movement emerged in the context of everyday caste discrimination, humiliation, and stigma that the outcastes have to carry throughout their life. Rising against the stigma and Dalit atrocities, the Dalit Panther⁴ movement in Maharashtra emerged in 1972. Although short-lived, it indeed generated a radical consciousness among the Dalits and the other oppressed groups. In the context of Maharashtra it was the Dalit literary movement which supported the Dalit Panther whereas in other parts of India the case was opposite. The Dalit movement is not just political or social but a cultural movement which attempts to dismantle the brahmanical hegemonic order.

At present, it seems that the Indian society is transitioning between caste and democracy. Because of the constitutional safeguards, Dalits and the other oppressed sections of the society are able to rise up against caste exploitation. The Phule-Ambedkar approach is an ideological basis for the 'politics of hope' for the Dalits as Nagaraj states in the epigraph provided at the beginning of this paper. Dalit experiences of humiliation are rooted in the Indian social structure. Crossing all kinds of hurdles the discourse of the Dalits has Reached in Indian academia only recently, specifically after the 1990s; and perhaps because of prolonged *closure* the Dalit cross-disciplinary theoretical domain has remained underdeveloped, in other words, did not reach in the mainstream academic discussion. Therefore, one can claim that the available mainstream approaches in humanities and social sciences in India could not grasp the intensity of Dalit pain and anguish; and it has only presented the mainstream sympathetic view. Scholars from the dominant academia have reduced the meaning of

the term 'Dalit' as broken, crushed, and so on. Even after the radical political activism of Dalit Panther, the meaning of the category of Dalit did not change. It is perhaps only Gopal Guru and D. R. Nagaraj who have seen 'Dalit' as a category that radicalizes the consciousness of oppressed communities (Guru, 2001, p. 102; Nagaraj, 2010, p. 94). However, the cultural and administrative institutions have reduced the meaning of Dalit to pity and emotion. Gopal Guru (2012) presents this disparity in the context of Indian academia that 'social sciences are divided into empirically inferiorized and the critically privileged domain of knowledge' (p.9). The oppressed masses remain marginalized whereas *savarnas* dominate over knowledge building institutions.

Therefore, there is a need to debrahmanize the disciplinary space. In this process intersecting Dalit and cultural studies could help so that Dalit culture and the fight against injustice could be radically visible. The Dalit literary and political movement, along with the Phule-Ambedkar anti-caste ideologies, is also inspired from the Black consciousness of USA. If one looks at the Black knowledge production domain one can see how Black studies curriculum or their resistance movement has gained a certain kind of global recognition. In contrast, the internationalization of Dalit studies is still an ongoing exercise. A more recent phenomenon has been international conferences organized in Black-American academic circles with themes revolving around caste, class, race, and gender in relation with the Ambedkarite ideology.⁵ Another account would be Isabel Wilkerson's recent contribution to caste studies in global perspective. Wilkerson (2020) in her piece in *The New York Times Magazine* mentions caste is about power, resources, respect, authority, and competence, and about which groups have it and which do not. With a few exceptions, the effort of raising Dalit issues at the global level seems to have been taken up only by the few anti-caste Ambedkarite scholars who are studying abroad. But, Black intellectuals do not seem keen on taking Ambedkar in their everyday matters of fight against race. Rather they seem to heavily rely on the Marxian notion of class and capitalist nexus and its relationship with race. Sharmila Rege (2013, p.19) points out that:

research and curricular frameworks in social sciences and literature departments included studies on Dalits or Dalit writings while completely evading the epistemological challenges posed by the Dalit Panthers. However, since the late 1990s, Dalit studies has emerged, shaped by the "secular upsurge of caste" at national level and the emergence of the caste question in international forums like the United Nations World Conference against Racism.

