



Reading Sambhaji Bhagat's Bhim Geet

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Dalit assertion in contemporary India manifested itself in political and cultural realms in the opening sentence—in a different manner. In the cultural realm a variety of texts emerged, which were often categorised as protest literature. These narratives broadly challenged Hindu nationalism, which sought to define Indian society as essentially a Hindu society; attacked Hinduism by arguing that it was not the religion and culture of the majority; and rejected the forceful imposition. These narratives exposed the limitations of the Nehruvian model of development, which had created a welfare state with an industrial base with established scientific and technological institutions along with the establishment of the Indian University system. This framework defined as brahmanic socialism had limited reforms for working class, and socialism implied planning and management and ‘public sector...with statism’ (Omvedt 2011,70).

The Hindu rate of growth in the 1960s with a brahmin dominated state apparatus witnessed a slowdown of the economy, and new social movements were triggered by the Naxalite revolt in 1967 that mobilized many subaltern groups, of which Dalits were one. However, the institutionalization of the democratic process, represented through the establishment of institutions of liberal democracy, along with successful land reform legislations and execution of rural development programmes, resulted in the rise of middle-level agrarian caste communities, who also participated in electoral politics. The period also saw the rise of political

parties that mobilized Dalits and low-caste groups in electoral politics. This partly resulted in 'power being transferred in a peaceful manner from upper-caste elite to various subaltern groups' (Nilsen and Roy 2015,3). However, from the 1980s, an era of neo-liberalism, globalisation and privatization commenced. This period witnessed phenomenal growth in multiple sectors in an ever-expanding global economy, with wealth being concentrated in a few pockets. This development model defined by the New Economic Policy further exacerbated existing inequalities and disenfranchised peasants, Adivasis and Dalits.

The relationship between the Indian state and subaltern politics was defined by 'the combined impact of development strategies that are increasingly centered on neoliberal forms of empowerment' (2015,3) and the 'introduction of rights based legislation, to protect civil liberties and social entitlements' (2015,4). This in turn reconfigured the encounter between the Indian state and India's marginalized, to create the 'imagined space' (2015,4) within which negotiations between the marginalised communities and the Indian state took place. YouTube videos featuring Sambhaji Bhagat's Bhim Geet, which have been analysed in this essay belong to this imagined space. This paper will argue that Sambhaji Bhagat's Bhim Geet embodies oppositional narratives that have contributed to create a Dalit counter public sphere, which is part of the multi-dimensional Dalit movement, where struggles against humiliation, oppression, exclusion and discrimination have emerged as part of the complex process of subaltern struggles against hegemonic projects that have defined the Indian state.

Sambhaji Bhagat's Bhim Geet draws upon the tradition of the popular, which include forms and practices, located in the social and cultural conditions of the Dalits. These cultural traditions were often kept out of the narrative of national culture. Rege, following Stuart Hall, has defined these cultural practices as popular practices which are 'neither just traditions of resistance nor just forms on which the bourgeois forms are superimposed' (Rege 2002,1040). They are, as Rege argues at 'once emancipatory and imprisoning, containing and resisting' (2002,1040). The roots of this performance can be traced back to the tradition of Ambedkari Jalsas; jalsa, which was the tamasha of the lower caste. Mapping the transformation of jalsa to Ambedkarite Jalsas is tracing the history of 'cultural Renaissance led by Jyotiba Phule' (Prakash 2019, 75); the establishment

of Satya Shodhak Samaj and the manner in which jalsas were transformed to communicate debates in Marathi newspapers about untouchability, the plight of peasants and oppression of women. The audience now included women who were not allowed in the traditional tamasha. The traditional content was altered and the 'reform character was represented in terms of form and content' (Rege 2002,1044):

The content was altered such that the traditional gan (offering to Ganesha) was replaced with a verse in praise of the Creator; the gavlan (the traditional dialogue between Krishna and the milkmaids) was transformed into an encounter of the non-brahmin hero with the daughter of the brahmin priest of the village. This became the mode of critiquing brahminical practices. The key element of this jalsa was the vag (the spontaneous theatre) which was instructive – in praise of modern science and education and was built around the mockery of oppressive religious practices (2002, 1044).

