

Interrogating the Thesis of 'Irrational Deification'

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Mass gatherings on significant Ambedkarite dates are seen by some as irrationally deifying Ambedkar. In fact, on these days dalit history is remembered and reinterpreted, notably through the large sale of audio cassettes of compositions from the 1930s extolling Babasaheb's struggles to the current *I Love You Ambedkar* collection that celebrates selfless commitment to the community.

The commemoration of Babasaheb Ambedkar's 'mahaparinirvan' (death anniversary) on December 6 is usually followed by a stream of commentaries on the "irrationality" of the gathering at Chaityabhoomi in Mumbai. The usual middle class "common sense" reading of the annual Ambedkarite gatherings is that these events are irrational/emotional and cause civic problems related to traffic and hygiene. Comments by social scientists on these annual gatherings suggest more continuity than differences with the common sense view.

There is very little in the way of sociological documentation of these gatherings and social scientists with notable exceptions have continued to explain these "publics" through a thesis of either "deification of Ambedkar" or "manipulation of the masses by the leadership". Some of them contrast the rationality of Ambedkar's thought and practice with the "irrationality" of these annual gatherings and the "public" is then seen as "undeserving" to claim the legacy of Ambedkar.

A documentation of Ambedkarite calendars and the sociological mapping of annual gatherings of the popular masses that constitute the calendar interrogates the easily drawn conclusion about the irrational deification of Ambedkar by the dalit masses. It foregrounds the reflexive circulation of "mud-house representations"¹ of Ambedkar, mapping thereby the contours of an Ambedkarite counter public.

I would like to begin by situating my engagement with the mud-house writers and their literary representations of Ambedkar in the formation of dalit feminist groups in the early 1990s and in the interrogation and revisioning of feminist politics that followed. For many like me, the alliances with democratic dalit bahujan groups and cultural movements brought the realisation of gross ignorance

of histories and cultures that have been violently marginalised and the manufacture of ignorance in which academic practice is complicit. For some of us curricular transformation became the immediate site for engagement and projects with explicit pedagogical functions were undertaken. It is in this context that the documentation of the Ambedkarite calendar and some of the gatherings that constitute it began.

A Date with History

The Ambedkarite calendar refers to those published yearly by several dalit groups which are visually distinct in their styles of establishing the historical lineage from Buddha, Jyotirao Phule, and Shahu Maharaj to Ambedkar. The advertisements (mostly middle-level entrepreneurial efforts from the community) occupy a very small space at the bottom of the page. Each of these calendars is a documentation of history in that while marking the days, each day is represented as a day in the history of dalit doing. The calendars become a mode in which critical memory and history of the dalit movement is reiterated, reinterpreted and reindexed. What does this empirically documented history from below of the publics that constitute and are constituted by the Ambedkarite calendar suggest?

A documentation over the last six years of the gatherings on December 6 at Chaityabhoomi in Mumbai, October 14, at Diksha bhoomi in Nagpur, January 1, at Kranti Stambh in Bhima Koregaon and March 20 and December 25 in Mahad suggest that thousands of people repeatedly visit these places. Can the visits be explained solely in terms of their special value in being connected to Ambedkar? Why do these places continue to be culturally and politically meaningful year after year? As a part of the empirical documentation, we asked people to tell us about what they do, why they visit these places, the cost of the visits, the way they are organised and their experience of travelling without tickets that often places these groups in direct confrontation with the state. We also documented the trade in these gatherings – the activities at the different stalls exploring questions of – who puts up these stalls, what do they sell, and what sells.

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The stalls sell a wide range of items like brass vessels from Muradabad, "Jai Bhim" caps, statues, posters, calendars, prints of Ambedkar, statues of Buddha, lockets, watches, pens, key chains, ribbons and night lamps with images of Ambedkar. There are other stalls offering free medical services, stalls put up by various banks, those giving career advice and matrimonial data. The book stalls and stalls of 'gayan parties' (singing troupes) with their audio cassettes which sideline others by their very number and the crowds that they draw were documented in detail.

Buying and selling of goods by dalits at these gatherings has been commonly summarised as "these events have been commercialised". With very little information about commerce and cooperative building efforts among dalit communities, buying and selling by subaltern groups at these gatherings has often been explained either through a thesis of alienation or resistance. I am not suggesting here a neat hypothesis that equates consumption of commodities that iconise Ambedkar to a form of cultural politics but am making a case for exploring the interconnections between the expressive and symbolic issues and the practical.

