

Dalits as Subjects of History: Contesting Hegemonic Discourse through Songs of Protest and Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Conventionally, historical discourse has been understood as the written record of the dominant power centres. Since the early years in India the Brahminical mode of composing, defining and interpreting history, culture and stories became the basis of formation of narratives loaded with Brahminical mindset and a normative frame of reference by which the voice and experiences of 'ordinary people' remained obscured and ignored in historical discourse. But in the recent years the development of new historical consciousness has shifted the focus of history from narration of past politics to the lived experience of marginalized, ultimately posing serious theoretical and methodological questions to historiography- the politics of knowledge generation, the validity of official versions ,etc. This has led to rethink about the need to produce deconstructive, counter-historical discourse that aims at centering the hitherto historical margins. This shift resisted the dominant historiographical framework by contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic, and political importance that obscured lives of the marginalised and by countering it with an alternative historiography drawing from oral histories, folk songs, folk-lores and legends. In this process we find that the stories, songs and folklores of subaltern groups particularly the dalits are communicating their own composed in various forms to counter such oppressive historical constructions though not. In this paper I would like to analyse a few Dalit folk songs of protest and resistance which contest the dominant or hegemonic discourse.

Key Words: Dalits, History, Hegemonic Discourse, Folksongs ,Protest and Resistance .

Backdrop

Conventionally, history has been understood as the written record of the dominant power centres. Until the present century, the focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people or the workings of the economy or religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis such as the Reformation, the English civil War or the French Revolution. Historical time was divided up by reigns and dynasties. Even local history was concerned with the administration of the hundred and parish rather than day to-day life of the

community and the street. This was partly because the historians , who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most. They had no interest in the point of view of the labourer, unless he was specifically troublesome; nor-would they have wished to inquire into the changing life experiences of women. But even if they wished to write a different kind of history , it would have been far from easy , for the raw material from which history was written, the documents, had been kept or destroyed by people with the same priorities.(Thompson,1998). In the wake of challenge from post modernist discourse questioning, deconstructive readings, reinsertion of

the silenced voices and counter-historiographical positioning emerged. Subaltern' and 'feminist' histories, among others, constitute some of the dominant historiographical positions that deconstruct the mainstream to decentre it and reinvest the historical space with the voices of the marginals.

Dissenting voices and rebellions against the structures of domination have always existed in one shape or another. Marxism, Feminism, Post-colonialism and Dalit Studies are the principal discourses of resistance that arise from a certain condition of oppression and marginalization.

Over the last few decades in India, affirmative action by the state has produced some powerful leaders from dalit and low caste communities at many different levels of public-political life in the country. This has directly impacted on the politics of historiography in India, leading to the deconstruction of the legitimacy of history and its dominant methodologies. The effect of this has been the democratization of history as knowledge of the communities, which ultimately leads to the larger goal of democratization of history as a discipline. Dipesh Chakravarty (2003) in his paradigm shifting article on the changing methodologies and epistemology of history, mentions that history as a formal discipline was introduced to the Indians during the British rule. At that time historical evidence and ideas of truth and reality were central to the discipline. In the post colonial period too, history as a discipline has remained anchored in this idea of evidence. But with developments in Indian democracy and the changing political arena in which dalits and subalterns have become the principal actors, the distinction between a myth and a verifiable fact is becoming blurred. The modes of reasoning taught in the courses on social theory in universities are not necessarily obvious to citizens from the subaltern classes who now actively shape the character of Indian democracy. Chakrabarty identifies that there is an obvious paradigm shift in which the history as proposed by subalterns and Dalits, which is grossly different from professional academic history is,

actively and consciously redefined the boundaries of history as knowledge.

In the changing socio-political milieu of Indian democracy marginalized communities notably dalits women and ethnic groups are inventing and reinventing the past to support their demand for an appropriate share in the power structure of state and society. The social and historical meaning of the past is being recreated and in this process, the past becomes the subject of present reflection and reconstruction to change one's marginalized social position.

The reconstruction of dalits's history is made difficult because of the nature of available historical sources. As most of the historical sources were written and collected by ..., and libraries and archives organized their materials within the traditional categories of elitist history, there were hardly entries under 'dalits', and dalits were generally subsumed under the "caste" category as a whole.

