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CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 1 pp. 171-186
April 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i1.2701

"*Daat Faadu Mahilaye*": Dalit Women's Laughter and Disruption of Casteist Structures, India

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Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2022 to 2024 in two urban villages in Delhi, I investigate how Dalit women's laughter functions as a powerful site of anti-caste resistance and feminist praxis. Moving away from dominant frameworks that foreground grief and victimhood, I centre laughter as an everyday embodied tactic employed by Dalit women to navigate and subvert the structural violences of caste, gender, class, and religion. I analyse how laughter operates as a generative force—simultaneously affective and political—and thus unsettles the fixity of caste, gender, class, space and religion. Engaging with interdisciplinary debates in feminist anthropology, Dalit studies, and humour theory, I examine how Dalit women's shared, rebellious, and often vulgar laughter forms a counter-public, subaltern speech act that challenges brahminical patriarchy. Laughter, conventionally perceived as an expression of joy, I argue, is a defense mechanism employed by Dalit women to navigate everyday caste violence in the cities, creating the societal perception of them as *Daat Faadu Mahilaye* (Women Who Show Teeth). This analysis is crucial, as caste significantly influences women's access to laughter in India. I ask, who has the privilege to laugh? Whose right to laughter is jeopardized? Who are the women who laugh more frequently, and why? This paper offers insights into discussions of gender, and urban marginalization.

Keywords

Dalit humour, Dalit feminist laughter, Feminist Anthropology, Ethnography, Laughter, Affect, Resistance, Urban marginalization

> *The secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow. There is no humour in heaven.*
> ***—Mark Twain***

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Introduction: Historical Backdrop of Research on Dalit Women

bell hooks (1984) statement, "Being oppressed means the absence of choices" strikes a chord as I enter my field every day. For as long as I can remember being in academia, there are specific keywords that I have found to be repeatedly used to study Dalit women's[1] lives in India. Social exclusion, social discrimination, grief, and sexual violence have long been the dominant themes investigating the situated oppressions and resistances of Dalit women. A curious Dalit girl scholar who finds herself interested in studying Dalit women's lives and acknowledges the historical and present harms inflicted on these women due to caste violence in India is introduced with two kinds of reading experiences of 'gender and caste' in India. The first experience is an introduction to Dalit women's autobiographies that share intricate details of what constituted their everyday lives (Kamble 1929; Bama 1992; Pawar 2008; Gidla 2017; Dutt 2019). The second experience is an academic engagement with key debates on Dalit feminism amongst Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Smita M. Patil, Uma Chakravarti, Nivedita Menon, and Mary E. John. The list of renowned academics raised prolific questions examining Dalit women's lives, such as: Do Dalit women talk differently? What constitutes the nexus of gender caste in India? How can Indian feminism be made more inclusive? What does it mean to engage with the women's movement in India? These debates analyzed some central questions from a feminist and anti-caste historiographical perspective. However, it was during my fieldwork from 2022 to 2024 in two urban villages in Delhi that I found myself embroiled as a traditional participant observer in the local life of a neighbourhoods identified as "urban villages"[2] and with a sizeable Dalit population that continues to reside in slums and ghettos.

Calls for a "new sociology" in India have emphasized the need to take lived experience seriously as a site of knowledge production (Bandyopadhyay & Hebbar 2016). My research critiques the anthropological tradition in India by focusing on caste-oppressed women,[3] whose mediations and negotiations serve as entry points to locate what form of feminist resistance and voice are formed when domestic

[1]Dalit women refer to the community of women belonging to the erstwhile "untouchables" in India. These women belong to the caste identified as 'low' in the brahminical caste hierarchy. They continue to remain socio-economically marginalised. To read more about Dalit women's lives, one can refer to https://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/.

