

Repertoires of Anti-caste Sentiments in the Everyday Performance: Narratives of a Dalit Woman Singer

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Abstract

Understanding Dalit women through their lifeworld and life-narratives enables one to understand the caste relations that they negotiate with in their everyday life. Resistance in the everyday life of Dalit women includes how they challenge the existing public spaces, cultural norms, and practices through the creation of a 'subaltern counterpublics' space. This space involves collective actions like popular writing, singing, theatrics, etc., to confront the 'normalised' caste relationship that prevails within Indian society. The cultural performance becomes the narrative of this counterpublics space in which they intend to reassert their lost identity and dignity. The emergence of alternative public spaces is 'significant and a necessary condition for democracy'. For Dalit women cultural performers, the everyday resistance practices are deeply embedded in the creation of an alternative worldview, a counterpublics, that both represent their 'world of (caste) experience' as well as becomes a space to 'talk-back' about their exclusion and humiliation. This article through an ethnographic account, has engaged with a Dalit woman cultural performer and her lifeworld. The article aims to explore the meanings, practices, and challenges that she faces in her anti-caste resistance.

Keywords

Cultural performance, resistance, everydayness, lifeworld, Dalit woman, Birha

Introduction

I begin this article with an anecdotal reference of my respondent and popular Dalit *Birha* singer Malti Rao. One fine day, amidst the presence of other activists during a cultural program on Ambedkar Jayanti, Dalit Mission singer Malti Rao sang her famous *Birha* song:

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*Na Rab ne diya hai, na paigambar ne diya hai,
 Jo Kuch bhi diya hai wo Ambedkar ne diya hai
 Babasaheb Bhimrao ka Issara tha,
 Kisi Garib ko Haq dilana agar Bagawat hai,
 To bagi naam hai mera, bagawat naam hai mera,
 Mita do julm ki hasti, yahi paigam hai mera.*

(I have not been bestowed upon by any God; whatever I have is because of Ambedkar's effort. He was the one who stood for us. He was the revolutionary who believed in helping the poor and needy. I stand in solidarity with his revolution, and I like and appreciate his spirit.)

The song was sung by Malti Rao in a piercing loud voice, with full use of body language and establishing eye contact with her listeners. The song reflected not just pure aesthetics but resistance as well; to deny the dominant caste-social order that has rendered Dalit women like her vulnerable. Songs were a way of her everyday expression that unfolded her desirability and anti-caste passion.

The lifeworld of many Dalit women is often narrated in their ethnographic narratives, autobiographies, translations, anecdotes, memories, musical performances, etc., to mention a few. The narratives told in such writings and performances reflect upon the real-life stories and their everyday struggles. It enables the readers/viewers to gradually unfold the struggle and challenges that many of these writers, artists, have undergone due to the caste location in which they are embedded. A study of their lifeworld through autobiographies, memories, ethnographic studies are methodologically significant ways in which Dalit women's struggle, resistance, and everydayness can be unfolded.

The performance of Dalit songs, poetry, and theatrical performances also reflects a critical take on the existing upper-caste cultural practices. For instance, many of the songs are written and performed in a manner that critically highlights the 'flaws' of the dominant culture. The performers engaged in such cultural productions are deeply embedded in the process of cultural production that has a sense of 'reflexivity', thereby allowing them to critically assess the dominant and hegemonic cultural practices. The 'everyday soundscape' has the potential to 'bring together shared experiences of displacement, racism and social exclusion' (Bennett 2005: 118). For Dalit women singers, their engagement with music and writings has been a source to 'talk-back' to the structures of caste and also to recast their identity.

The Dalit cultural performances also bring up a dialectical relationship with the dominant culture. The cultural performance has a counter-narrative to the existing dominant caste social order. This dominant upper-caste social order is questioned in terms of its myths, history, and traditional practices. The oeuvre of cultural performance is much more than the material aspect of culture. The emergence of new-popular spaces is intervening in the existing cultural forms and practices, thereby destabilizing its legitimacy and authority. In Adorno's term, this 'culture industry' in a true sense not only accommodates new forms and practices of a culture, but it also resists against those

mainstream, dominant culture that is already well integrated within the social system.

It is interesting to see how in popular cultural spaces the emergence of reflexive writings and cultural performances have created a new worldview for Dalits, that is enabling them to reclaim dignity.