By invoking the different claims of dominant epistemologies re-articulated by the Dalit intellectuals (Guru & Geetha, 2000) and locating the cultural past of Dalit humiliation, this paper examines the anti-caste discourse and Dalit cultural resistance from the colonial and postcolonial time. With an attempt to bring in the intersections of Dalit and cultural studies the paper argues that by challenging brahmanical cultural knowledge production, Dalits can reclaim the power and knowledge in relation with the 'politics of difference'. The Dalit aesthetic decentres the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives. Further, it attempts in de-brahmanizing the established disciplinary space by bringing the discourse of Dalit experience of caste and humiliation into mainstream academia. Dalit literary and political movement has

not only challenged the brahmanical order of caste but it has also developed various forms to express their rage and angst against caste and everyday brahmanical politics. Dalit literature has been an important aspect of the Dalit culture in India as it is mostly available in regional and vernacular languages and therefore, it needs to be brought into mainstream academic discourse through the process of translation and rigorous research work. Dalit literature is studied in various way but largely highlighted in socio-political context. Popular Dalit folk songs, dramas, and humour are yet to find a respectable place in mainstream Indian academia. Moreover its cultural context has also remained unexplored. Therefore, Dalit studies need to go beyond the confined disciplinary fields as its vast canon of literature remains outside these boundaries. Metaphorically and realistically, it is similar to the way the dominant social order and its gatekeepers kept the Dalits outside the village society. On the same line Dalits' knowledge production, by which they resist, has been kept outside the dominant academic discourse.

Indian Cultural Studies and the Absent Anti-Caste Movement

Drawing from Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (2006) it is possible to retrieve the historicity of Cultural Studies abroad and in India. Cultural Studies as a field of interdisciplinary studies started in the British and American academia somewhere between the 1960s and 1980s and was influenced by Marxist philosophy. In the process of socio-political and economic development, it has brought a range of studies together and evolved at the global level. In the context of India, the launch of *Journal of Arts and Ideas* marked the arrival of Cultural Studies in the country during the 1980s. Unlike British academia, the arrival of Cultural Studies in India was influenced not only by the Marxist movement but also the 'political spirituality' of Gandhi, and Nehru's socialist vision of democratic institutions. The dominant aspect of theorizing the culture in India is of (upper caste) society and the behaviours, beliefs and attitudes of its members alone. Culturally, much of its focus has remained limited to the theatre movement and the Hindi cinematic evolution from India's independence to the arrival of the free market economy. Only recently, it has started to explore marginal identities such as gender, class, and patriarchy. Yet, Phule-Ambedkar and the anti-caste resistance movement seems absent in the mainstream articulation of Cultural Studies in India.

Nonetheless some efforts have been made by scholars who are influenced by the world of the anti-castes. In this relation Sharmila Rege (2000) has made an important contribution by mapping the trajectories of the two terms 'popular culture' and 'mass culture.' In analyzing popular cultural forms such as *Satyashodhak Jalsa*, *Chhatrapati Mela* and *Ganesha Mela*,⁶ Rege underscores the way caste is mapped, re-mapped, and contested through the caste-based, gender-based cultural practices and material condition of the working caste/class communities (Ibid, pp. 194-198). In addition, there are few scholars like Gary Michael Tartakov (2013) and Y.S. Alone (2017) who have contributed in the field of Indian art history and its cultural context through which they try to deconstruct its brahmanical epistemology. Tartakov in his edited book *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* looks at the ancient art of temple architecture and

its social connection through which he emphasizes on the Varna hierarchy based social stratification. In addition, Tartakov has looked at the images of Ambedkar painted in various magazines. Alone, an art historian, focuses on the visual manifestations with the conceptualization of 'protected ignorance' (2017, p. 141) drawing on the paintings of Dalit and non-Dalit painters' expressions. To elaborate 'protected ignorance' further it is an academic blindness of the savarnas the way they overlook the matters of caste. Deeptha Achar (2019) in her essay invokes the concept called 'Dalit Art', by critically looking at the striking absence of caste question in contemporary art discourse in India (p. 183). In addition, she mentions that Dalit art is a self-conscious practice; but at present Savi Sawarkar who practices in Delhi and G. Chandrashekhar who works in Chennai, are the only artists who display the caste question through their politically charged aesthetics (Ibid, p. 188). These are the few exceptional interventions that have been made in the discipline of Art History and Indian Cultural Studies at large. These scholarships have distinctly come from anti-caste researchers and have remained at the periphery of mainstream framework of Indian cultural studies. In such a situation one would go beyond and ask that what could have been the state of Dalit studies in mainstream Indian academia even after its substantial development.