[2]To engage with the historical backdrop of urban villages in Delhi and their emergence, please refer to: Meier, Richard L. "URBAN VILLAGES FOR INDIA." *Ekistics* 23, no. 137 (1967): 236–37. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4361450

[3]I use the term "Dalit women" to refer to caste-oppressed women and employ these terms interchangeably. While "Dalit" signifies a political and self-assertive identity, state and administrative frameworks categorize these communities under Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Castes (depending on a region's socio-economic history and mobility patterns).

helps, educators, students, activists, and homemakers invoke constant self-reflection on their lives due to the status quo. Qualitative research is built on a paradigm of previous research, but when past research does not figure caste-oppressed women's everyday mediations and negotiations, where does one begin to base them? Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) examines the destruction caused by slavery on a physical, mental, and spiritual level, the destruction that haunts the characters who were once enslaved people even in freedom. In India, caste shapes the vicissitudes of women's worlds. Caste-oppressed women's mediations and negotiations involving everyday theatrics challenge structures of caste, gender and class oppression, tagging these women as mad. Therefore, my ethnographic dwelling on laughter argues how laughter is a binding force and a survival mechanism for Dalit women to beat everyday casteism in the neighbourhoods.

Theoretical Grounding

This article is theoretically grounded in lived expertiential thought and belief of the participants in the ethnographic research. The Dalit women in Rangpuri and Mahiplapur often mobilize, learn, and spread Ambedkarite teachings through oral and written channels. Discussions on fraternity, equality, constitutional morality, and dignity are routinely held. Therefore, the mobilising pattern and intent of the women demanded that I theoretically situate this article in Phule's ideas (Phule 1873) and in Ambedkarite thought and philosophy that critique brahminical patriarchy (Ambedkar 1936). I juxtapose this critique with affect theory, particularly drawing on the relational capacities that give rise to a body's doing in a world marked by the belonging and un-belonging of other bodies. Baruch Spinoza argued, "No one has yet determined what the body can do" (Spinoza 1959, p. 87). Spinoza's statement reveals that body or its functioning doesn't work in isolation but rather acts and exists in a field of context filled with force-relations, and the striving to comprehend a body and its affect/affectedness (Gregg et al. 2010). I place Dalit women's bodies in my analysis of laughter as it is through the site of the body that the generative and force of the laughter and its affect can be understood. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque offers a productive frame to explore how laughter inverts hierarchies and enables momentary liberation. Unlike Bergson, who reads laughter as corrective and disciplinary (Bergson 1900), I follow scholars like Goldstein who read laughter as generative, especially in contexts of marginalization (Goldstein 2003).

Research Methodology

The findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 24 months in two urban villages in Delhi. The research involved participant observation and informal conversations with Dalit women who work as social activists, teachers, homemakers,

domestic workers, sanitation workers, and informal vendors. My status of migrating outside the urban village during teenage has given me a position of being an "outsider-within" on returning as a fieldwork participant researcher (Collins 1986). The ethnographic theorization of laughter would not have been possible without my access to the unfiltered laughter and its expressions of Dalit women during random moments of our socialization. This laughter and its affect are not the same privately and publicly as the ethnographic vignettes of the participants will reveal, nor is this laughter easier to be observed by an outsider, as some degree of lived experience of the epistemological pain and oppression is required to connect, socialize and engage with the manner in which this laughter is a force of encounter in itself (Gregg et al. 2010).

Entering the Field: Mahipalpur and Dalit *Mahila Mandal* (Women's Collective)

Challenging Religious and Categorical Boundaries

Sitting between a group of Dalit women preparing to sing the hymns and ballads of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the main singer, Rekha,[4] adjusts her right thigh to place a two-headed hand drum (dholak) with a spoon in her hand, making tinkling sounds on the drum as she giggles with the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal. These women, who identify themselves as "casteless"[5] gear up for an intense two-hour singing and dancing performance. Samta, a Dalit activist, remains an exception in the crowd, identifying as a Buddhist rather than a Hindu, and is seen guiding the women to sit in a proper circle, requesting that they make more space for women who may arrive later. Samta is ecstatic with joy, and so are other women wearing visible markers of being Hindu, a kalawa (a sacred thread on the hand), a bindi (a coloured mark on the forehead), or a long-stretched vermillion thread (an auspicious thread worn by married Hindu women).

