

**IDEOLOGIES AND SPACES OF CULTURAL
RESISTANCE IN MAHARASHTRA: PERFORMANCE
AND CASTE-CLASS POLITICS SINCE
THE 20TH CENTURY**

**SYNOPSIS OF THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARTS
OF
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

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2022

Introduction

In April 2011, the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested Deepak Dhengle, a shahir (best translated as performer poets of resistance), from the Pune-based cultural troupe Kabir Kala Manch (KKM) whose aim is to 'create a culture free of caste, class and women's slavery' (Kabir Kala Manch 2009). Dhengle was among 14 accused booked by the ATS under sections of Indian Penal Code and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 for alleged links with the banned CPI (Maoist). Around the same time, and as a counter to this narrative, noted documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan released his film *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011), which featured the poetry, performances and interviews of numerous cultural activists from Maharashtra including KKM members.

As a freelance journalist and student of MA (Sociology) based in Mumbai, I followed these developments with curiosity and alarm. Given my association with the Free Binayak Sen Committee (a loose civil society grouping demanding the release of the award-winning paediatrician, public health and civil liberties activist Binayak Sen imprisoned under UAPA and other charges), I was closely aware of how the Indian state used draconian laws such as the UAPA and public security acts to target dissident activists and groups, especially in conflict areas.¹

Yet, the booking of KKM under similar charges seemed to stand out *because* it was a cultural troupe: What threats really did a cultural troupe pose to the state to necessitate such coercive action? What activities did it undertake, where, and among which sections of the population that rendered its relationship with the state antagonistic? Further, my conversations with various progressive activists I befriended in Mumbai indicated that although punitive action targeting shahirs/ cultural activism was not new, their intensity and scale had increased since the Samyukt Maharashtra movement that preceded the establishment of Maharashtra as separate state on May 1, 1960.

For instance, in 1954, the Congress government in Maharashtra imposed a ban on the tamasha, a lower caste performative genre, claiming it was obscene.² The move was in fact targeted against tamasha performances by leading shahirs such as Wamandada Khardak and Annabhau Sathe in support of the movement demanding a separate state for Marathi-speakers, as the Congress was principally opposed to the idea of linguistic states till the late 1950s. Though drastic, this action paled before the persistent propaganda by powerful politicians and state functionaries about KKM being a Maoist front since 2006, and the arrest of its members under draconian charges in 2011.

I wondered thus about how measures to target 'voices' of subaltern resistance had changed in the past few decades, and what they revealed about the underlying nature and evolving shape of the state in India? How were troupes as well as individual activists affected by these measures, and how did they respond to them?

These inquiries were formalised via my registration for a PhD in November 2012 under the title 'Ideologies and Spaces of Cultural Resistance: Caste-class politics in post-1960s Maharashtra.' Cultural resistance here referred to the critique of extant socio-political situations via songs, theatrical acts, street plays, stage shows and other cultural renditions.

Two aspects became apparent early on in the study. One, that it was foolhardy to leave out the Samyukt Maharashtra movement from the analysis because many participants in the movement claimed that leading shahirs of the time such as Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh, Wamandada Khardak and others played a far more important role than the top anti-Congress political leaders in mobilising the Marathi-

¹ These laws gave overarching power to law enforcement agencies to detain the accused for long periods merely on the suspicion that they may disrupt social harmony and national unity, or incite hatred and violence between social groups. For an overview of these laws and their use over time, see "India's Unforgivable Laws" 2018.

² See Korgaonkar 2021; Bhagat 1982.

speaking masses behind the call for a linguistic state (Adarkar and Menon 2004). This required a change in the time period covered by the study. Secondly, the concept of 'performance' became crucial to the study given that shahirs who were part of cultural resistances since the early twentieth century possessed a deep, nuanced understanding about the meanings of performance and their liberatory potential.

Hence the new proposed title is 'Ideologies and Spaces of Cultural Resistance in Maharashtra: Performance and Caste-Class Politics since the 20th century.'