The mass gatherings of Ambedkarites at Nagpur and Mumbai are viewed by the "unmarked" publics as days of "traffic nuisance" – "packed trains" and days on which the Shivaji Park grounds in Mumbai get littered. These are reactions to "unmarked public spaces" being occupied (physically) on certain days in a "marked manner". Space and spatial strategies of appropriation, deployment and control have been of crucial significance in maintaining hierarchical relations of caste. The Ambedkarite movement has contested this through claiming the right to public water resources, temples, and educational centres by dropping negative rights to spaces such as the 'watan'² and denouncing the "space" within Hinduism. At the level of ideology, the spatial strategies can be seen as articulating the physical, material and mental imaginative aspects of social space.

The Ambedkarite utopia (a community based on the call to educate, organise and agitate) represents a search for society in a perfected form but like all utopias, it does

not have a fixed address or determinate physical space. It may be argued that the Ambedkarite calendar events link the utopia to real places thereby constructing dalit heterotopias³ – real places that exist on a map, and which can be visited. They mediate in a mirror-like fashion between utopias and ideological subjects and link popular masses with a possible political moral identity that they can assume. The printed booklet and music perform considerable ideological labour in sustaining the heterotopias. For the moment, setting aside the printed booklet which lends largely to the rational-critical dimension of the dalit public, we shall explore further the sphere of music and gayan parties.

Musical Memoirs

A dimension of social imagination and promise is lent by the gayan parties which constitute the second largest number of stalls at these gatherings. The mahar community is traditionally associated with singing, and in the Ambedkar era, old forms of publicity like the community bhajan came to be thematically reformulated.⁴ The "private" forms of expression, like women's compositions of the 'ovi' (songs of the grinding stone), 'palana' (songs of the cradle), adopted overtly political themes of a caste society. Some of these compositions of the 1930s and 1940s, otherwise lost to history can be retrieved from the memoirs of an Ambedkarite teacher, Gaikwad Guruji.⁵ Gaikwad recalls the verses in which women admonish the Congress for ignoring the khoti (a land tenure system) abolition bill, claiming Ambedkar as the sole leader of the peasants and the poor:

The peasant toils day and night
Like a cobra that claims a readymade hole
The Khot with no efforts claims his share,
My peasant brothers, do not lose patience,
To your interests, the courageous
Ambedkar alone shall remain – always
dedicated.⁶

In the 1940s, in the context of the struggle by Sambhaji Santajii Waghmare for houses for dalits in the BIT chawls, the compositions of women centre on "Rajgrih" the house that Ambedkar built in Mumbai.

Come dear women –
Let us go and see
Babasaheb's palace,
Ramabai is sprinkling water in the garden,

As Bhaiyyasaheb plays with the cart,
Let us go and see the first floor,
Where, in the garden of roses,
Ramabai plucks flowers⁷

In the 1930s, even as older forms of publicity were being thematically reformulated, a new mode of publicity – the 'Ambedkari jalsa' emerged. Commenting on the emergence of the jalsa (celebration of music), one of the early composers Bhimrao Kardak recalls how the poor turnout at meetings led a group of young Ambedkarites in Nasik to the idea of a jalsa.⁸ In the jalsa, the structure of the tamasha (folk theatre) was radically reorganised as verses and dialogues became the central point of the performance which began with a salutation not to Ganesha but to Babasaheb. One such popular salutation was:

Bhimraya, I touch your feet,
Give me the intellect to sing of your virtues.
In this world, except for you, we have no saviour,
You are the true mother of the untouchables,
To emancipate the dalits –
Give me the intellect to sing of your virtues⁹

Shantabai Dani, a well known Ambedkarite feminist in her testimonio, narrates at length Babasaheb's appreciation of the jalsa and particularly the dramatisation of the entry of the harijan into the Congress. She recalls how the jalsa sought to convey the message of Ambedkar through comical dialogues and parody.

The jalsa had one more incident where a person who is a harijan enters the Congress.