A shared struggle and understanding of being Dalit and a woman brought them together under the same roof to share joy through performance. Rekha, whom I was anticipating would begin with a revolutionary anti-caste rhyme/song, starts the devotional performance singing, 'Jai Ganesh, Jai Ganesh, Jai Ganesh Deva...' (The music of a Hindu God). Some women laugh at this; some are fully devoted to the belief and emotion. The second song follows, 'Baba Tu Hai Sabka Malik, Tu Hi Mera Saathi, Teri Hi Arti Hum Utare' (an ode to Ambedkar as a remake of the traditional Durga Arti). Hearing this, a fierce Samta says, "Hey sister, you should've said Jai

[4]All names I use in this article have been anonymised to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

[5]A renowned anthropologist of South Asia, Gajendran Ayyathurai, who founded Critical Caste Studies advocates for using the term *casteless* for women fighting the brahminical caste status quo.

Bhim first. Have you forgotten who fought for your equality and dignity?" Samta looked at me and then broke into laughter, saying, "What to do with these women?"

Samta has spent her entire life creating more avenues and classrooms for underprivileged kids residing in the neighbourhood. I don't say anything in response and laugh with her. This shared laughter with Samta has a contagious effect; it invited the entire Ambedkarite mahila mandal to break into more laughter, but what exactly was the object of their (or my) laughter? Is it easy to leave what one has preached since childhood, even when this preaching means being repeatedly told, 'You are impure; you are an untouchable; don't touch the gods or be near them'? The categorical difference between a Scheduled Caste woman, a Dalit woman, an Ambedkarite woman and a Buddhist woman is blurred in their collective laughter; negotiating the contours of religiosity, rites of passage, resistance, love, and generational pain. Waghmare traces that humour within Dalit political life is a critical practice that unsettles the normalized hierarchies of caste while opening up spaces for reflection and alternative moral worlds (Waghmare 2016). In this sense, the laughter that circulates in the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal is not directed at belief alone, but at the contradictions of inhabiting multiple religious and political locations simultaneously—where devotion, dissent, and memory co-exist rather than resolve into a singular identity.

Photograph 1: Ambedkarite women celebrating Constitution Day 2025 at the field site[6]

Challenging the Language of the Colonial

When I asked them if they had heard of intersectionality or प्रतिच्छेदन (in Hindi) and explained how it is a framework used to describe their lives in theory, they paused, often

[6]Identifying features in photographs have been altered to protect participants' anonymity.

with the pupils of their eyes dilating, while trying their best to fake an interest in the conversation, controlling their laughter, and almost doing everything to not release the harsh blow of air carrying spit onto my face. This laughter died a silent death beneath their breath. This conveyed the gap between Dalit women's lives and academia. How was I to cover this gap in theory? I searched for a medium that was not essentialist in nature nor reflected conventional patterns of examining Dalit women's lives through frameworks of grief. I found that laughter is the medium that connects these two worlds: academia and Dalit women's lifeworlds. These women's critique of an inaccessible academic language was expressed, indirectly or directly, every time I used an academic term in front of them, in the form of their either choosing to be silent as a response or laughing (sometimes pretending to laugh, sometimes laughing for real).

Challenging the Male Gaze and Dominance

Dalit women's life worlds and their opportunities are limited due to the presence of caste. Often, I found Bhagwati, a seventy-five-year-old Dalit woman, sitting outside her home. Bhagwati usually narrated stories of gruesome violence in the Dalitwada and her life. She narrated how two children's bodies, one five years old and the second two years old, were found a month apart at the garbage dumping ground in shantytowns located about a kilometre away from where she lives. She said, *"Maybe this is what is considered normal now. This apathy, this ignorance of the marginalized and their bodies"*. She continued, *"I lost my husband to cancer. I lost my son to alcoholism…"* and then she paused. I sat observing the environment around and found three boys who seemed younger than me staring at us. I was not intimidated by them, but then Bhagwati shouted, *"Look at these heroes. Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir!"* and broke into laughter, making me laugh out loud. She continued, *"If you want prime footage of oppression, come in the evening, or just video call me. I will show you what men and boys do here while we women sit at home with hungry kids tied to our chests, waiting for the men to bring us money, food, milk or candy. Just video call me.*" She laughed again, but I couldn't laugh this time.