Research Questions

Research questions for the study were drawn up based on commonsensical notions and practices in the domain of cultural resistance in Maharashtra. Although fragmentary and at times contradictory, these notions and practices demarcated urgent areas of inquiry based on trends that distinguished enterprises of cultural resistance in the state. There are broadly four sets of questions, roughly corresponding to each of the four core chapters.

The nature of the shahir's work

The notion that shahirs conscientise the masses indicates their role is intellectual, focused on distilling higher truths and circulating them in the social body through their songs, plays and performances. But this goes against the dominant reading of the work of prominent shahirs, who are credited with being great performers, singers, artistes, writers or expert propagandists, but rarely ever, intellectuals. Shahirs are eulogised for experimenting with form and content and explicating complex ideologies and concepts in simple terms, but there is little discussion in available literature on their efforts, if any, to critically re-interpret systems of knowledge – as must an intellectual.

Thus, one question that the dissertation addresses is the nature of the work done by shahirs and in what sense(s) it can be characterised as 'intellectual'. Two other sets of questions related to this are also taken up for discussion.

One question involves the relationship between the ideology and praxis of shahirs, and asks if the stress on embodiment makes shahirs resistant to adopting any ideology as is, without testing it against experience, and changing it to suit the circumstances. Does reinterpretation of ideology then constitute the shahir's claim to intellectual activity, to the production and dissemination of new(er) knowledge?

Secondly, as legatees of the vidrohi parampara, what do shahirs draw from the counter tradition of the medieval Warkari sant kavis and to what effect? How do they make it relevant to their space and time? Does this influence their engagement with modern emancipatory ideologies such as Marxism and Ambedkarism?

Role and scope of artistic collectives

The second main research question is about the relationship between individuals, the collective and wider society and questions of intra-group hierarchy and decision-making. This question is important because nearly all prominent artistic collectives (or kalapathaks) involved in cultural resistance in Maharashtra since the early twentieth century have included shahirs; oftentimes, kalapathaks were also identified by or with their leading shahir(s). Their examples indicate that a set of individuals became defined as a collective not only through staged performances, but through the collective production of songs, plays and other cultural renditions as well as participation in meetings, demonstrations and mass movements. In many cases, troupes were also associated with Marxist-/Ambedkarite political parties. This, in turn, raises questions about the location of kalapathaks in the cluster of positionings in Left-wing cultural activism in India as identified by Sumangala Damodaran (2017), which is mainly linked to the degree of autonomy from the larger movement/Party. Further, repeated instances of

splits in prominent kalapathaks since the twentieth century point at the vulnerability of collectives to pulls and pressures emanating outside it. It is pertinent therefore to examine what these pulls and pressures are, how they have changed with time, and how they affected collectives.

Process of Art Production

The third set of research questions deals with how troupes and activists understand quality in art differently from hegemonic notions. What forms did they use and why? What role did writing play in the creative process? Did the undermining of individual talent in the artistic collective affect creativity? How did the presence of activists from various castes impact the ability of the collective to produce songs/plays? And who owned the art thus produced?

This set of questions is important to understand if and how Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies with regard to art are countered by the groups engaged in cultural resistance.

Performance: meanings and potential

Performance before a physically present audience has remained the central mode of intervention in the domain of cultural resistance in Maharashtra throughout the period of study. This holds true for the present period as well, when activists and troupes can stream live performances to large audiences in a targeted way via the use of digital technology and social media.

This raises questions about what performance really accomplishes – for organisers, performers and audiences – that distinguishes it from other possible media such as literature and audio-visual content. What does the physical presence of the audience make possible besides two-way communication? What designates performers' relationship with audiences? How do they grapple with the latter's aspirations, problems, and social divisions? What ways do they propose to counter the oppression and exploitation and how do audiences respond to their interventions? The stress laid by shahirs and kalapathaks on embodiment also raises questions about the relationship between staged performance and embodied behaviours, of performers as well as audiences. How is all of this affected by the changing space for cultural resistance?