Dalit Studies and Its Development

Savyasaachi (2004) in an essay elaborates about a national seminar held on *Dalit Studies and Higher Education: Exploring Content Material for a New Discipline* at Bodh Gaya, Bihar in the spring of 2004. It was proposed in the seminar to prepare the ground to understand the history of the suffering of the marginalized so that there could be Dalit studies critiques of the dominant system (p.1660). T.M. Yesudasan (2013) in his essay critically attacking the dominant historical oppression shows how oppressed masses raise self-reflexive queries (p.149) such as

Do we have a role to play in the ever-changing scenario in which history and the future are both fast evolving? Will social invisibility and political powerlessness continue to haunt our destiny, leaving us in perpetual wretchedness and humiliation? Dalit Studies originates on the premises of these disturbing questions and frustrations of the people.

One can observe that Dalit Studies evolved by radically asserting a critical past. Yet there are systemic hurdles and impossibilities in its growth. Ankit Kawade (2019), drawing on impossibility, argues that Dalit Studies is a production of assertion, but the pedagogical practices and institutional policies in higher education have ignored the thought process of the Dalits. He further mentions that Dalit studies becomes an undesirable site for research, because it is undervalued to retain the Brahmanical academic 'purity' for their institutional disciplines (Ibid, pp. 21-22). By raising critical questions against mainstream history and culture, Dalit Studies poses the challenge to the dominant brahmanical system. Hence, in mainstream hegemonic academic atmosphere it tends to become an undesirable site for research. How then could one make it a desirable site of research? In what manner can Dalit studies become a dynamic discipline? Can Black Cultural studies show a path in foregrounding the

discipline of Dalit Cultural Studies? Mae G. Henderson in his article (1996, p. 66) mentions that

the arrival of Black Studies was central to the project of contemporary cultural studies. It has articulated the perspectives and counter-perspectives in various ways. It has challenged the dominant Eurocentric institutions and has generated the possibility to alter the mode of inquiry with an effect of change in texts, curricula and classrooms.

Similar to Black Studies that has challenged the domination of the white supremacist ideology, Dalit Studies also draws its articulation from the centuries-long oppression, anti-caste resistance, and the vast domain of egalitarian culture to challenge the dominant brahmanical institutional supremacy and narrate the unheard, unseen, and unimagined social pain of the Dalit community.

By reading the historical complexities and the socio-political philosophy expounded by Ambedkar and other anti-caste thinkers, one will be able to see that the academic discussion around Dalits and other marginalized groups of the society has become merely an object of discourse and needs to be interpreted and understood from the Dalit cultural point of view i.e. having a 'perspective from below' a process of de-brahmanizing the dominant theoretical disciplinary ideas. Scholars in general have asserted that Dalit writing is not just about 'writing experiences' of one individual or a community in general, but it is about raising the voice against dominant narratives and social suppression. It is an assertion and resistance against the brahmanical power, which is at the core of the distinction between Dalit versus *Lalit* perspective (Limbale, 2004). *Lalit* literature is that which tries to project otherworldly, fictional, and exaggerated realities of society. Dalit perspective stands against this notion by focusing on the experience, oppression, and resistance and, the world of the outcastes. Dalit expressions are negation against the brahmanical (upper-caste) social world.