Challenging Penury and Temporality of Thinking

I met Sahira and her friend Nisha walking down the road, with babies tied to their chests and buckets of water in their hands. Amidst the daily banter of our conversations, both laughed even when I engaged in serious conversations—almost like they don't take what I do seriously. They often spoke about the failure of the modern capitalistic brahminical patriarchal systems of dominance in making them feel heard and taken seriously. When I asked Sahira and Nisha why their children are not wearing slippers, Sahira laughed and said, *"I don't have the luxury of time to think about this."* Nisha added, *"Once the slippers of our children break, we don't have money to get them*

fixed". Amidst the deprivation, Sahira's and Nisha's laughter surrounds the lives of their children, and themselves and points towards grave realities that force one to reflect upon: Who has the right to laughter? How can we understand the laughter of Dalit women in neighbourhoods? What does this laughter often conceal or cover?

Analyzing the Embeddedness of Dalit Women's Laughter in an Urban Space

A critical reading of caste and gender meant noticing the multi-layered laughter. The kind of laughter Dalit women begin their narratives of oppression with and choose to end them with. In their speech, laughter becomes the grounding for marking a resistance that challenges the structures of caste, gender and class exploitation. When I began my fieldwork in 2022, like many first-generation scholars from social marginalized backgrounds in academia, I found its portrayal and engagement with Dalit women's grief, exploitation and exclusion extraordinary until it stopped feeling that way when I actively looked to find stories of Dalit women's success, celebration, laughter or joy in the textbooks I read but couldn't find them in numbers. Despite the sizeable Dalit population in my field sites, everyday life in the bastis is marked by layered precarity structured through caste and class. Children frequently exit formal schooling to enter low-paid, informal labour as computer operators, sales workers, beauticians, sweepers, street vendors, carpenters, and domestic workers. These conditions are spatially produced: cramped housing, the absence of green cover, and the lack of spaces for rest or bodily well-being point to what Lefebvre (1991) would describe as the unequal production of space.

Mobility, both social and spatial, remains tightly circumscribed by the often invisible yet deeply entrenched boundaries of caste, shaping who can move, where, and with what consequences. While dominant-caste actors frequently invoke the language of sociality and harmony, such claims dissipate at the thresholds of Dalit settlements, revealing the limits of caste coexistence. Within these bounded spaces, the civility associated with such narratives rarely materializes. Instead, what emerges is a lived experience of exclusion that is at once spatial, social, and affective.

While I witnessed all these sensibilities of the oppressed as well as the oppressors and carried them with me in my research analysis, wherever I sat, the memories of Dalit women laughing followed me. These memories were added to the repository of what Bama (2005) refers to as *'rebellious celebration,'* a response to the hardships faced by Dalit women.

> *"My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Paraiyar women but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them but to swim vigorously*

> *against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enable them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives"* (Bama 2005).

As a budding socio-anthropologist who understands the implications of oppression that are far-sighted and debilitating, I explore the multifaceted meanings and transgressions embodying the laughter of Dalit women through an interrogation of their feminist praxis. Samta chooses laughter to engage with the complexity of Dalit women's oppressions. Her life's aesthetics are rooted in aggressively proclaiming laughter over grief. She says, "*We didn't choose our caste location and this struggle—yet we will continue to fight with smiles and laughter in our bellies."* This statement by Samta reflects the fate of being born Dalit in a country, a fate that is not one's own to decide. It also speaks to the experience of struggling as a Dalit, not necessarily with pain and anger, but with laughter.