Oral History, Oral Tradition and Dalit Voice

Having been denied education for centuries, most dalits were illiterate and had left no written traces. This lack of historical sources might help to explain how easily dalit history has simply been overlooked. Oral history appears to be a methodology well suited to an enquiry into the past of depressed communities like dalits that left no written traces. Collecting oral evidence among witnesses allows historians to give a voice, or perhaps more appropriately to listen to suppressed voices and to go deeper into the experiences of those historically marginalised communities that have been 'hidden from History' (Perks and Thompson, 2006). To quote Thompson (1978) ***All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose***¹. Knowledge is always produced from a particular standpoint in the society, time and space, with a

¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1978), p. 1

particular perspective, different forms of knowledge serve the interests of differently situated groups in societies, this is true at all scales, local and global. (Cox, 1981)

Oral history is not just about describing a dead past. It is about using that past to shape the present. In doing so, oral historians are not only recognising their relationships with the subjects of their studies, but were frequently arguing that oral history should empower people who had been doubly marginalised in history *and* then in historiography. This was in part a rejection of the 'objectivity' and written sources as the only ones valid for historical enquiry considered in the positivist historical tradition². Luisa Passerini's powerful criticism of oral historians' 'tendency to transform the writing of history into a form of populism' continues to be appreciated as a warning. As does her argument for recognition of 'a subjective reality which enables us to write history from a novel dimension undiscovered by traditional historiography. (Passerini, 1979)

Dalit Consciousness and Struggle for Identity

Dalit consciousness that resounds in the discussion of Dalit identity, has greatly influenced the lives of millions of Dalits. Though it is a complex term to be described, yet it is a general perception that Dalit consciousness is the awareness that makes Dalit realize of what they actually are and what they are said to be. Different Dalit writers, scholars and critics have defined Dalit consciousness differently. Some call it "a revolutionary mentality" whereas

² The so-called positivist history is inspired by Auguste Comte's nineteenth century positivist theory. As historians were driven by the desire to transform history into a scientific discipline, objectivity was aimed for. Factual history became the tendency; critical history (internal and external critique of documents) of written sources the adopted methodology. Documentary and written sources gained primacy, not to say exclusivity. Indeed, written sources were considered to be the only ones able to respond to historians' new concern with objectivity.

some others call it "deconstructive consciousness" (Breuck, 2010). Its insurgence in modern times signifies the subversive spirit that questions the dominance of Brahminist ideology and this subversive spirit is focused in the songs mentioned below. Caste discrimination and untouchability marginalize the lower castes. Oppression and exploitation of the Dalits in the name of caste creates an unequal order. This prompts resistance by the sufferers, such as dalits, who reject the unequal order and demand social justice. The articulation of resistance on the axis of caste has produced what is known as Dalit resistance. Dalit narratives in myriad forms particularly folklores, folksongs, folk stories, myths, are associated with movements of Dalit resistance that aim to change the prevailing order. Dalit resistances attempt to develop new consciousness and identity by upholding universal human values. Dalit communities are found to be often rejecting dominant language and inscribing resistances through either use of new language or giving new meaning. In this way, the dalits are attempting to carve out some space for themselves. Dalit narratives advocate the liberation of human beings from caste hierarchies. It rebels against the hegemonic order and strives to establish a classless society that is free of exploitation.

The history of their struggles is not to be found only in written scripts but in their songs, dances, folktales, passed from one generation to another. In fact Dalit life has been found its highest expression in folksongs and other mass performative arts like street /stage plays. And this helps us to understand not just what happened in the past, but how those telling traditions represent what happened and what the peoples think about their past social milieu. Oral traditions method would definitely help in documenting previously undocumented information about rituals, customs, social organisations, myths, legends, indigenous science and knowledge, migration and origin.

As stated above dissenting voices and protest against the structures of domination have always existed in one form or the other. In this paper it is interesting to demonstrate how through these popular and folksongs the dalits are trying to reveal

their suffering their resistance and their protest towards the social order and the assigned space to them. Resistance exposes the unjust practices, undermines the power of dominant structures and may eventually carve out an equal place for the ordinary people and the practices.