This article aims to explore a Dalit woman's lifeworld and worldview, and the meanings that they associate with their involvement in cultural programs. An ethnographic account of cultural performers reveals their motivation or trigger for them to be part of the anti-caste movement. Furthermore, an in-depth engagement with their lived experience unfolds to us the role of micro social structures like family, marriage, etc., in the anti-caste resistance. Melucci has discussed that the everyday practices assume a form of 'articulated system of decision-making, negotiation, and representation in which signifying practices developed in everyday life can be expressed and heard independently of the formal political institution' (Melucci 1993: 188). The ethnographic account of Dalit-women-cultural performers can also help explore the dynamic relationship between the everyday lived experiences of performers and the anti-caste movement.

Theoretical Framework

An engagement with lived experience allows one to understand the 'tacit practices' through which everyday reality unfolds itself. Many such everyday practices include talking, reading, moving about, singing, etc., to mention a few (Certeau 1984; Johansson & Vinthagen 2020). The act of resistance in such everyday practices might be small, scattered, or tacit but they are significant in questioning the power structures. Scott (1985) in his discussion about the 'ordinary class struggle' has talked about the significance of 'small events' in bringing long-term political changes. He has explored the potential of everyday confrontation that can be detrimental to hegemonic class structure. Scott's theoretical position is significant to understand how the 'weak' challenge the dominant structure.

The work by Johansson and Vinthagen is also a significant theoretical guide to understand a lesser engaged concept of 'everyday resistance'. Their theoretical approach is important to consider how structure and agency have worked in a different context to shape historical social change. The everyday resistance is thereby a dynamic concept that needs to be understood beyond the existing historical frameworks by looking into micro-social structures and processes. This article has engaged with narratives of Dalit women singers to study how their narratives and songs are imbued within the everyday resistance against caste structure.

The other theoretical framework which this article seeks to explore is the 'counterpublics' discourse that Dalit women have created through their narratives and singing. The term 'Subaltern counterpublics' was coined by Nancy Fraser where she has discussed the discursive arenas that develop parallel to the official public sphere. 'Subaltern counterpublics' support revisionist historiography. It generates 'counterdiscourses' that permit the formulation of oppositional interpretation of

subaltern identities, interests, and needs (Fraser 1990: 67). Interestingly, Fraser has discussed the emergence of counterdiscourses in the late twentieth century through the emergence of an ‘array of journals, bookstores, festivals...’ etc. (Ibid.: 67). The emergence of counterpublics is particularly significant in a multicultural society that is stratified through the structural relations of dominance and subordination. In the Indian context, the structures of dominance and subordination are largely determined through caste relationships (Ambedkar 2014; Guru 2002; Thorat 2009).

For Dalit women, the ‘counterdiscourse’ is the rejection of the hegemony of the dominant caste social order that has sanctified caste practices. Their songs have anti-caste themes and an alternative worldview of cultural practices. Through an ethnographic narrative, the article has tried to explore the music as one of the facets of ‘counterpublics’ that Dalit women exhibit as their everyday resistance against the caste structure. The act of singing for Dalit women is their effort to create an alternative worldview, revisionist historiography in which they can re-imagine an anti-caste worldview.

Methodology

Ethnography is an important methodological tool to understand a culture and its representations. It allows the researcher to engage with the field in a much more nuanced and engaging way. Clifford has argued that: “Ethnography is powerfully situated between powerful systems of meanings. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilisations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and itself part of these processes” (Clifford 1986: 2). For Dalit women performers, their narratives uniquely decode the cultural practices and the symbols of political resistances that are imbued in their everyday life. Their engagement with the cultural space re-structures their traditionally ascribed position as doubly-marginalized

Dalit women, by giving them voice and agency to express their conventionally silenced voice.

Ethnography as a methodological approach becomes even more significant when the research involves engaging with the women’s question (Lughod 2000; Stacey 1991; Visweswaran et. al. 1994). Stacey argues that women’s ethnography has its strength as it gives research ‘subjects’ greater respect, thereby making them ‘full collaborators’ in feminist research (Stacey 1991: 112). An ethnographic study was significant to this article as it helped to understand the anti-caste resistance through an everyday engagement of artists and participants of anti-caste activists. Clifford (1986), in his methodological engagement with ethnography has discussed how ethnography can decode and recode the meanings that exist in a culture.