Rum Lola Rum,[7] a blog run by a Dalit professor states,

"I would like to believe that all Dalit women are naturally equipped with a capacity to laugh menacingly. How? I don't know, but they just do. Someone once said that a good, strong laugh is one that shrinks cocks down. It is true. Nothing shrivels a cock and Savarna pride more than the loud and 'vulgar' laugh of a Dalit woman."

This quotation by Singh uses the phrase 'menacingly, loud and vulgar' to explain the affect of Dalit women's laughter. Therefore, it becomes crucial to place the agential forms of resistance of Dalit women at the forefront, arguing how Dalit women's loud forms of laughter disrupt, subvert, and beat Brahminical patriarchy. I borrow from Goldstein's (2003) analysis of laughter in the Brazilian favela. Goldstein observes a paradox: laughter as resistance—"residents spit and laugh in the face of the unfathomable misery, disease, anarchy, injustice, violence, and societal desertion as they battle to contain their rage and despair in ragtag shantytowns" (Goldstein 2003, p. 14). Laughter and the sociology of laughter open a discursive space that renders the silenced, unrecognised, and unheard perceptible, transforming it into a resource for challenging ethical loneliness. What Jill Stauffer terms 'ethical loneliness'—the experience of abandonment by society—is reclaimed by Dalit women through practices of laughter (Stauffer 2015). My fieldwork findings revealed that humour is connected to the sensibilities of a particular social group; it is intimately tied to one's position within the gender and caste structure.

[7]A blog run by a Dalit professor. I read her work to ground my thoughts and connect with how the global conversation sparked by Dalit women is not regionally significant but significant across national and global borders. https://rumlolarum.wordpress.com/

Denial of Laughter Leading to Boundary Formation

In the field, Dalit women pass by dominant caste men silently. They are not seen laughing around them, but as soon as they are distant, these women joke about the sexual and intimidating gaze of these men, calling it *gidh ki nazre* (gaze of a vulture), while they smoke traditional hookah sitting outside their houses. Dalit women's humour, I argue, plays an important role in boundary formation and the reinforcement of caste hierarchies and relations in a space. Through laughter—one's own as well as that of others—one's naturalized and proper "place" within the urban village social geography is outlined and reinforced, as well as contested. In humour, *"characteristic expressions of individual minds, class habits, and cultural styles"* are embedded. As Bergson put it, *"Laughter is always the laughter of a group"* (Bergson 2018). That said, it can also be used to upset those same group boundaries.

At the *chaupals*, or what are known as community halls, a Dalit man cracks the joke, 'God *is a Jat; tell me how.'* His best friend, a Jat man, replied, 'How?' The Dalit man said, *'Whoever cries for help, but who goes to fight?'* Both men burst out laughing, producing a fleeting intimacy that would otherwise be foreclosed in explicit discussions of caste. What appears as casual banter is, in effect, a coded negotiation of caste stereotypes, where humour allows critique and appreciation to surface without triggering confrontation.

Situating Dalit Laughter

The Dalit laughter I discovered in my field was a discourse created by Dalit women against the hardships of their lives. While it was once common to think that elite culture always moved downward toward the masses and that the masses merely mimicked the elite, there is now a greater interest in tracing the effects of elite and popular culture on one another. Bakhtin (1965-1984) traces the ways in which the folk would play with the body in its "low" form—fart, defecate, and pick their noses—in a manner that reinscribes the body as a source of comedy. Similarly, David B. Morris (1991), in his study of the history and culture of pain, positions the body as a fundamental source and object of human laughter. *"Comedy needs the body in the same way the sonnet needs fourteen lines and unrequited love. The life of the body—which most philosophers can afford to ignore or dismiss as trivial—is almost a formal requirement of comic practice"* (Morris 1991).

Within a Bakhtinian world, a world that celebrates the rituals of the folk, such as Carnival, it is worth noting that bad taste is embraced. Carnival is a time when popular culture is permitted to broadcast its commentary, mustering all its power through lowness or bad taste.