Caste, Democracy and Dalit Resistance

Constitutionally, untouchability and discrimination based on caste have been abolished, but caste is still a visible and persistent problem, culturally ingrained in the social sphere. It reproduces inequality in social institutions in different ways. Caste is so prevalent that one cannot spend a single day without hearing about caste-atrocities or about the rapes on Dalits and *Adivasi* (indigenous) women. We see several cases of caste discrimination in the educational sphere too. Ambedkar had argued for an extension of India's political democratic model as the social democratic model. But because of the cultural binary between democracy and caste society, the multi hierarchical structure continues to exist. M. S. S. Pandian (2016, p. 26) by referring to K.M. Panikkar mentions that:

Democracy and caste are totally opposed...one is based on equality, the other on inequality of birth. The one is actuated by the principle of social inclusion, the other by the principle of social exclusion. Democracy tries to break down the barriers of class; caste seeks to perpetuate them...In all matters that are of

importance, caste and democracy are fundamentally opposed, they are at their very bases, incompatible.

Democracy not only opposes caste, but also provides a space to represent the experience of the excluded subjects. Therefore, to subvert the dominant 'politics of representation' the pan-Indian Dalit literary movement continues to have a contentious relationship with academia and outside as well. Sharmila Rege (2006) writes, '(S)ince the 1980s caste identity and caste consciousness have dominated the political scene, and theoretical and political issues concerned with the role of caste in social transformation are at the centre of political debates' (p. 64). Caste and consciousness have become the centre of political debate as Gopal Guru (1995) aptly points out that 'less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them certain epistemic positions over others' (p. 2549). Sara Beth Hunt (2014, p.10) writes,

Dalit literature exposes what Dalit politics does not – the subtlety and widespread experience of caste discrimination among not only the Dalit poor, but the Dalit urban middle class. In other words, Dalit literature highlights the inescapability of caste identity and the emotionality of discrimination in a different way to Dalit politics.

Dalit politics and literature both are inter-relational as one cannot sustain without the other. For any movement to live long, it must have a literary backup.

The notion of caste is socially rooted across communities and it creates barriers for the oppressed Dalits. In contrast, the democratic process provides an access to Dalits at the socio-political and cultural level. Democratic politics of Dalits paved the way to liberate themselves from the prolonged experience of discriminatory social reality. Further, Hunt's (2014) study argues that 'Dalit politics portrays a very specific Dalit identity linked to social and economic oppression, historical disenfranchisement and a shared set of civil rights that must be regained, Dalit literature displays a much broader and more fluid set of the characteristics and experiences that constitute Dalit identity (Ibid, p.11). The question of representation is important to know from where the voice of/for Dalits is coming. In a brahmanical society like India a of framework representation works in various ways: one way is that of the progressive liberals who are actually from the oppressor class but to have an 'agency' in their hand they will appropriate the struggle of the oppressed and resist against oppression. According to Ravi Kumar 'while the spurt in translations ensures that Dalit voice does become accessible and casteism is exposed, it is important also to remember that there is a politics of selection at work in terms of what is translated and by whom' (as cited in Rege, 2006, p. 9). The selective ways of seeing, doing and allying Dalit politics needs a critical cultural approach about the way Dalit literature and politics is projected. Rege (Ibid) points out further that the articulation of castes has been reduced to purity-pollution and untouchability and reforms are articulated through the division of labour upholding the *varna* order 'as the division based on differential qualities and skills' (p.26). Ambedkar in his famous piece *Annihilation of Caste* points in a succinct manner that 'caste is not merely a division of labour, but the division of labourers' (1979, p.47). However, mainstream academicians have reduced the caste functionality to

division of labour. The savarna intellectuals mostly rely on the Marxist notion of class, and they generally look at the matter as through binary position of haves and have nots. Caste as a social order dominates the psyche of the Indian individuals through number of divisions. There are visible divisions and invisible divisions (varna-jati complex)⁷ There are visible divisions and invisible divisions (varna-jati) complex, and most studies have focused on jati(s) or caste complexities. However its subdivisions have not been addressed widely in the Indian academic knowledge production. On *jati(s)* or caste complexities and its subdivisions have been addressed widely in the Indian academic knowledge production.