Historically there has been a long tradition of the struggle for Dalit identity in India. The eminent activists who contributed to the process include Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, among others. Before them the Bhakti saints made a remarkable contribution in the form of questioning the Brahminical hegemony. Next to the Bhakti movement, the 'Ádi Movements' were significant in the formation of the Dalit identity. And in Uttar Pradesh Swami Achhutanand invoked Dalits through the songs, plays and pamphlets portraying all lower castes as the original inhabitants of India. Thus it can be said that the Dalit movement had taken roots at popular level and oppressed Dalit masses started questioning the dominance and hegemony of the upper caste people. Dalit leaders, reformers, intelligentsia provided the spectacle through which they could uphold the culture, history and politics of the lower caste.

In their struggle for identity, Dalits who have emerged as the strongest force in India raise their voice of protest, resistance and persistently argue in order to regain their lost identity. Several issues have come up in this struggle of Dalits: Untouchability, dehumanizing poverty, social ostracism, caste and power dynamics, cultural and religious oppression, identity consciousness and so on. Since their problems are notched up with several unjust systems and structures both within and around the society, based upon brahminical social order, they are on the way to search for identity consciousness, mobilisation.

The literature, and culture of dalits emerged as protest against the dominance. Dalit song as a cultural genre made an attempt in resisting hegemony of brahminical class and in mobilizing dalits for a political purpose. As stated above in this paper I would like to analyse a few Dalit songs of protest and resistance which contests dominance of the caste based unjust social order and hegemonic

discourse. Dalit movement emphasised over the recognition for Dalit. There had been a good number of songs about the social and cultural issues and life and struggles of dalits narrated by dalits, they are not identified with the name of dalit. In academic discourse, they are known as folklore in contrast with elite culture/classical song.

Against this backdrop let us examine the dalit songs historically. Dalit songs are mostly available in oral form. There is no recorded evidence for their songs. But one can listen to their songs by invoking social memory³. Though there are countless composers, singers, saints, but there would be institutionalisation of a few names and that too on a rare basis.

Song on Attack on Manusmriti⁴

*Nis din Manusmriti ye humko jala rahi hai
Upar na uthne deti niche gira rahi hai
Brahman va Kshatriyo nko sabko banaya afsar
Humko purane utaran pehno bata rahi hai*

*We are asked to maintain the same old status.
This Manusmriti is setting us on fire everyday.
It does not allow us to rise and pushes us to fall.
It made Brahmins and Kshatriyas the authority overall. jootha
And told us to wear their old clothes.*

³ The groups in which we define ourselves and, most importantly, the shared history that shapes our perception of ourselves as part of those groups are called **social memory**. Although many sociologists and historians have deployed working distinctions between social memory, collective memory and historical memory, there is no syntactic consensus on what distinguishes them. For detail see Cubitt, History and Memory, pp13-20. What is more widely agreed is that memory is always socially framed in one way or another.

⁴ Mata Prasad 2007, Lokgitan Mein Vedna Aur Vidroh, Samyak Prakashan, New Delhi

Song on Attack on Manuvadi system⁵

'Manuwadi' Tohri chal se hum bahutai dukh uthai ho
Varna Vyavastha rachi ke, adi niwasin shudra
bataya

Manusmriti Ved banake, sewa karan sikhaye ho
Padhna likhna band karaike , sab vidhi hume sataye
ho

Khana pani jo hum chhuwen ume chhut bataya

Bartan jo kutta billi chate woke shudh banaya

Par hum khaye se bartan mnahi chhut oliyaaye ho...

Manuvadi system had done much harm to the dalits
It created varna system and labelled original
inhabitants as Shudras

It created Vedas and created division of labour

It prohibited education to oppress us

We are untouchables and cannot touch food and
drink

Foods touched by cats and dogs are pure

But the utensils touched by us are thrown saying
impure

Identity⁶ Song on Dalits as original Inhabitants of India⁷

⁵ Folksong composed by Former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh Sri Mata Prasad. He still travels from village to village, talking to Dalits through his folk songs, skits and books. In the old days, folk songs and drama were the most popular and powerful means of awakening Dalits," says Prasad. "Now, as education spreads, prose and serious books have replaced folk songs and plays." On song: UP's new Dalits Sunita Aron, *Hindustan Times*, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh Updated: Apr 06, 2009 23:42 IST See <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/on-song-up-s-new-dalits/article1-397618.aspx> accessed on April 20, 2015

⁶ Dalits Identity: is who Dalits are and where they came from; it says that the people are from a homeland, a place of pride and dignity, a place of ownership, a place of