The engagement with a Dalit woman through ethnography helped this research to understand the subtle layers of caste practices that are prevalent in society, and how Dalit women have tried to cope with it in their creative ways. The access to the field

has allowed for a better understanding of cultural nuances by connecting with people who are the bearers of the culture. The cultural performances have given unique insights into the research to learn about cultural meanings and cultural significance.

Lughod (2000) has argued that ethnography allows one to engage with the social and cultural richness of the field. The 'thick and thin' description in ethnography allows the researcher to move from 'local, to personal, to national'. The ethnographic account of a Dalit woman singer in this article has allowed the understanding of a Dalit woman's positionality across the historical and socio-cultural spectrum. The ethnographic richness of a Dalit woman narrative has made the understanding of her lifeworld more accessible for this research. The study of lifeworld within sociology can be seen as a methodological shift in sociological inquiry as it intends to study the 'world of experience' (Erfahrungswelt). It is a subjective inquiry into one's life and his/her experience. Husserl, who is the pioneer of the concept of lifeworld understands it as a 'world of experience', something that is ignored, taken-for-granted and is considered as obvious. Husserl through his understanding of the 'lifeworld' has tried to contrast the lifeworld, which is determined by experience, to that of science. He argues that the world of science is premised as something concrete, objective and true but it is not so. According to Husserl, it is the lifeworld that is governed by experience; it is what is true, real, and concrete. The lifeworld is determined by subjective and intersubjective characteristics. For Husserl, the concept of lifeworld means 'a thickly experienced context of embodied human acting and knowing that is not completely surveyable, not fully objectifiable and which has an inescapably intertwined and intersubjective character' (Moran 2012: 181).

Exploring the narratives has special significance for the Dalit community. Dalit history has remained unaccounted, and their history and culture have been that of erasure.

Narratives, autobiographical writings, ethnographic accounts, are thus some of the significant ways through which history telling can happen. Kumar (2010) has discussed the absence of Dalit autobiographical writings till the late twentieth century. Its emergence gradually through writings of Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Vasant Moon (Vasti), Laxman Mane (Upara), among others has been important to account for Dalit 'self'. For Dalit women the very act of discussing life narratives has been important to question the structures of caste and patriarchy, thereby discussing their double-marginalisation.

The field-based research involved long-drawn conversations with my respondent over a period of time. I visited my respondent during different cultural events. Initially, the conversation was formal but during the course of my interaction, I built a rapport with her that helped me conduct an in-depth conversation. Her caste experience was strongly intertwined with her everydayness. The selection of my respondent was through snowballing. During my frequent visit to sites of cultural events, I came to know about her popularity among the masses. She was also popular through social media networks and had her YouTube channel as well. Her songs are widely circulated through CDs, mobile music, and stage performances. The other reason that made me choose her as my respondent was because of her ability to connect with the

masses and their strong anti-caste determination. My respondent would connect with the audience even after their performance and she would ensure that her thoughts and ideas made sense to people in real-time. I established contact with her through connecting with her peer groups and organizers. My meetings with her initially were at the sites of cultural events but eventually she became more comfortable with me which enabled me to have a more personalized conversation with her.

While there were several other popular singers that the research work might have as well looked into, but to ensure more focused and in-depth inquiry, I limited this research to one respondent.

Respondent

Malti Rao is from Ambedkar Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. She is a *Birha* singer and is well-known for her musical performances. She runs her YouTube Channel and has also published several CDs and VCDs. During my interaction, I found her narrative very powerful and embedded in her everyday lived experiences. She had her life narratives and her unique ways of resisting caste oppression. My interaction with her involved questions on their caste experiences, the role of family and peer-group in voicing resistance against caste, the challenges that they faced to access cultural spaces, and the meanings they derived from their performances.

The research involved narrative analysis to understand how they expressed their lifeworld. Narrative Analysis as Riessman (2003) has argued is about sharing the experience by constantly moving back and forth in understanding the totality of reality. It is more than just storytelling as it allows for the re-imagination of lived experience through a more personalised account. It is thus a critical engagement with one's own self in this process of narrativizing. The narrative analysis allows that the interviews conducted in the process of study are not just about the spoken part, but it involves microanalysis by looking into language, how the narrative is told, and other micro inquiries that can reflect more about the narrative beyond the obvious.

Analysis

Revisiting Childhood Memories

During interaction, I found that childhood experience of exclusion and discrimination was something that my respondent began with. She explained her childhood experiences in detail. Her discriminations were both in subtle and overt forms. The responses of my respondent discussing her childhood exclusion were part of the shared collective exclusion that the Dalit community has faced for centuries, particularly when they try to access the educational space. It is important to note that Dalit students are often marginalized in institutions like schools and are relegated as inferior. The question of 'Merit' is often hurled at them.