This discussion takes one towards the formulation of the categories called *brahmani* or savarna and *abrahmani* or avarna, or in other words non-Dalit and Dalit that has been debated across Maharashtrian politics. This helps us to open up a way to analyze the question of (self) representation. Rege writes, 'in the conceptualisation of this binary, abrahmani referred to thoughts and practices that contested caste, class, and gender exploitation; in practice it was slippage on the issue of caste that became central in labelling practices as brahmani' (p.30). Similarly significant is Shailaja Paik's work (2014) that documented the neglected resources from Marathi to understand the efforts of Dalit radicals: Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar in reorganizing and refashioning the Dalit women's lives. The Dalit radicals have challenged the double discriminatory practices of brahmanic order, caste and patriarchy in order to liberate the Dalit women through the means of education. Generating anti-caste consciousness among the backward communities and bringing them in non-brahmanic fold is a counter-cultural project. Its impact was seen during the protests on the issue of Mandal commission—an extension of reservation policy for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the state-run institutions of India. Thus, the issue of caste and discrimination has been brought in academic and political discussion along with the debate on caste based reservation. Braj Ranjan Mani (2005, p. 34) writes 'as an exploitative ideology and practice, Brahmanism has been kept hidden in modern India under cleverly designed "cultural" or "national" discourse which obfuscates (in a variety of ways) the historical reality of caste and its consequences'. Understanding the complex relationship of caste and the democracy, Dalit intellectuals try to explain that as long as caste remains, the brahmanical power knowledge discourse will continue to operate. Therefore, in order to annihilate caste they try to de-brahmanize disciplinary space. Gopal Guru and V. (2000) mention what Sanal Mohan argued during the DIC⁸ meeting held in Pune in March 1997 that even when caste was/is unequivocally existing there was/is a singular absence of caste in Indian history writing. Mohan went on further to say that Indian social sciences is centred on '*bhadralok*' (elite) imagination. Historical writing around caste is about oppression and exploitation; therefore, the historical memory of the Dalits needs to be recovered (Ibid, p. 132). It is also about everyday resistance as much as it talks about oppression and exploitation. In this context D.R. Nagaraj (2010) mentions the 'cultural theory of despair' that is a mechanism of the anti-caste movement to repair the fragmented memory with the 'politics of hope'. Anti-caste intellectualism and the Dalit movement become helpful in exploring the historical and cultural context of caste. The academic debate of Dalit intellectual which has

started from 1990s onward needs to bring into the new framework what this paper calls *Dalit Cultural Studies*.⁹ It can be used as an umbrella term and approach to reconceptualize the available studies and framework that deals with the Dalit world and imagination. It will be ‘*anti-disciplinary*’ in its making. Anti-disciplinary in the sense that it will work on anti-caste ideology which dismantles the casteist disciplinary power and knowledge domination. Following recent studies one can see that 1990 was a crucial year from the Dalit point of view in relation with the declaration and implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations and consequent violence that erupted in many parts of India. It generated caste solidarities among the oppressed castes and thereby re-energized the Dalit movement. It followed the galvanization and celebration of Ambedkar’s birth centenary, which renewed the life of Dalit movement at the pan-India level (Tharu, 2008; Kumar, 2014; Rawat and Satyanarayana, 2016).

Towards De-brahmanizing the Disciplinary Space

In a casteist social order Dalits had no right to gain or preach knowledge. Shudra-atishudra (Bahujan and Dalits) were left in historical darkness where light of the day was completely invisible. Their lives were guided by the *Manusmritic* social order and had no rights over their own minds and bodies. The culturally rooted historicity of Dalit suppression was revealed by anti-caste leaders. Braj Ranjan Mani (2005, p.35) writes:

The Dalit-Bahujans, who have suffered humiliation and exclusion due to their caste, know the history of caste from their lived experience. Breaking the imposed ‘culture of silence’, they have started telling their stories in their own words. Their narratives refute their conventional representation in history and culture. The Dalit-Bahujan ideology—inspired by Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, heroes of the social justice movement in modern India—rejects the brahmanic version of caste and culture.