Adi Hindoo ka Danka Bajate Chalo
Kaum ko nind se jagate Chalo
Arya, Saka Hun, bahar se aaye yahan
Aur Muslim Isayi jo chhaye yahan
Sab videshi hain kabja jamaye yahan
Kholkar sari baatein batate chalo.
Do videshi fakat aur ham aath hai
Ham hai bahujan magar unke hi thath hai
Hamko padhane-padhane yahi path hai
Khabebe-gafalat ka parda hatate chalo
Adi Hindu ka danka bajate chalo
Uth khade ho kamar badh haq par ado
Kam bigade huye sab banate chalo
Kaum ko Nind se Jagate chalo

Sing the song of Adi Hindus.

Awaken the community from deep slumber.

Aryan, Sakas, Huns, Muslims and Christians

All came here from outside.

They are all foreigners

Who have captured our land

Tell these facts to everyone.

Keep blowing the naker of the original Hindu.

There are only few foreigners and we are in majority,

We are the majority but they have embellishment,

We have to read and teach these lessons only,

Raise the curtain of the dream of negligence.

Keep blowing the naker of the original Hindu.

Now stand up, string your waists and fight for your rights,

Keep correcting all the wrong done previously.

Awake the community from its sleep.

The song epitomizes Swami Achhutanand's ideas of reinterpretation of ancient Indian history. The above mentioned song can be cited as one of the best

culture, and a history and heritage, "which furthers a sense of community and belonging.

⁷ Opcit Bharati Kanwal, 2011, Swami

Achhutanandji'Harihar'Sanchayita, Swaraj Prakashan New Delhi .p 123.

examples of popular songs⁸ sung by the dalit community reflecting their identity consciousness⁹. As the Dalit philosopher Gopal Guru writes, Dalits are “still in search of an inclusive civilization that would ensure them at least a sense of decent time and space” (Guru,2004)

Identity Song in honour of Pasis¹⁰

*Suno Pasiyon bhai, diya jati bisrai
Ab aage hoee jao hoshiyar
Awadh me raj pasiyon ke kai paye
Aaspas kitne kile wahi banwaye
Din jo sataye unhe mari ke bhagaye
Sare dalitan ke rahe sath who milaye
Dus sau saal pehle raaj yahan chaye
Aaye phir videshi, hum gaye chitaraye
Chine sab raj apan dharti ganwaye
Bina ekta ke hum ijjat na paye
Pehle rahe vir sardar, jitkar raj kiye tyaar.....*

⁸ Popular songs: Songs that create socially shared meanings by exploring and celebrating in a state of awareness or consciousness which a particular audience identifies with as an expression of its emotional and moral precepts.

⁹ Achutanand constructed an identity which traces out the history of the original inhabitants of India. They outlined an idealized vision of social equality and of past power and glory of the untouchables. ‘Self –assertion’ was an important principle of Adi-Hindu movement. Exploring the identities of self assertion and empowerment that Adi-movements espoused, Nandini Gooptu states that the untouchables were the true masters of the land, the Adi-Hindu preachers cultivated a sense of entitlement to rights and power at the same time as they heightened an awareness of historical deprivation.

¹⁰ Song sung by Mata Prasad and his group. Mata Prasad is Former Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, a dalit writer, an activist and a leader. Mata Prasad..nd Lokgit, opcit .

*Listen O pasi brothers, you forgot your caste,
Now be cautious.
There were many Pasi kings in Awadh,
They built many forts around the area.
They sent away those who pestered the poor,
They united all dalits,
They ruled there around one thousand years ago.
Then foreigners came here, and we were scattered,
They snatched our kingdoms and we lost our land,
We cannot get respect without unity,
In ancient ages there were brave captains, who won
lands and prepared kingdoms,
The foreigners divided us and snatched out land.*

In fact these histories of castes are fundamentally based on folklore which is part of a living oral tradition. Occasionally they employ those folklore narratives, which are recorded by English folklorists, like William Crooks, and George A Grierson, or in colonial gazetteers, which contain a brief description of their glories as footnotes to their collections in same places. The Paseses in Uttar Pradesh have used gazetteers for exploring the history of their caste (Chaudhury, 1997)