Malti was born in Ambedkar Nagar in a village, Pakri Rasoipur, Uttar Pradesh. She is educated and she had completed her Master's degree. Her childhood memories

of getting excluded from social and cultural events at school made her commitment to sing anti-caste songs stronger. She said that she has been active in the Ambedkar mission from an early age, from 2003 onwards. She expressed her desire to continually associate with the vision of the Mission to spread awareness among people to establish an anti-caste society. Her narrative reflected her engagement with the anti-caste struggle very early in her life due to the exclusionary caste structures that she was subjected to. Her association with 'Mission' was influenced by reading the works of Dr. Ambedkar and other anti-caste leaders.

History of Caste Exclusion

Caste violence is an experiential reality that Dalit women have to face in their everyday life. The forms of this caste violence are manifold, and it unfolds in tangible and subtle ways as well. The forms of violence that Dalit women are subjected to include, rape, untouchability, exclusion, molestation, domestic violence, etc. The experiences of violence have relegated the position of Dalit women to infirmity. The violence they face is not just at a personal level but at the 'collective' level as well. The 'collective violence' often manifests itself in the State's apathy to account for such violence. The episode of collective violence is discussed in the works of Teltumbde (2008), where he has talked about the episode of Khairlanji violence of Maharashtra. The gruesome brutality that Dalit women were subjected to was due to the caste apathy that had prevailed in the region. The Khairlanji episode involved the rape of Dalit women and burning of Dalit ghettos.

The experience of such violence is often unfolded through the narratives of women. Their experience of violence is a consequence of social reality emanating out of a Dalit women's positionality within a caste society. Malti would often start her conversations by narrating her journey since childhood and the sense of exclusion and violence she faced due to her caste identity everywhere. The songs sung by Malti were not per se about the violence faced by Dalit women, but the songs were an important aspect to raise anti-caste consciousness among Dalit women for the kinds of atrocities that they are subjected to. It gave them a sense of belongingness and consciousness about social justice.

Resistance has been a significant means for Dalit women to come out of their experiences of violence. Malti said that her association with the cultural movement led by Babasaheb (Ambedkar) has allowed her to step out of her inhibitions about their caste identity. She has openly distanced herself from the ascribed caste identity and has taken up Buddhism as the mode of emancipation. Dalit music has been an important medium in which this re-working of identities has been meaningfully realized (Kalyani 2020). Merriam (1964) has argued that the study of music is a way to study human behavior itself. Its production is culturally located and hence a study of music can tell us the complex activities, ideas, and object that are embedded within the culture. The narrative that has unfolded through Malti's music thus provides some significant insight into the Dalit woman experiences of emerging from violent social structures.

Invocation of Socio-cultural Icons

The narratives of Dalit women carry a special admiration for social icons. These revered icons included Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Manywar Kanshiram, Sant Gadgeji Maharaj, Sant Ravidas, Sahuji Maharaj, to mention a few. The emancipation that Dalit women faced were echoed in the way they felt closely associated with these icons. Social icons and their personalities have been important in the construction of a cultural milieu, which is inclusive and discusses the emancipation of Dalit women. Malti emphasizes her *songs-of-resistance* were a way to find herself and her identity, it was a space for an alternative anti-caste worldview, where she will have a dignified and humane position.

Malti discussed in detail the icons and socio-cultural movements that motivated her to move ahead. The women icons are a sobriquet with terms of sisterhood like Bahen (sister) or Mata (Mother). This reflects the sense of solidarity and empathy that goes along with the cultural resistance for social change. The icons that she discussed during her conversation are celebrated during cultural programs and are part of collective social imagination. These icons are revered, and they have their unique historical trajectories of the anti-caste struggle. The icons are also a cultural artifact that is used in graphic art like in calendar art, wall painting, T-shirts, etc. Famous one-liners from the icons are also written on these cultural artifacts. The cultural production surrounding the icons in the form of booklets, artworks, etc., are also important aspects worth mentioning.

The reverence shown towards socio-cultural icons was more than just political gratification for Malti Rao as she said,

Our cultural programs are very different from political programs. Our programs are intended to unite our society and to make them understand our Mission of Buddhism and Ambedkarism. I feel deeply associated with Babasaheb, Mata Savitri Bai Phule, Narayana Guru, Shahuji Maharaj. They are an integral part of my songs and I consider them my ideal. They have stood for the cause and not 33 crores (Hindu) God and Goddesses. I don't consider them.