Ambedkarite Jalsas were a new genre located in the tradition of shahiri and were prevalent in the period 1920 to 1956 (Rege 2002). Their history can be traced to 1931, when in response to Dr Ambedkar's call to artists within the Dalit community to use their art to create anti-caste awareness, Bhinrao Kardak and his group formed the Shahiri Jalsa in Mumbai, and this marked the transition of Dalit tamasha and folk art into Ambedkarite Jalsa (Maitreya 2019). These Jalsas continued with the agenda of opposing caste-based oppression and discrimination. There was a shift from entertainment to politics, and women performers were excluded. These performances can be seen as the site of the articulation of values and meanings of subaltern movements, which contested their reception as folk performances associated with the bourgeois notion of aesthetics and their definition as 'traditional theatre' (Prakash 2019,76). Official Indian culture has been defined by the cultural expression of upper castes and in this situation creative performances by subordinate castes is defined in 'replication and not innovation' (2019,21). However, subaltern communities possess an autonomous culture that is independent of the Brahmanic worldview. These performances are part of the caste-system and they function as a 'repository of memories and histories of a particular caste' (2019,21).

Sambhaji Bhagat is described as a lokshahir, a tradition of Maharashtra's fabled people's poet, a lokshahir is a master of the tamasha; a folk form. A renowned Dalit activist and a balladeer, he has re-created traditional Dalit music and has

infused it with revolutionary ideas. He founded the Vidrohi Shahiri Jalsa in 2004, and performs to raise democratic consciousness. He has inherited this tradition from Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh, two well-known Dalit balladeers. The YouTube videos featuring Bhagat's Bhim Geet herald the alternative framework of songs in his provocative refrain, 'We are here not to entertain you, but to disturb you', and therefore he was there not to 'sing a song, but sing a thought'. The four YouTube videos which will be analysed in the article are

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0QETSCliRk&t=173s;>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XatQyVi6-1k&t=296s;>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0QfvGWeeVQ;>

and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYJtr7dUEiw&t=119s.>

They are performances which were performed in auditoriums except for <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0QfvGWeeVQ> which feature the songs composed by Sambhaji Bhagat for the movie Court(2015).

Throughout the performances, Bhagat is engaged in a dialogue with his audience, who are made aware of the political economy of these performances and the aesthetic registers which are defined by anti-caste movements. Inspired by Ambedkarite philosophy, Bhagat exhorts the audience, whom he identifies as the educated elites, to expand their cultural field and to interrogate their cultural elitism. The songs are affective in their meaning and message. They are composed in Hindi and Marathi, and are categorised as protest songs to create a 'public conscience'. 'Public conscience' was explained by Dr Ambedkar as the 'conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer and it means that everybody whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved' (Teltumbde 2018, 15).

The compositions emerge as shared space for emancipation and the canvas is contemporary India marked by the rise of religious fundamentalism, growing intolerance as was evident in the brutal assassination of rationalists like Narendra Dabholkar, MM Kalburgi and Govind Pansare, growing violence against minorities, rise of crony capitalism, entrenched poverty, a political class who are not sensitive towards their own constituencies, agrarian crises looming large in

the country side, Hindu nationalism masquerading as patriotism, the agenda of development and governance that resulted in disenfranchising the adivasis and farmers through land acquisition, the withdrawal of welfare state in the face of growing global capitalism, environmental degradation and the failure of democratic revolution.