Forms of Dalit women's humour can be conceptualized within this framework. For example, Dalit women's humour is born within the material and ideological circumstances created by what Paik (2022) refers to as a *sex-gender-caste complex*. In India, what counts as humour and art remains deeply politically entrenched. Women are sometimes forced to laugh at their own misery. I argue that participating in laughter reflects the unwillingness to confront the 'brahminical other'; it becomes a form of submission in circumstances where Dalits remain powerless.

I now turn to analyze contemporary visual character portrayal of marginalized women in the Indian popular culture to support the analysis of laughter and its affect. The anti-caste woman's character portrayal of *Manju Mai* in the Netflix series, *Laapta Ladies*, clearly states what is 'pretentious feminist politics in India' practiced by pro-caste feminists. Her character is central to the film, as it conveys the problematic aspects of mainstream feminism in India, which is led by oppressor-caste women. The film explores the language and morality of anti-caste feminists through the character of Manju Mai. Manju Mai uses humour to convey her feminist ideas to the other character called Phool, a woman who internalises gendered shame. Phool, a newlywed, finds herself lost on the railway track and anxious about returning home without her husband. She says, *"Good women do not return home without their husbands."* To this, Manju Mai responds, *"The biggest fraud in this country has been running for years; it is called 'a good woman' (Iss desh mein ladki logon ke saath hazaaron saalon se ek fraud chal raha hai. Uska naam hai bhale ghar ki bahu beti."* In the conversations that follow, Phool shares with Manju Mai that she knows household chores such as

Photograph 2: Manju Mai's character from the film, *Laapata Ladies* (2023)

sewing, cooking, and praying. To this, Manju Mai responds with amusement, "*Do you know how to return home? (Ghar jana aata hai?)"*. Manju Mai's statements showcasing her astute belief in anti-caste feminist ideals and politics show the audience how 'shame' and 'morality' are used as brahminical tools to silence women. Hence, her character chooses laughter and amusement to convey to Phool how to practice her agency. At the end of the film, when Phool, the female protagonist, realizes the value of exercising her agency, she delightfully chooses to seek out more opportunities to hear Manju Mai's anti-caste feminist takes, laugh, and find meaning in that laughter. Manju Mai tells Phool *"My husband would get drunk and beat me up. And then would say, 'someone who loves you has the right to hit you'. One day, I exercised my right as well."* She pauses and says, *"Women can farm and cook. We can give birth to children and raise them. If you think about it, women don't really need men at all. But if all women figured this out, men would be in trouble, wouldn't they?"*

This examination of the visual character of Manju Mai on television and the ethnographic dwelling on Dalit women's laughter revealed how laughter becomes a site of resistance and survival for them.

Dalit and Adivasi portrayals of life, such as those of Dalit women stalwarts Mayawati and Phoolan Devi, are often shown in a poor light in mainstream media. Comedy is used as a platform to deride these women and their achievements. Their names are often used as jokes in everyday vocabulary. A famous comedian, Poppydos, once said this about Mayawati in his comedy show,

"I don't hate Mayawati because she looks like a man. I don't hate Mayawati because she looks like a penguin with an Uttar Pradesh accent. I hate Mayawati because somewhere I saw Mayawati with a garland of money, and that pissed me off."

When Poppydos made this comment, the entire audience laughed. Many anti-caste leaders and the public felt angered by this comment of a famous liberal comedian using casteist language for a Dalit woman on a stage, but the reality is often that the laughter of the oppressor-caste[8] folk has showcased a vilification of Dalit women in the collective civil aesthetics of daily life in India. The Indian Constitution bans the practice of untouchability in Article 17, listing verbal and physical acts that constitute discrimination towards a Dalit person. However, the site of laughter showcases how laughter is used by the oppressor-caste communities as a safe space to showcase their casteist sensibilities without making it look extreme. Dalit women's laughter in my field is an answer to the larger global and national caste atrocities that outrage their bodily autonomy and dignity. Ruth Manorama, head of the National Federation for Dalit Women asserted,

[8]The term "Oppressor-caste" to refer to caste groups that have historically exercised social, economic, and symbolic dominance within the caste structure. This usage shifts focus from static caste identities to relations of power and domination.