It was interesting to see how despite being embedded in party politics, Malti demarcated political icons and socio-cultural icons. She strongly felt that while politics has been an enabling experience and it has spread the reach of socio-cultural icons, it couldn't be the end goal per se. The ultimate goal for her was to experience an anti-caste worldview in which she can reclaim her dignity.

The socio-cultural icons from history have given a different alternative view to understanding history. For instance, works of Jyotiba Phule have also reimagined the existing myths and questioned the authority of the upper caste by discussing how in the mythical narrative there is a deliberate attempt to silence and demean the voice of the lower caste. Similarly, Ambedkar in his writings has discussed the history by taking

into consideration the oppressive caste structure that persisted. In his work *Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, he has discussed how in ancient society the Brahminical rituals and practices were aimed to bring a social order that was devoid of the principle of social justice. The Manusmriti has given sanctity to the Varna hierarchy in a way that it has positioned human beings with Shudras and Ati-Shudras at the bottom of the hierarchy (BAWS, 1987: 25). Social icons like E.V.R. Periyar are also well-entrenched in people's memory for his anti-caste Self-Respect movement.

During my conversation with Malti Rao, she talked about rationality and debunking irrationality explicitly. In her discussion, she mentioned that she has done away with all Hindu idols. Even in wall art like calendars and wall paintings she only uses images of socio-cultural icons, whom she reveres. She said that using icons of reverence is a small homage that she can give to her *Nayak* (hero). She also shared her experience through her songs that were deeply embedded in the reverence of social icons. She recalled, 'Since my childhood, I was inclined towards the songs of Babasaheb Ambedkar. That was the starting point. Later, I have sung songs on Mata Savitribai, Kanshi Ram *Saheb* as well'.

The experience of recalling anti-caste icons is rooted in resistance to annihilate caste and reclaim social dignity. Narayan (2006) has argued that the construction of icons and symbols has given Dalits a sense of pride and glory. It is an important step to break the upper caste-dominated cultural autonomy by dissenting to accept a subservient position. The celebration of these icons has eventually become part of the 'collective memory' that is embedded with liberating and emancipatory messages, and it has been significant in transforming Dalit lives (Narayan 2006: 27).

Resistance and 'Recognition'

Popular music is an enabling experience for Dalit women as it has created a new space in which they can break off from the conventional caste and gender norms that they are subjected to as Dalit women. Resistance in everyday life has been a significant aspect for Dalit women that has enabled them to come out of their experiences of everyday violence and humiliation. Malti affirms that her association with the cultural movement led by Ambedkar and others has enabled her to step out of her inhibitions about her caste identity. She has openly rejected caste identity and has taken up alternative cultural practices like Buddhism, as the mode of emancipation. Dalit music, in particular, has been an important aspect in which this re-working of identities has become meaningfully realized.

Malti's narrative has explained how she has tried to shake off her caste experience in everyday life by constantly contesting the caste structures in multiple ways. A Dalit woman's music challenges the Brahminical structures by creating 'new popular music' by contesting the existing form and content of the music. While the content of music is reworked in terms of alternative history, oral narratives, and myth, the changes in the form of music include a reworking of the spatial and material aspects of the music.

The 'new popular forms' of Dalit women's music have become more publicly visible, louder and dynamic in terms of political content.

One can theoretically understand Malti's loudness, upright position, and firmness in songs through Guru's concept of 'Humiliation'. Guru (2009) has argued that the act of humiliation is political. The resistance to humiliation thus also needs to be a political act. One needs to openly claim for such resistance rather than hide it. When Malti talked with a degree of comfort and confidence about the acts of humiliation that she was subjected to, and her ability to stand against such humiliating experience, she made a political claim. Her humiliation was not just internal to her but her act of claiming that she has been humiliated gave her a sense of agency to deny a subservient position, any further. Guru also argues that 'resistance is internal to humiliation. Since humiliation does not get defined unless it is claimed, it naturally involves the capacity to protest' (Guru 2009: 18). Malti's response through her cultural practices was her claim to a public space that was historically denied to Dalit women like her.