A different chord is struck with songs that pay tribute to Dr Ambedkar's role in creating new Dalit personhood, defined by untouchability that challenged the hegemony of the Hindu community. The larger ideological milieu of the songs is the cultural space located within the Dalit movement, where from a Dalit perspective an understanding of subalternity is not confined to caste-identity paradigm, but an expansive framework of 'exclusion, domination and marginality in their various forms' (Nilsen and Roy 2015,12). The song titled '*They are the friends of Hitler*' is one of the iconic songs of Bhagat and brings out the underlying politics that defines his oeuvre:

They are the friends of Hitler
 Leading a procession of corpses
 They do not talk about humanity
 They only enquire about your caste and religion
 Know their true selves
 Be wary of them, O brother
 Your blunders will cost you heavily
 They are seen in jumbo jets
 Controlling the Internet
 We are sitting on empty stomach
 We are sitting at factory gates
 They act, we vote
 They have done their manipulation
 We have done our voting.
 (author's translation)

The larger background of Bhagat's Bhim Geet is the different stages of the Dalit movement and its visions and the interpretation of caste related to power and culture followed by an understanding of the Dalit, not confined to identity. The

next section will map this journey and, in the process, try to identify some of the political-cultural formulations heard in Bhagat's songs.

The changing contours of Dalit space in recent times has been marked by communication and tensions amongst Dalit activists, daily interactions, sporadic meetings, conferences, festivals to mark Ambedkar's birth and death anniversary, social websites and publications that have enriched and defined ideas about Dalit identity 'disassociated from an ascribed Hindu identity, the Hindu community and Hindu values' (Hartmann 2009, 227). This space has been defined by various anti-caste movements that challenged caste bound exploitation to contemporary Dalit assertion. In western India, Dalit mobilization began with Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), who founded the Satyashodak Samaj and he presented the theory of Aryan invasion, where the low caste were the ethnic groups who were the inheritors of 'antiquarian golden age and whose culture was therefore distinct from that of the Hindu society' (Jaffrelot 2012, 83), and tried to unite the Shudras and Atishudras.

The Non-Brahmin Movement spread to Southern India, where it was led by Iyothee Thass, who argued that lower castes were the original inhabitants of India. Periyar valorized a non-Aryan identity. These movements were united in the belief of the notion of autochthony and low-caste people were united on the basis of an identity that harked back to a glorious past. This alternative identity as sons of the soil helped them to challenge their inferior position within the caste system. However, the caste system was rigid, and was marked by competition amongst various jatis and various caste group leaders tried to build a support base by trying to mobilize all jatis under one umbrella. As Jaffrelot has observed, 'democratisation of the political arena had already accompanied the ethnicisation of caste' (2012,86). The analysis of the caste system by Dr. Ambedkar provided the taxonomy of an emancipatory vision. He denied the racial construction of caste and viewed all varnas as impure and his analysis of inequality in a caste-based society was founded on the concept of graded inequality:

In a system of graded inequality there are the highest (the Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriya). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are the low (Shudras) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have a grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of the highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low

and the lower lest they should reach his level and be his equal. The high wants to overthrow the higher that is above him but does not want to join hands with the low and the lower, lest they should rise to his status and become equal to him in rank. The low is anxious to pull down the highest, the higher and the high but he would not make a common cause with the lower for fear of the lower gaining a higher status and becoming his equal. In the system of graded inequality there is no such class as completely unprivileged class except the one which is at the base of the social pyramid. The privileges of the rest are graded. Even the low is a privileged class as compared with the lower. Each class being privileged, every class is interested in maintaining the system (2012, 90).

Ambedkar addressed the division of Untouchables into many jatis and coined 'Dalit' (the broken men) as a common identity, and infused Dalit with a 'sense of an indigenous, ethnic identity and a religious affiliation to Buddhism' (2012: 90). He tried to unite the peasants, workers and the Untouchables. His 'position on the caste question is one of confrontation as opposed to Gandhiji's position of accommodation' (Zelliot quoted in Pai 2013,19,) and therefore he opposed the Indian National Congress as controlled by the upper caste and the capitalist, and 'sought to create an alternative political front that would represent a kind of left-Dalit unity with a core base of workers, middle castes and peasants' (Omvedt 1994, 13).