To quote Mayawati, ex-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, “The people who wrote our history wiped out all traces of dalit raja-maharajas. For a long time our history has been wiped out. The social system is such that someone like Bijli Paseses found no mention in our history books while there is evidence that the Paseses at one time were ruling this area. So I am not inventing history. I am only highlighting history that has been consciously suppressed”.¹¹

Song on Prevalence of Untouchability¹²

*Humare deshwa kai chalanwa bigadi ho gaily na
Chini me haad dawa me daru ghiv me charabi khave*

¹¹ See India Today, August 12, 1997, p 33

¹² Song sung by Mata Prasad and his group. This book has been documented by him in his small booklet see Mata Prasad..nd Lokgit (Dalit Samaj Sambandhi) Gram Sewika Prakashan, Lucknow

*Chadhat chamar dekhi kuana par bbap baap
chillawe
Ei chhuwai na pave paniyan bigadi ho gaily na
Humara deswa kai chalaniyan bigadi ho gaily na.....*

The song above is protest song¹³. The singer tries to protest that despite declaring of the practice of untouchability illegal it has been into practice. Through this song the dalit singer laments over the contradictions of the society which readily accepts sugar adulterated with bone, medicine with alcohol as well butter /ghee with fat but the presence of chamar(SC) caste at the well for fetching water makes him cry.

Discrimination by caste is now illegal under the terms of the Indian constitution, and various programs of affirmative action (some of them highly controversial) have been implemented since India gained independence. Gains have been made, but Dalits still face widespread discrimination in access to housing, employment, education and other resources. As a group, they remain significantly disadvantaged in relation to the rest of the Indian population, as measured by levels of literacy, income, employment, health and security.

The song below reveals that provision of reservation or affirmative action of the State for Scheduled Castes might bring relief in employment and economic or in other spheres but the situation for the dalits in social sphere does not seem to change. The song resonates the idea of Ambedkar who believe that political democracy is of no value and would be misfit if there were no social democracy. According to Ambedkar, democracy means fundamental changes in the social and economic life of the people and the acceptance of those changes by the people without resorting to disputes and bloodshed. He wanted to establish the principle of one man, one vote and one value not only in the political life of India but also in social and

¹³ Protest songs: Songs that characterize grievances with a particular hegemonic structure which adversely affects a particular group

economic life. He wanted political democracy to be accompanied by social democracy.

Song on Reservation in Employment¹⁴

*Mile Achhutan ke sab nokariya
Shor mache bahubhari
Bhale hai seat rijarb naukari pai Na sakari ho
Hamare lekhe nahi badlul jamanwan
Kahanwan kaise hum kari.....*

The folklores of the lowers castes are commonly referred to as jati biradari ki katha or jati katha. They are parallel to the caste puranas of the upper castes (quoted in Narayan) and are the creations of the castes themselves, usually based on their folklores, which express a social order that runs against the order described in the meta-narratives. One finds in them definite protests against brahminical forms. An attempt to go for an alternative content is visible in the parallel histories of the lower castes, although at many places the tendency to accept these forms is also visible.

Conclusion

After the analyses of the above Dalit songs, a different worldview contrary to the hegemonic one assumes significance in the context of revitalising Dalit culture. It needs reiteration that Dalit culture has to be understood in the context of the politics to challenge the hegemonic culture - the Brahminical Social Order. The challenge to hegemony is also a task to create and sustain a counter culture through the politics of resistance and protest though these expressions through songs may be a peaceful one. As seen in this study folksongs serve as a voice for those who have no other voice. However, there are many ways in which Dalits employ historical and other narratives to voice their resistance and protest in order to restore a sense of self-respect and to imagine for themselves an alternative cultural identity other

¹⁴ Song sung by Mata Prasad and his group. This book has been documented by him in his small booklet see Mata Prasad..nd Lokgit opcit.

than the assigned one which oppresses, discriminates and subjugates them. Thus, it can be argued that folk or popular songs can be an effective medium through which some kind of protest is articulated for social change is voiced. One, the symbolic power of making one's voice heard in public as an actively participating citizen can promote a process of 'democratic discourse'. Two, the reversal of public space and authority challenges the established discourses of power relations. These songs can be interpreted as the transformation of pain into resistance and protest. In a nutshell, it can be said that through these songs they are not only contesting the hegemonic structures and ideologies that have placed them at the margins, but are looking for historical reconstruction of the past. This Dalit consciousness has inspired intellectuals to rethink the entire Indian history and culture from 'below'.

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