For Malti, the act of claiming the public sphere through her song was a shift from 'Reductionism to Recognition'. Guru argues that the desire for 'recognition' corresponds to the 'reduction, rejection, cancellation and annihilation' that the Dalits are subjected to. By 'Reduction', Guru refers to the act of reducing someone to the level of an animal. They are devoid of 'cultural life' (ibid.: 211). Within the upper-caste framework of 'Reductionism', Dalits are subjected to cultural and political reductionism. Guru cites the example of a cow to explain how 'the four-legged animal is privileged over the human beings' (ibid.: 212). The reduction of a Dalit is about reducing their value to be lesser than an animal or the natural order. In this regard, Malti recalled her school experience where her headmaster would often beat her up like an animal. She said, 'Humare Masterji meri Choti kich ke marte the jaise maveshi ko marte the' (My teacher would beat me up, holding my braid like a cattle). She further said, 'I still remember in school when we used to go our teacher would have stricter punishment for us compared to other students. This was very painful'.

Her imagery of humiliation and getting belittled was close to that of an animal being tamed. The 'reduction' of her identity to cattle was a reflection of how Dalit women were treated when they tried to access institutional spaces like schools.

However, with the rise of anti-caste consciousness to some degree the existing/mainstream cultural space has become contested. The very act of 'Rejection of Rejection' has allowed for an alternative imagination of the public sphere. The emergence of an alternative cultural space has allowed Dalits to transgress from the state of 'Reduction' to the state of 'recognition'. Popular culture is an important site of 'recognition' and reclaiming of identity. It has infused newer meanings into the lives of Dalit women in particular. For Malti, singing was both passion and resistance. For her, the very act of singing was reclaiming a space that was historically denied to her. During one of her conversations, she said,

I often use platforms like Facebook and YouTube to share widely my songs. I do programs for free to ensure that people know more about them. I only take convenience charge. I do Bollywood (songs) for money and I do get money from there. But for Mission songs, I take no charge, because it is my 'payback' for society. I don't want to make a business out of my Mission dedication.

Malti's engagement with singing anti-caste songs was more than just earning money. It is about her struggle to get 'Recognition'. This act of recognition involves rejecting the Brahminical social structure and reclaiming spaces of dignity.

Socialization and Peer-group

Socialization and peer-group played important roles in Malti's life. Her narrative has explicitly discussed the significance of micro-social structures like family in supporting women to come out of a domestic space and occupy the public sphere. Families have further been an important space for socialization and learning about the social movement. Malti too emphasized the significance of family support. For her familial association particularly, post-marriage has been a watershed moment to associate oneself with cultural events. Family support and socialization thus has been a critical space of learning as well as re-learning about questions of identity and self-assertion.

Understanding Malti's association with family and their support in the choices she made was important to unravel their lifeworld. It explained the role of socialisation in resistance. I enquired with Malti about how supportive was her family in making the choices that she did? For her the role of family was important as she had adopted Buddhism only after her marriage. Her husband's dedication to Buddhism also encouraged her to take up Buddhism. However, during my conversation, she insisted that she had taken the decision voluntarily and not under family pressure. She added that her adoption of Buddhism also encouraged her father to take up Buddhism. She said, "When my father came to know about it, he accepted it too. He agreed that the Hindu religion had a lot of superstition and irrationality". She further added that she along with her family now are convinced that the Hindu religion is not going to give her a sense of achievement as she felt with Buddhism.

The inclination towards Buddhism by Dalit women has emerged out of a 'collective experience' of exclusion that they have felt within the dominant religion social order. The social structure of the family has been an important space through which anti-caste consciousness is promoted. The conversion to Buddhism is an alternative worldview, a counterpublics, that is taken up by Dalit communities. Fraser in her discussion on 'subaltern counterpublics' has considered it as 'parallel discursive arenas where the members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990: 67). My respondents' vehement rejection of dominant religion and acceptance of Buddhism was a 'counterdiscourse'

through which she imagined an anti-caste society. This gave her a sense of liberation and pride in their identity.

Malti Rao, during her discussion on the family as a space of unlearning and re-learning said that her commitment to the Bahujan Mission has led to a redefinition of the family itself. For her, it is no longer confined to merely conjugal relationships, but it extends to everyone who has a shared consciousness with her, including her audience. While familial socialization was enabling for her, she was not limited by it. The family gave her conducive space to have interactions and associate herself with cultural spaces like programs and meetings. This had opened up new possibilities and avenues for her. Malti said that she would have never got the freedom to access her Mission if her family would not have supported her. The assertive voice in which she told me her perspective somewhere reflected her equal and collaborative understanding with her husband, instead of being in a submissive relationship. A sense of comradeship with her partner was a significant aspect of the Dalit movement which brought her to the active front in the movement.