"Dalit women are at the bottom in our community. Within the women's movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously. Within the Dalit movement, women have been ignored. Caste, class, and gender need to be looked at together. Dalit women have contributed to this discourse. Women's labour is already undervalued; when she is a Dalit, it is nil... The atrocities are also much more vulgar."

A Dalit author on Medium shares her lived experience of being teased as 'Mayawati and Phoolan Devi' as a joke during her schooling by a dominant caste boy. She always wondered, *"Why does he refer to only me like that?"* and then witnessed the entire classroom laugh at this joke projected against her. This article serves as an entry point to centre the lived experiences of Dalit girls and women who are forced to participate in their humiliation as jokes are directed against them.

Borrowing from Jogdand's analysis of how leaders transform their humiliation into a creative force, I showcase how Dalit women's laughter is a laughter back at the oppressors (Guru 2011, Yashpal 2020). It is a transformative force that fights everyday caste violence or the poverty that is born due to it. It is not confined to spaces of solitary secrecy or homosocial safety but rather transgresses the boundaries between public and private. Rude. Loud. Mad. Aggressive. That's how their humour has been classified. Goffman (2021) states that *"back regions are typically out of bounds to members of the audience"* (Goffman 2021, p. 124). The laughter of the caste-oppressed erupts *backstage* to avoid the confrontation on the *frontstage*.

Here, the audience comprises pro-caste individuals who deny participating in this laughter when asked outright if they laughed at a caste-oppressed person. Although laughter has the potential to bring social reform and to form intimacy and friendship, Dalit women's jokes on caste and their lives are never fully vocalized as a confession, a reflection born from guilt in front of these women. In most cases, Dalit women meet humiliation through no soft introduction or explanations of what explains this constant hateful comedy that comes their way. It usually erupts randomly in between a conversation, and any undignified comment is expected to be taken as a 'joke' by the caste-oppressed individuals. For Goffman, social interactions were largely "frontstage" and in public spaces; in working and school settings, the code of conduct by which we carry ourselves differs from that at home. Look around and observe: who is laughing with whom and at whom? And where?

Resuming active listening to Dalit women's laughter and observing the social circumstances within which it emerges, my biggest limitation as an insider to the ethnography is my inability to move beyond looking at caste dictating variegated worlds around me. My experience foreshadows my ability to observe, and I often struggle to move away from this emphasis. However, the laughter of Dalit women navigating

between Ambedkarism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, as well as Samta's reflexes in the everyday, provides the epistemological turn in ethnography, where Dalit women and their lived experiences become paramount to understanding the social world.

This approach aligns with Lila Abu-Lughod's exhortation to "write against culture," which encourages researchers to eschew monolithic representations of culture as a unified "whole way of life" and to focus on the specific, the fragmented, and the contextual (Lughod 1991). Instead of perceiving caste as a fixed cultural framework, acknowledging the laughter of Dalit women highlights the dynamic, contentious, and experiential aspects of caste as it is navigated in daily existence. Laughter serves as a methodological entrance point that opposes the reification of culture while simultaneously elucidating the mechanisms of power in personal and common encounters. And so it is in these ways that laughter and humour play a significant role in power relations. In the next section, I showcase how Dalit laughter is not limited to the backstage but extends to the frontstage. Recently, it has been institutionalized as Dalit stand-up comedy with the performances of Dalit comedians appearing on stage, a trend that had not been witnessed prior to 2017. In the next section, I explore the rise of Dalit stand-up comedy.