Post-independence, this space was defined by the rise of the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1957 and later by the rise of the Dalit Panther in 1972. The RPI continued to take up class and caste issues and form a broad base. However, the rise of factionalism saw the growth of radical alternatives like the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit Sahitya. Various narratives begin to define the space, where the Dalit Panthers left a rich legacy of literature and sought to 'universalise the Dalit identity as proletarian experience' (Omvedt 2011,77). They brought together the economic exploitation and the cultural oppression of class and caste and the process of proletarianization of Dalit identity resulted in the spread of a kind of 'Dalit consciousness'. The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 is another trajectory that marked the inception of the Ambedkarite movement-turned-party, and sought to capture state power to rectify historical wrongs and establish a new social and political order from above through social engineering.

The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, where 27 per cent reservation of seats for Other Backward Castes in public sector employment resulted in the re-surfacing of caste in the public domain, was marked by nationwide protests of upper caste students around issues of merit, efficiency and national interest. Theorization about caste underwent a change to challenge the existing notion of Nehruvian modernity and the 'universal-normative position of "castelessness"' (Deshpande 2014, 407). This led to the rediscovery of Dr. Ambedkar as a pan-Indian figure and 'gave rise to a new language in Indian politics and Dalits and OBC were the agents of this transformation' (Tharu and Satyanarayana 2011,5). The reconfiguration of caste brought out the power in caste. Caste was no longer a relic of the pre-modern binary of purity-pollution, based on hierarchy, and specific to Hinduism. Caste issues were no longer the problem of lower castes only, and the dominance of upper caste groups in perpetuating caste-based discrimination was investigated. Thus, the anthropological notion of caste, which had informed state policies through education, development and administrative policies to make India secular and modern was contested and caste was now invoked as the sign of 'solidarity, fraternity, pride, self-respect, assertion and unity' (2011, 13):

Relocated thus in the domain of modernity, caste is reconfigured as a contemporary form of power. It structures social relations and therefore also state action. It works in renewed and updated forms in modern contexts and institutions. This history of caste is part of the history of modern India. The experience of the dominant castes- their authority, visibility, power, economic presence- as well that of the lower castes- their subordination, oppression, invisibility, and economic and political marginalization- is a modern phenomenon. (2011,11).

The critique of the unmarked secular citizenship followed the critique of 'caste, power and privilege' (2011, 11) and a shift in understanding of caste as merely a vulnerability and disadvantage. The unmarked secular citizen was the norm and governed the 'foundations of modern institutions- law, education, knowledge forms, the arts, public culture- it is also the principal modality through which these institutions practice caste' (2011,11). Anti-caste movements, which followed the Mandal agitation and the massacre of Dalits, brought out the importance of the idea of caste as a social reality and the truncated modernity of the Indian

state. Dalit leadership and emerging Dalit identity mentioned above challenged the absence of Dalit worlds not only in the political sphere but also in the cultural and literary sphere. Dalit assertion mentioned at the start of this discussion was manifested in the reconfiguration of caste, and Dalit identity which emerged in the cultural arena was a new identity of 'self-assertion and pride' (2011, 13):

. . . This caste identity, Dalit writers have argued, captures Dalit community life in urban as well as rural settings. It recovers and valorizes histories of specific caste leaders and reaffirms a range of Dalit cultural and religious practices. In these arguments and narratives, caste acquires a new meaning as the "social, economic and cultural capital" of a community. Such political identities also form the basis for determining access to resources and entitlement to rights in a modern democracy. While for the upper castes, caste enables social dominance and hegemonic power, subordinated castes rework caste to affirm the solidarity of a community, regain a world and affirm self-possession and confidence. Caste is now a conceptual formation that may be employed to theorize prestige, arrogance, privilege, dignity and power of social groups in India. It is articulated as a political question aimed at changing the existing equations of power (2011, 13-14).