To understand the collective consciousness that facilitated the idea of Mission, it is significant to look into social networks like family, peer groups as well as social media networks (digitally connected spaces), that play an important role in boosting their morale. Castell (1996) in his discussion on Network society has discussed economic organizations and other entrepreneurial ventures that transgress pure economic logic. He defines network-society as, “a society where key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information and use electronic-based technologies”. Castell, while discussing forms of economic organization argues that these organizations do not develop in a social vacuum and their rootedness to cultural and social institutions cannot be ignored. The network-society for my respondent was significant in keeping up with liked-minded people connected on social media sites and in creating a ‘family-like space’. Such social networks were also significant in the production of culture-economy around songs-of-resistance like *Bhimgeet*. Malti’s songs are also widely circulated in social media networks dedicated to the anti-caste mission. Malti discussed her performance saying,

Wherever [an] important program used to happen like *Baudh Dharma Samelan*, *Ambedkar Jayanti*, *Ravidas Jayanti*, *Phule Sahuji ki Jayanti*, I am the regular visitor to these programs. I feel a sense of connection with the people. They willfully listen to me and also buy my CDs and download my songs.

The connection and comradeship with the cultural space explains the significance of network society and peer group in Dalit women-led performances.

The other significant aspect of the family as the space for re-learning is that it has allowed women to resist caste-based exclusion through their everyday practice. For instance, if a woman has actively occupied the public sphere it is because she has received constant encouragement and freedom to choose her way to express her dissent to the caste structure. In a closed, orthodox Indian family this would not have

been possible. Leela Dube (1988, 2000) has reflected on the gender dimension of the family by studying the role of the family in the process of socialization and the social constraints a woman faces within the family. Thus, the role of the family becomes important to understand the everyday lived experience of Dalit women. Beteille has further discussed the role of the family in ‘socialisation of children, particularly in the early years. The family acts in conjunction with others- kin, neighbors and so on- in the socialization of child’ (1993: 438). The creation of Dalit counterpublics has created a conducive space for family and peer-group to transgress caste identities.

The association of women in cultural events is part of the larger socialisation process that they underwent in different phases of their lives. Their association with *Bhingeet* and other cultural associations emanated from their voluntary will to do so, and their family supported such decisions. The experience of the family might have been different for different women; however, it is important to mention that to understand the everydayness of resistance of Dalit women, the family is an important institution one needs to engage with. The narrative analysis of Malti establishes a positive relationship between family and women who occupied the public sphere through cultural performances.

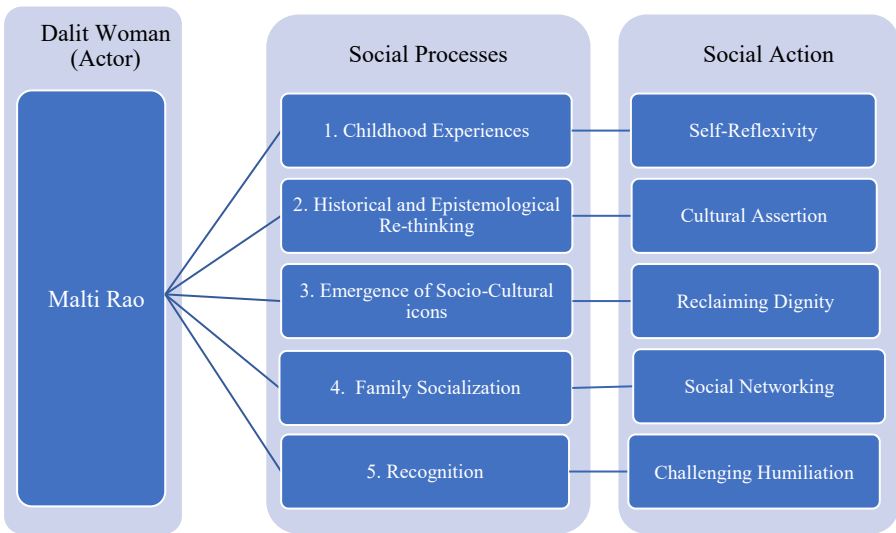


Table 1: Conceptual framing of ethnographic narratives

Table 1 draws out the relationship between different social processes that a Dalit woman faces in resisting the caste structure. Weber in his discussion on understanding ‘social action’ and the human agency, has discussed the relationship between social structures and processes and the active engagement of human rationality, that leads to a particular kind of social action (Albrow 1990). The social processes that Dalit women have been subjected to have enabled them to rationalise their caste experience. Social action is a consequence of the anti-caste sentiments that are produced.