Therefore, a project of de-brahmanizing the disciplinary space goes beyond merely bringing the literature of the oppressed into mainstream academic domain. The coupling of Dalit and cultural studies attempts to reconstruct the Dalit cultural past in an ontological manner so that objectification of the oppressed can be prevented. In this relation the Dalit epistemological perspectives are to be widened to include Dalit experiences of anguish, negation, and their resistance against the dominant culture to question the social hierarchies. To de-brahmanize the (Indian) cultural context, the vernacular intellectual deliberation of the Dalits must be brought into the mainstream academia in order to explore the larger context of Dalit and Cultural studies. For instance, in providing a context to the Dalit feminist understanding, Gopal Guru (1995, p. 2549) points out that Dalit women not only face exclusion in political sphere, but they are also being marginalized the cultural field. Caste patriarchy¹⁰ which is brahmanicalin nature, works in all the institutional mechanisms. For example, Dalit men do not take ‘serious’ note of the literary output of Dalit women; instead they become dismissive of their contribution. Hence, Dalit women’s resistance also remains invisible. In this context, we see that the field of cultural studies does not have its

own framework as such. It is an intra-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and multidisciplinary project yet it is a framework in itself. Nelson; Treichler and Grossberg (1992, p.4) describes thus:

A number of efforts to define and delineate the cultural studies project help map the diversity of positions and traditions that may legitimately lay claim to the name. Keeping those efforts in mind, one may begin by saying that cultural studies is an interdisciplinary, trans-disciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and a more narrowly humanistic concept of culture.

There is a difficulty in mobilising a pan-Indian coalition of marginalized groups given their regional, linguistic, religious and other cultural differences. Thus, efforts to articulate a pan-Indian counter-hegemonic cultural politics will have to be undertaken at various levels. Dalit theoretical discourse is based on the notion of anguish, negation, revolt, and humanitarian values which focuses on the conditions of caste and the historicity of Dalit humiliation. Marathi Dalit writer Baburao Bagul (1981) writes 'human being primarily never is a Dalit, marginalized or untouchable. It is the social structure that brings him to this stage. Once you change the structure, a human being remains a human' (1981, pp.19-20; *roughly translated from Marathi*). Sharad Patil draws upon Marx, Phule and Ambedkar's ideologies together to evolve an 'absolute' answer to 'India's sorrow' pertaining to caste-class relationship. (1988, p.71; *roughly translated from Marathi*). Dalits and marginalized people in India are never treated as human. They are reduced to their caste-assigned status which is why Ambedkar's philosophical approach is important. It not only understands sorrow but also cures it and shows the way towards human liberation. Sharankumar Limbale (2004) borrows the notion of aesthetic from Sharad Patil's approach of non-Brahmin aesthetics, raising the question of 'why counter revolutionary literature possesses the weapon of aesthetics, but revolutionary literature does not' (p. 113). In addition he also emphasizes on the evolution of Dalit literature and the way it has developed through the different approaches such as Ambedkarism, Marxism, its relationship with African-American literature and so on. While critically looking at brahmanical literature and the way Dalits are projected by using the dominant strategy, Limbale mentions '[...] Dalits have been portrayed from a middle-class perspective, which expresses sympathy for Dalits from a reformist-liberal standpoint. Because the middle-class, upper caste writers' world of experience is limited, there is no realistic representation of Dalits in their writing' (Ibid, p.27). This is what Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012) refer to as a '...complex and distorted reflection between theory and experience' (p. 6). Alok Mukherjee (2004) elaborates, 'one facet of Dalit literature's rejection of the brahmanical literary tradition is that it does not adhere to classical Indian aesthetics, according to which the purpose of art, literature is to evoke different emotions and feelings, such as pity, love, fear and anger' (p. 14). But neither social sciences nor cultural studies in India have paid much attention to understand the relationship between Dalit culture and the way it evokes the feelings and emotions about the Dalit world