The reconfiguration of caste identity to interrogate equations of power entrenched in modern democracy is one of the dominant themes in Bhagat's songs.

The existing power equations in the prevailing techno-bureaucrat state apparatuses was manifested in social and political elitism, which defined not only political process but also values, well-being and self-fashioning. A critique of growing economic disparities fueled by neoliberal economic policies, growing commodification, state withdrawing from social sector spending and the emergence of a system of exclusion marked by castelessness define the songs. The songs are an intervention in the long-established histories of accumulation by the dominant elite classes and point to the emergence of the politics of assertion by subaltern communities. A pervasive theme that is heard, is the impact of the elitism of traditional caste-capital, which manifested itself in terms of access to higher education, professional mobility and shaping formal democratic processes. This caste capital manifests itself as embodied cultural capital, which has been analysed by Bourdieu as the 'accumulated effects of family and class history that become integral to a person' (Subramanian 2019: 40), and functions as symbolic capital.

This privilege allows the member of the upper-caste to embrace modernity and gives them claim to a unique form of self-fashioning as 'subjects with sincere commitments to universalistic ideals of equality, democracy, and rationality' (2019,41). This vision governed the Nehruvian project of nation-building by the native elites who, according to Sudipta Kaviraj, did not speak the vocabulary of the subaltern communities. The songs critique the elitism represented in a postcolonial state that came to be defined by this elite discourse of governance and development schemes. There are repeated references in the song to farmers' suicides, point to a model of development, which 'implied a linear path, directed toward a goal, or a series of goals separated by stages. It implies the fixing of priorities between long-run and short-run goals and conscious choice between alternative paths' (Ram 2011,190).

The impact of growing corporate elite class, their forays in electoral politics and their influence in setting state agendas that had resulted in the rise of 'a hybrid system of political and economic governance which combine elements of redistributive, market, predatory, and democratic logics' (Lucia Michelittu 2017 quoted in Jodhka and Naudet 2019, 16) and its impact on ordinary Dalit lives has been a repeated motif in Bhagat's songs. This projection of subalternity marks a shift in the understanding of Dalit oppression beyond the axis of religio-cultural framework to the proletariat experience of the Dalit. Dr. Ambedkar 'had portrayed caste society as an involuted class formation' (Rao 2011, 102). Bhagat's songs reclaim Dr Ambedkar's vision of liberation, which involved economic and cultural struggle and therefore tried to unite the Dalits, the peasants and the workers against the Brahmin-bourgeois Congress' (Omvedt 2011, 54).

The songs celebrate a certain kind of non-bourgeois subaltern citizen culture, which lay bare the statist manner in which the citizen subject was constituted, and propose a notion of citizenship beyond the formal legal framework of the Constitution. Post-independence, the Indian state attempted to constitutionally address caste imbalances through the principles of freedom, justice and equality. The notion of citizenship as a member of a national political community was incorporated in the Constitution of India. This concept tried to invert oppressive structures simultaneously at two levels: against a hierarchically organised

scheme of social relations marked by ascriptive inequalities; and the dominance-subordination relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

The nation-state was based on the principles of 'self-determination, sovereignty and citizenship' (Roy 2005, 80), and for the larger masses it implied embracing their new political identity as citizens with equal rights. The vision of citizenship was influenced by the nationalist anti-colonial struggle that reflected demands for greater participation in governance and carried out a significant experiment for an alternative modern state through Gandhiji's non-violent and non-cooperation movement. The native elites who were at the forefront of the struggle wanted to present the struggle as a harmonious aspiration of the people as a whole. The old structures of feudal-patriarchal-Brahminical structures were not contested (Roy 2005). Gopal Guru's observation about the silence of the traditional elite, about caste based humiliation point to the internally conservative and externally radical nature of the struggle (Guru 2009,4), where the 'political' was privileged over the social. The elite bourgeois distanced themselves from the peasants and the subaltern classes. The paradox continued to define the nation, where every citizen was deemed equal and constitutional equality was promised, effacing hierarchical inequalities and masking differences of gender, caste and culture. The Dalit voice emerges as a symbol of change, and challenges the space of dominant nationalism, 'a domain of enforcing domination over subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions by national elite' (Pandian 2002,1736).