According to the ethnographic research, the first social processes that a Dalit woman was subjected to are the harsh childhood experiences in institutions like schools or peer groups. This caste-based discrimination has enabled Malti to think critically through the structures of caste and how she can stand against the structures of caste as active agents of debunking caste. Second, the emergence of anti-caste consciousness has created new ways to read history and production of new knowledge that have been missed out from mainstream discursive practices. For instance, Guru has pointed towards, 'cultural hierarchies that operate through certain academic institutional structures' and this makes marginalized identity intellectually deprived (Guru 2002: 5003). But it is worth mentioning that despite the institutional exclusion of history and narratives of the margins, much of this history and culture is produced and circulated through popular culture.² For my respondent, the re-thinking of history from the vantage point of the margins has given her a sense of pride, and her act of singing involved cultural assertion. The historical and epistemological rethinking takes place through a critical re-reading of history, the reworking of socio-cultural icons in everyday practices, the celebration of festivals, etc., to mention a few. The production of songs-of-resistance like *Bhimgeet* involves a perspective from the margins. The third social process is the emergence of socio-cultural icons. It has allowed Dalit women in particular to reclaim dignity. For instance, my respondent considered the icons as a 'source of inspiration'. She idealized the icons and wanted to practice their ideology in her everydayness. The other significant social process was family socialization through which she has connected with her community and expressed her solidarity. Lastly, the very process of 'Recognition' of her Dalit identity has allowed her to challenge oppressive structures of caste. The challenge to 'humiliation' has happened through claiming their identity beyond the structures of caste and by dissociating with the existing social order that has rendered Dalit women as untouchable.

Conclusion

An in-depth discussion with my respondent has enabled this article to understand the worldview of Dalit women in a more nuanced way. Engaging with ethnography as a methodology, allowed the research to open up terrains that were relatively unexplored and unknown. It gave the research better access to Dalit woman's lifeworld that was otherwise not possible. This research interacted with a Dalit woman singer to know and learn about the meanings embedded in her cultural practices. These interactions, taken up at multiple sites, helped the research explore the everydayness through her personal narrative and through the association she had with cultural events.

Life narrative is an important aspect of the performative culture that is witnessed among Dalit women. An engagement with life narratives re-centers the question of Dalit women and their everyday experience of resisting caste structures. An

²K. Kalyani. (2021). Ashok Vijaydashmi to Dhola: National Archives, Central Libraries failed Dalit-Bahujan history. *The Print*. 10 July. Available at: <https://theprint.in/opinion/ashoka-to-vijaydashmi-national-archives-central-libraries-failed-dalit-bahujan-history/693310/>

engagement with life narratives also gives authenticity to the claims of humiliation that Dalit women have been historically subjected to (Shankar & Gupta 2017: 4). The exploration of experience unravels the everyday lifeworld of Dalit women and explains what their act of resistance is largely against. Mohan (1999) in his discussion on the emergence of the 'New Dalit Self' has argued that claiming agency through Dalit movements has given them an alternative ideological orientation. Despite some of these accounts that have discussed the significance of engaging with Dalit women's self and their narrative, an ethnographic engagement per se is largely missing from the discursive practices. The focus on unraveling Dalit women's lives is largely done through statistics of violence that they are subjected to, instead of centering the focus on the everyday resistance that they are part of.

This article is an ethnographic engagement with the life of a resisting Dalit woman who has transgressed the boundaries of pain and has made claims to 'recognize' her identity and dignity. Within the cultural sphere such claims for dignity are made by oppressed-caste women through narratives like songs, writings, speeches, autobiographies, etc., that are worth engaging with. The cultural reimagination of the anti-caste social order that these women strive for is a significant way to understand their everyday lived experience. This article has specifically focused on a Dalit woman singer and her act of singing as the creation of 'subaltern counterpublics'. The process of singing and narrativizing experience is a culturally significant phenomenon that has contested with the existing caste structure and has certainly disturbed the hierarchy of dominant and subordinate to some degree.

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