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**CONTROLLER OF
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Having become a member of the Congress, he starts living in style. He walks with an affected gait. With obviously plenty to eat and plenty to drink, he becomes a great show-off. But there is a problem. This undreamed of comfort is very hard to get used to and proves to be too much for him. Finally, unable to cope with it, he kicks the bucket. The corpse is kept on the stage. The Congress members come, see him and go back. His wife is howling. It is not an ordinary funeral though. The howling is interspersed with dialogues. She says, "O body, you were just as stiff before dying and you are the same even after death". Babasaheb was guffawing loudly watching this.¹⁰

Contesting Dominant Perceptions

The first generation of Ambedkarite composers (1920-56)¹¹ while seeking to spread the message of Ambedkar used idioms that contested the dominant message of the day. A popular verse contested the category "harijan" thus:

All of us mahars, mangs, bhangis and chambhars
Let's condemn the name 'Harijan'.
Hearing the name – makes my mind sad
Harijan is a stamp – a stigma, a sign of slavery,
And this dictatorial Congress government,
It claims to run a democratic government!¹²

V D Savarkar's composition 'Tumhi Amhi Bandhu Bandhu' (You and Us – we are all brothers) – is contested by Patitpavandas:

You are human beings,
We too are Hindu human beings,
You too are Hindus,
Yet when it comes to temples –
It is always – you above and we in our place¹³

Keruji Ghegde contested the claims of the political parties of the period in his composition *The Market of Indian Politics*. He imagines it thus:

To the bazaar of Indian politics,
goes the old congress woman,
She is really obstinate,
She is possessed by non-violence,
Has lost her principles – lost her path
How can she get Swarajya?
To the bazaar of Indian politics,
Goes a Hindu Mahasabha woman,
She is obstinate,
She is possessed by Hindutva
Has lost her principles – lost her path
How can she get Swarajya?¹⁴

In the 1930s – the Pune Pact was the predominant theme in the compositions

of the 'jalsakars' (composers) of the period. One of the very popular verses was:

Gandhi – what kind of Mahatma?
Fooling people with his pretences
What kind of Mahatma is this?.....
He propagates the message of non-violence
But kills democracy in broad daylight.....
What kind of Mahatma is this?¹⁵

Keruba Gaikwad also a first generation Ambedkarite 'shahir' (poet-singer) addresses the tensions between modern education and community ties:

...Babasaheb Ambedkar is so highly educated,
Yet his life is committed to society,
For his community, he sweats blood,
Always seeking its prosperity¹⁶

In the 1950s, as conversion to Buddhism became a political issue, composers contesting the critics of dhamma moved swiftly between the familiar and universal. Keshab Subha Aher claims:

When they heard of it-the new Dhamma,
Dhamma of Equality, Independence, Fraternity
The casteists lost their cool,
When we lay in the hell of slavery
Did they have no shame?¹⁷

Embers of Revolution

The second generation of Ambedkari shahirs¹⁸ composing after the 1950s, while carrying on the earlier genres created a new genre of music Bhimgeet and 'Buddhageet' which underlined the strong linkages between Ambedkar and the dalit masses. The palana of Phule, Ambedkar, and Shahu became a popular genre with women and printed booklets of these songs priced between Rs 2 and Rs 5, are among the most popular items. The primary theme in the compositions of the second generation is the message of modernity; to provide quality of life for dalits as also to legitimise Buddhist practices as modernist expressions. Vamanda Kardak, one of the best known 'bhim-shahirs' (composer of the Ambedkar movement) says:

Throw off the skin of the Hindu Dharma
Take on the blue shawl of Buddha's Equality,
Throw off the old one – worn out woven by
threads of hatred
It's so patched,
Why should anyone use it?
When it has no trace of humanism
Say no to Hindutva,
For in it there is no place for fraternity
By declaring some to be lowly

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And others as high,
This culture has been blinded
It has been rendered lame.¹⁹

Kardak's social imaginary²⁰ is one that at once recognises the failure of modernity to deliver on its promises and invites it to deliver. He says:

Bhima, your thought
It's like the shade of a Peepal tree,
A door to happiness, a storehouse of
knowledge,
a message for good living,
This is all a favour from you
A New house, a car at the door,
Your community owes it all to you,
We have the sword of your thoughts as sharp
as ever,
Your thoughts and new vows.
We have to follow in your footsteps,
Singing you song,
For the poor-you are the only support.
There's hunger in my stomach,
My face may look sad,
But for Waman, the joys lie in your shade,
In this shade, lie the embers of revolution-
the door to happiness.²¹

The jalsa became central to the Buddhist conversion movement as well as the land grab movement led by Dadsaheb Gaikwad in 1959 and 1964. The decline of the jalsa in the late 1960s has been explained by scholars in terms of the political subordination of dalit politics to the Congress. The neglect of the tradition by dalit political leaders, the rise of the electronic media and dalit youth musical groups are also seen as contributing to this decline.²² While the impact of these forces cannot be denied, our documentation of the cassette culture of the gayan parties suggests that the issues of tension between preservation and expansion of cultural forms cannot be settled at once.