The Dalit movement of 1970s created a space for social activism but it is largely seen as a literary movement. There has been an academic and political 'invisibility' of 'other' forms of assertions, which remained 'subsumed' under the category of the literary. Sharmila Rege (1998) in her review of Gopal Guru's (1997) book *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra* points out that the state has colonized the Dalit movement which has caused the decline of Dalit politics, and further that the fall of the Dalit movement was observed due to the invasion of electronic media. Mainstream media and politics after 1990s works more powerfully to showcase the majoritarian political spiritualism, and in this process Dalit political and cultural activism has remained invisible from popular visual media circulation (pp.339-340). Dalit world, imagination, and their expression have never been a part of mainstream popular TV serials and their focus, at a singular level, remains limited to projecting the brahmanical spirituality and culture.

Even in the Rohith Vemula incident mainstream media's attempt was to 'wipe out and divert' the matter about how Rohith Vemula did not belong to the Dalit community and how caste discrimination had no role to play in his suicide, rather than broadcasting caste discrimination faced by Dalits on Indian campuses. Thanks to the active Dalits on ground, on social media and Dalit-Bahujan web portals who took the matter in their own hands to dismiss mainstream media's untrue claims about Rohith Vemula's caste and suffering. It is the Dalit youth who are socially and culturally active in academic spaces and also in the social sphere. Even most Dalit leaders are silent on the cultural matters remaining absent from media spaces. Guru (1997) aptly points out that, 'Political leaders after Ambedkar never recognized the importance of cultural activists who right from Ambedkar's time played very effective role in radicalising the Dalit masses' (p. 20). Taking a cue from Guru it can be said that most harm to the Dalit political movement has been done by the mainstream political parties through the process of 'political subordination,' and co-option of the Dalit cultural movement by the state has deflected the progress of the Dalit culture at a large scale. In the politics of difference, the relationship between representation and lived experiences of Dalits and understanding the production and reproduction of lived experiences becomes an important point of discussion. It reflects on the aesthetics through which one tries to draw meaning. S.P. Punalekar (2001) elaborates, stating that the agenda of Dalit cultural resistance was uplifted by the Mahars of Maharashtra, and it is now resurrected by other complex social and political groups. Along with the question of identity and humanism, the new narratives seek solidarity in order to resist Dalitism in a newer way with an 'unexplored social cultural content' (p. 239-240).

This is an alternative discourse to understand the reality of the life of the repressed. Outsiders try to understand their experience through sympathy. The main source of Dalit literature is Ambedkar's philosophy and the Constitution of India which provides certain rights to resist the imposed cultural stigma. Dalit studies has expanded at various levels but it is yet to be institutionalized. In order to de-brahmanize the established disciplinary space, cultural theorization from the anti-caste point of view is yet to take place. Therefore, an intersection of Dalit and Cultural studies becomes an

important intervention as anti-disciplinary challenge against the brahmanical ‘cultural hegemony’ of power and knowledge.

Conclusion

The paper sought to draw from the Phule-Ambedkar’s radical resistance against Brahmanical power and knowledge domination. It advocates challenging the mainstream cultural knowledge production to lay down the way towards cultural theorization of non-brahmanic tradition. Further, it has highlighted, with the ‘politics of difference’, how Dalit aesthetics decenters the cultural production and circulation of the hitherto grand narratives.