It is in this context that Bhagat's songs invoke Dr. Ambedkar as the new lawgiver, who enumerates a new jurisprudence enshrined in the Constitution, which rendered Dalits as political constituency. However, the songs talk about the failed project of social equality, which was coterminous with political equality. The withholding of 'sociality was the coercive force keeping the caste system together' (Rao 2011,103), and 'violence structured the social relations between untouchables and caste Hindus and justified their degradation as well as their separation from other castes' (2011, 104). Anand Teltumbde points to the contradiction where, even though the 'Constitution helmed by Babasaheb Ambedkar created a republic that repudiates caste, in reality the republic of India has been constructed on the foundation of caste' (Teltumbde 2018, 20). Therefore, although the Constitution

has outlawed untouchability, the lawmakers have 'skillfully consecrated caste which is the source of untouchability' (2018 ,20). The songs are embedded in a vision of humanity and perhaps speak of the notion of citizenship 'as a function of "responsible" participation' (Roy 2005,201):

Responsible participation would manifest itself in diverse social situations, viz., how citizens view or act amidst potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable;...Such citizenship qualities ... make a democracy stable and governable.(2005:201)

Bhagat's powerful articulations share some of the features of Dalit literature and are therefore marked by a powerful manifestation of Dalit Chetna, which is a pivotal feature of this body of literature. This oppositional consciousness has been defined by Muktibodh in the essay titled 'What is Dalit Literature' to understand the radical potential of Dalit literature:

Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its implied value. The nature of this literature consists in a rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits in the past and even in the present in the framework of varna system. A Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary. (Muktibodh 1992,267)

The oppositional consciousness cannot be defined in a single register. While sharing the space created by Dalit literature, the songs cannot be read as 'untouchable documents of subaltern experience' (Brueck 2017,7). They talk about the need for a radical and inclusive politics followed by engagement with issues of visibility and invisibility, hegemony and marginalization, and articulation and silence. The songs are revolutionary and often privilege Dalit cultural idiom, which is invisible in dominant cultural spheres. Bhagat, in the course of his performances has defined them as performances of the sons of the soil, the toiling masses, and draws attention to his diction and phrases and the need for different aesthetic standards which cannot be judged by the cultivated language of cultured people. This rebellion defies an essentialist understanding, and the 'innovative narrative

styles of resistance' (2017, 8) encountered in the songs call for understanding the 'interstices of Dalit activism, "consciousness", and literary expression' (2017,8).

The songs constitute the Dalit counterpublic sphere defined as the site 'for the construction of alternative and oppositional interpretations of culture and identity' (2017,26). Nancy Fraser in her essay 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' (1990) proposes the concept of multiple publics and revisits Habermas's singular concept of liberal bourgeois public sphere, which was constituted by exclusions in stratified societies and failed to provide opportunity of participation to subordinate groups. Hence, subordinate groups deliberate about their situation in their own subaltern counterpublics and challenge the inclusive character of this space:

. . . history records that members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians – repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where 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)

These spaces promote the ideal of participatory parity and have a dual character:

. . . in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies. (1990: 68)

Sambhaji Bhagat's Bhim Geet are a part of an expansive Dalit counterpublic sphere; they spell out an anti-caste cultural oppositional agency that moves away from an essentialist understanding of caste as identity to inscribe a sense of solidarity amongst subaltern constituencies in the era of globalisation.

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