As the jalsa troupes faced closure in the post Ambedkarite period, a new generation of gayan parties or quawal parties emerged. Buddhist mahila mandals (women's groups) formed local gayan parties which travel to perform at the calendar events. One such group articulates their relation to Ambedkar and his to the nation:

They went away just the way they had come,
All shattered to pieces,
Who says our nation stands on the rupee note,
You must say only that what is true,
My Bhima lifted the nation,
Just on the nib of a pen!
My father called him father,

My mother calls him father,
I call him father,
My son too calls him father
Try searching in the world
One such relation,
Does anyone share this kind of relation?
Like the one we share with my Bhima?²³

Cassette Culture

The compositions of these travelling troupes move across regions and generations so that often (unless mentioned in the composition or obvious by the individualised style) the original composition is difficult to trace. The rich genres of Ambedkarite music cannot be reduced to "organising tool for politics" or to something all too "readily appropriated by market forces". In the late 1980s the possibilities opened by locally produced inexpensive cassettes, have meant a revolution in quantity and variety of music and it has sometimes revitalised the gayan parties. The "cassette culture" has brought more women singers and parties into prominence and has not eroded the base of the live performances. At the Chaityabhoomi and Dikshabhoomi the audio cassette stalls are the most colourful with posters announcing new cassettes with live performances of artistes at regular intervals.

A preliminary documentation of cassettes sold at Chaityabhoomi suggest that recurring themes include a re-reading of events in modern Indian history, a mapping of the struggles in the everyday life of Ambedkar and commentaries on contemporary issues in the socio-political domain. In re-rendering modern history, musical meanings centre on the Pune Pact while in articulations of contemporary politics it is saving the Constitution that occupies the imagination of the composers. The intellectual war between the two great men, Gandhi and Ambedkar, is imagined to be an "intellectual 'akhada' (wrestling ground)" and the interesting and repeated imaginary in the compositions is the request made by Kasturba Gandhi to Ambedkar to grant 'jeevandan' (boon of life) to Gandhi.²⁴

The compositions in the much circulated popular cassette *I love you Ambedkar* outline the contours of conjugal relations in the new Ambedkarite community. The four compositions on "side a" present an

interesting mix – the first one *Ambedkar I love you Ambedkar* (Lucy said, "I love you Ambedkar") narrates the story of a British woman Lucy who expresses her love for Ambedkar. Her lack of control over her feelings and her plans to entice Babasaheb are underlined.

She drops her books and
Then says sorry sorry

All these efforts of Lucy are lost on Ambedkar who tells her that she is like a sister to him, for fidelity and commitment are important to him. The second composition 'Baba Mhanto Samaj Mala – Lagna Konashi Karu' (The community calls me 'Father' – who can I marry) imagines the doctors advising Babasaheb to marry a second time after the death of his first wife Ramabai. Babasaheb replies that the welfare of his dalit children numbering nine crores is his real aspiration and work. The whole composition places on record the reason why Ambedkar might have married Savitabai, a brahmin doctor and the secondary importance of conjugality as compared to the community. The third composition outlines the condition that a young dalit boy makes before agreeing to marry. He agrees to marry if the women can find him a bride like Ramai (Ambedkar's first wife) whose contribution to Babasaheb's work is then underlined. The fourth composition, 'Tumcha Kahi Nahi Mala Akaycha' (I will listen to nothing you say) is the voice of a woman's determination to attend the jayanti celebrations at her paternal village where the celebrations are grander than her conjugal home. She warns her husband that her mind has been made up. The four songs together weave patterns that contest upper caste bourgeois ideals of conjugality. The ideals of faithfulness and loyalty of the man, of the priority of community over conjugality, of a supporting and giving wife – who can challenge the husband if he stands in the way of her commitment to the Ambedkarite ideology are grounded socially and in dalit historical struggles.

Critical Memory

The musical meanings, it is apparent, are grounded socially and historically in struggles and operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions and

memories. This project of documentation with all its methodological and other problems, seeks to bring the jalsa, gayan parties and cassettes into the curricula thereby interrogating the uncritical classical anthropological gaze at dalit publics and suggests that the analytical gaze of the publics be thrown back at academic practices in general and those relating to the analyses of recognition struggles and social movements in particular. It seeks to recover dalit intellection erased by dominant frameworks in the academy and interrogates the assumption of dalit citizenship as incapable of thinking in universal terms and engaging only with everyday mundane problems.