Moreover, this paper has critically analyzed the framework of Indian cultural studies in relation with an anti-caste ideology. Reading through the anti-caste tradition and its influences on Dalit movement, the paper has provided a detailed overview of disciplinary political relations and contestations in and around Dalit studies. Further, it has also made an attempt to see the relationship of Dalit resistance with caste and democracy. Discussing the available Dalit intellectual scholarship, it has sought to elaborate how the discourse of anti-caste narratives reached Indian academia from 1990s onwards. Through interdisciplinary context the paper has argued how de-brahmanizing the disciplinary space can generate the possibility of Dalit cultural studies a step forward and a newer way of cultural resistance and academic activism of the oppressed.

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Endnotes

- 1 This is an extended version of the paper presented in the "5th International Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar: Rethinking Gender and Religion at The New School, India-China Institute, New York, USA, Oct. 24-26, 2019.
- 2 As an example, Indian cuisine is very vast. Varying by geography, climate and community, there are certainly more varieties than what we are actually aware of. For the knowledge of culinary culture to spread, the practitioners have to transfer the knowledge from one generation to another. How much of the food habits and culture of the Dalits is known to the masses? The knowledge of culinary arts and food culture is limited to what has been.
- 3 Jotirao Phule conceptualized shudra-atishudra category for the people who are at the lower level in the social order of caste. Nowadays, it is also called Bahujan-Dalit/Dalit-Bahujan. Phule in his *Gulamgiri* elaborates the way Peasants (Shudras) and Untouchable (Atishudras) were exploited by shetji-bhatji (bania-brahmin) nexus.
- 4 J. V. Pawara, founder member of Dalit Panther, has given a detailed account of the Dalit Panther Movement in his book *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*, published in 2017.
- 5 The first conference was organized in 2015 at Brandeis University with the theme 'The unfinished legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Following the same theme, the College of Education and the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts hosted the fourth annual conference on 'Caste and Race: Reconfiguring Solidarities' in May 2018. See details in 'International Conference on Caste and Race Set for May 4-6.' 2018 (April 25). *News and Media Relations*. Retrieved from <https://www.umass.edu/newsoffice/article/international-conference-caste-and-race>

- 6 *Tamasha* or *Lavaniis* a popular folk dance form of Maharashtra, it is an erotic performance performed by women. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* is an alternate popular form influenced by non-Brahmin anti-caste tradition that is different from *Chhatrapati Tamasha*. *Mela* is also a non-brahmin popular form that emerged against *Ganesh Mela*, and talks about caste and gender. *Ganesh mela* is one of the practices by which brahmanical religious cultural ethos is maintained.
- 7 According to the Chaturvarna Vyavastha there are four classes viz. *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* who have to do karmic duties assigned to them as per the Varna hierarchy. *Ati-shudras* are untouchable communities, or outcastes (avarnas) who do not fall under the Varna structure. *Jati(s)* are the divisions and subdivisions (castes and subcastes) of the four Varna. Although the outcastes remain outside of varna-jati complex, they have to do caste assigned menial jobs that are culturally imposed by the caste order. (For more details see Geetha, V., and S. V. Rajadurai, 1998, p.xiii).
- 8 Dalit Intellectual's Collective (DIC).
- 9 At the moment it is an ambitious project, but if this formation comes true, there might be challenges and confrontations over the naming of the discipline itself; whether it should be called Dalit cultural studies, Non-brahmin cultural studies, or Anti-caste cultural studies. Perhaps the debate will be similar to the way we see the contestation on naming Dalit literature, as Buddhist literature, Ambedkarite literature, and so on. In my understanding, the term Dalit provides a context for the making of a political category which has the historical baggage not only of humiliation but also of resistance. Moreover, bringing Dalit Studies into the fold of cultural studies will radicalize the anti-caste knowledge production, as one can see that in the larger context of India, the oppressed communities feel connected with the category of being Dalit, and culturally and ideologically there is a possibility of being united.
- 10 Sunaina Arya's (2020) paper, 'Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism', explores the context of the working of patriarchy in Indian feministic discourse. Her paper looks at Gopal Guru's quest of Dalit patriarchy differently. (For details see in *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 1(1), 217–228.