The Rise of Dalit Stand-Up Comedy

Dalit stand-up comedians such as Manjeet Sarkar and platforms like The Blue Comedy mobilize humour to express and circulate the lived experience of injustice under caste oppression. Manjeet Sarkar, a Dalit comedian whose comedy is a sharp challenge to the brahminical status quo, often makes jokes such as, "*Take our jokes like you take our land.*" In his comedy, he is inviting the person who belongs to the caste-oppressor background watching his show as an audience to self-reflect on the historical and present harms inflicted due to caste violence. In each, Manjeet centres caste in comedy. In one of his special stand-up comedy sessions, Manjeet shares jokes from real incidents in his life. An important description of his stand-up comedy states that *"he had a decent time living them and an amazing time re-living it on stage"*. This distinction makes it clear that Manjeet was bringing his lived experiences as a Dalit in India to the stage for an audience. In an episode of a famous podcast, Manjeet shares that he is India's funniest Dalit comedian but also its most dangerous. The cultural sphere of comedy in India also showcases Dalit marginalization (Ambade 2023). Sarkar has an upcoming documentary titled *Laughing Out Caste* and has also been at the receiving end of surveillance for speaking about the harsh realities of untouchability and discrimination.

Table 1: A List of Self-identified Dalit Comedians

Name	Gender	Comedy Type	Started Comedy
Manjeet Sarkar	Male	Laughing Out Caste	Performing since 2017
Manaal Patil	Male	Blue Comedy	Performing since 2023
Ankur Tangade	Queer	Blue Comedy	Performing since 2023

Conclusion

While those with power act out a theatre of majesty, wealth, and domination, those with less power act out a "counter-theatre" of laughter, humour, and absurdity. This connection—between absurdity and laughter—is one that the people portrayed on these pages may not articulate spontaneously, but they would doubtless recognize it. Others, too, will understand this connection, much like the portrayal of the seated Phoolan Devi between gunmen, laughing with a gun in her hand. The visual portrayal of the gun shows Phoolan reclaiming her power and respect. It means a return to *'controlling one's narrative.'*

The laughter in my field, as I witnessed it firsthand, also reminds me of my coping mechanism to use humour and laughter every time the most traumatic topic of conversation on a "sibling" begins, as I lost mine during COVID-19. During the earliest stage of my grief, I often began laughing and saw my mother burst into a loop of laughter even when I witnessed tears fall from her eyes. My trauma response to pain was laughter and still is. It got so extreme that I often gave a disclaimer to individuals to not take my laughter at its face value. For only I know what this laughter contains—pain of separation and longing for my late elder brother. My laughter is not laughter. My laughter is a result of fighting back against my circumstances. It is choosing to live when it feels easier to die. In this context, laughter disrupts the custodian rules of how one should deal with their pain and trauma. Laughter is multi-dimensional and expansive. The laughter of battling caste violence has yet to be fully explored.

Dalit women do not come into the world as "Ambedkarite"; such political consciousness is cultivated over time rather than inherited at birth. This consciousness is a result of engaging with the historical backdrop where Dalit women are welcomed but experience denial of access to education, human dignity, and laughter. It is also an invitation to engage in practices of "active listening and checking-in," which Sonkar et al. (2024) theorize as a form of feminist pedagogy. This laughter becomes resistance, a marker of happiness amid great odds in society. This laughter restores the destruction of the casteist world and acts as a minimizer of the harms, as well as a survival kit for Dalit women to beat everyday casteism and patriarchy in their lives. This laughter

reminds us of what cannot be traced through scientific, rational, and quantitative methods but can only be observed, felt, and witnessed in its capacities, in the form of a lived experience. If not for an ethnographic endeavour, I would never be able to establish what Dalit women's laughter embodies and how it is feminist. From Samta's everyday negotiations with the Ambedkarite Mahila Mandal, Bhagwati's jokes on men in the neighbourhood, Sahira and Nisha's laughter beating poverty, there was so much laughter that surrounded me, and this laughter of Dalit women must be analyzed more sincerely for all of us to understand the nuances and differences between *laughing at Dalit women and Dalit women's laughter*. They both share an intrinsic relationship, as I argue through field encounters, that Dalit women being *Daat Phaadu Mahilaye* is a form of fighting back, a talking back to the degrading laughter projected at them through popular culture and everyday jokes by the caste oppressors. Dalit women's laughter is a defence mechanism and a unique tailoring of their anti-caste language.

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