The foregrounding of mud house literary representations brings up the significance of critical memory and passionate politics in studying dalit identity and politics. Articulation of the present crisis through linking it to moments of the time past is a defining feature of the mud house literary representations. This work of critical memory is not to be confused with “nostalgia” – for nostalgia is selective and conservative in that it does not link the past to the crises of the present. Critical memory of the mud house composers works in a cumulative manner, through a collective maintenance of a record that links time past and the crises of the present. The music plays a distinct role in organising a dalit counter public. A public (as also counter public) is notional and empirical and never is just the sum total of persons. It has to have some way of organising itself – for it is different from crowds or audience which require co-presence.

The dalit counter public emerges as a distinctive social space through the reflexive circulation of the music; with texts not only asserting their own position, but also characterising their relation to all other positions in the imagined horizons of circulation.²⁵ How do we understand the music as constituting a “counter” public – is it the claims to the oppositional that constitutes the counter? Or is it the host of the alternate publishing and circulating institutions, practices and sites that make it “counter”? To some extent it is both – the claims and the institutions that make these publics “counter”. But

more importantly it is also in the awareness of the subordinate status – and of the conflict of ideas, the modes of address, and the speech genre that it marks itself off from the dominant public.

Exploration of the Ambedkarite counter public and the passionate politics that constitutes it not only opens up new dimensions of dalit politics – but also brings emotional reflexivity into the analyses of dalit assertion by allowing a mapping of the relation between representations of Ambedkar and the generation of subversive counter emotions. If gratitude and loyalty to Ambedkar and his ideology emerge as the predominant cementing emotions; moral outrage and anger against the leadership coopted by the state play an important role in holding back cynicism or resignation – emotions that otherwise demobilise the popular masses.

NOTES

- 1 See Gopal Guru, *Dalit Cultural Movement and Dialectics of Dalit Politics in Maharashtra*, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, Mumbai, 1997.
- 2 ‘Watan’ refers to the lands that the Mahars received in return for the discharge of caste-based village duties. This was not fixed on individuals but on the entire community. Ambedkar introduced a bill for abolition of mahar watan in the Bombay legislative council in 1927.
- 3 The term heterotopia is a medical term, introduced in the social sciences by Michel Foucault in Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, in *Diacritics*, 16, 1(1986), pp 22-27.
- 4 Guru, op cit.

- 5 Gaikwad R D, *Ambedkari Chalvalitil Athvaani*, Sugava Prakashan, Pune, 1993.
- 6 Ibid, p 62.
- 7 Ibid, p 64.
- 8 Bhimrao Kardak, *Ambedkari Jalse: Swarup va Karya*, Abhinav Prakashan, Bombay, 1978.
- 9 Baban Londhe, *Ambedkari Lokgeete*, Akshar Prakashan, Mumbai, 2001.
- 10 Sharmila Rege, writing caste/writing gender: narrating dalit women’s testimonios, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2006.
- 11 The first generation of Ambedkarite shahirs include Patitpavandas, Bhimrao Kardak, Keriji Ghegde, Arjun Hari Bhalerao, Keruba Gaikwad, Keshav Sukha Aher, Ramchandra Sonavane, Amruthhawa Bavaskar
- 12 Kardak, op cit, pp 86-87.
- 13 See Krishna Kirwale, *Ambedkari Shahiri: Ek Shodh*, Kalpana Kirwale, Pune, 1992, p 66.
- 14 Ibid, p 83.
- 15 Gaikwad, op cit, p 93.
- 16 Ibid, pp 248.
- 17 Kirwale, op cit, p 93.
- 18 The second generation includes Wamandada Kardak, Sridhar Ohol, Rajanand Gadpayle, Deenbhandu Shegaonkar, Annabhau Sathe, Dalitanand and Vithal Umapp.
- 19 Baba Borade, *Ambedkari Lokshahir Waman Kardak*, Prachar Prakashan, Kolhapur, 1995, p 21.
- 20 In over 4,000 compositions Wamandada articulates the popular dalit social imaginary and we are at present trying to document this – both through a collection of the texts and memories of the context of their production and reception.
- 21 Ibid, p 19.
- 22 Guru, op cit.
- 23 These compositions are a part of the audio-visual documentation of songs of mahila mandals (Mahad 2005); this and other compositions will soon be accessible on the digital archives housed by the CSS, University of Pune.
- 24 Listen to, for instance the song *Vachava Gandhi* (Save Gandhi) in the popular cassette ‘I love you Ambedkar’, Wings, Mumbai, 2000.
- 25 My understanding of counter publics draws upon Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002.

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