In pursuance of these questions, the study sought to understand whether cultural resistance was connected to the formation of counter/public(s). If yes, what was the ideological, ethical grounding of such publics, and their demographic composition? How did they change over time?

Why Maharashtra?

A key reason for focussing on Maharashtra derived from its rich and diverse history of cultural resistance centred around the question of caste. The earliest notable instances of such resistance flourished between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Mahanubhav and Warkari saint poets countered the idea of caste as divinely ordained as advanced in the Vedas, Upanishads and other Brahmanic texts, and stressed on the equality of all human beings in their compositions (Feldhaus 2003; Novetzke 2009; 2015; Eaton 2008; Gokhale-Turner 1981; Omvedt 2009). Thereafter, shahirs are believed to have played a key role in enabling Shivaji to establish the Maratha empire by singing powadas or ballads in his praise.³

The colonial period witnessed fresh instances of cultural resistance that were more directly engaged with politics. For instance, Satyashodhak jalsas and Ambedkari jalsas played a crucial role in the spread of the non-Brahmin and Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra between 1910s-1930s and 1930s-1950s respectively (Omvedt 2011; Thakur 2005; Rege 2000). A reworking of the traditional tamasha, these jalsas 'praised modern science, mocked the sacred books and religious traditions in their songs,

³ See the documentary *Shahiri* (Sable 2017) for oral accounts.

dialogues and plays...and played a prominent role in forming and spreading a popular Maharashtrian culture of religious and caste revolt' (Omvedt 2011, 243).

Leading jalsa artists of the time were referred to as shahirs, and the shahiri 'tradition' has remained central to enterprises of cultural resistance spanning a variety of ideological dispositions in the post-independence period. Many activists and commentators for instance refer to three streams of shahiri (Communist, Socialist, and Ambedkarite) and specific shahirs are often identified with particular ideological camps – viz., Annabhau Sathe as Communist, Liladhar Hegde as Socialist and Wamandada Khardak as Ambedkarite. Though there is no institution to confer the title of shahir as such, leading performer-poets of KKM and several other contemporary troupes in Maharashtra are also called shahirs; predominantly from subaltern caste-class backgrounds and including men and women, these shahirs claim inheritance to a 'vidrohi parampara' of resistance against Brahmanism dating back to Buddha and Charvak,⁴ whose contours resonate with Braj Ranjan Mani's account of dominance and resistance in Indian society (Mani, 2015).

Presence of the unique shahiri 'tradition' in cultural resistance in Maharashtra comprised the second key reason justifying the location of the study.

The third reason for focussing on Maharashtra pertained to the centrality of both caste and class in state politics across the past several decades, as opposed to states like West Bengal where caste was largely absent from political discourse. The tensions between caste and class – as concepts as well as mobilisational, collective identities – often erupted in the form of contradiction or rejection of the other ideology/ side. For instance, especially after the 1960s and coinciding with the development of a sizeable Dalit, largely Mahar middle class in Maharashtra, Ambedkarite parties and leaders expressly rejected class ideology and class struggle, whereas the CPI, CPM and various other communist parties/ groups seemed to lean towards subsuming caste under class until very recent years.

Nevertheless, there were persistent efforts towards conjoining caste and class politics in Maharashtra during the period under study. Ambedkar's presence here was foundational, especially because he spelt out Brahmanism and capitalism as the twin enemies of Dalits, lower castes, minorities, and other subaltern groups in India, and strived to build alliances between these groups through actions in the domain of politics till his death in 1958.⁵ Another notable example in this regard was the Dalit Panthers (1972-1979), which argued that 'class relations in India were subsumed within the cultural framework of caste' (Baviskar 2009, 3).

Additionally, innumerable shahirs and kalapathaks seem to have existed in different regions of Maharashtra like Vidarbha, Marathwada, Khandes, western Maharashtra and the Konkan throughout the period under consideration. They advocated a conjoining of the struggles for liberation from caste, class and gender exploitation and domination, or variants thereof, and many entities such as KKM pointed at the immanence of caste-class relations (Rao 2020). This was despite important shifts in the political economy of the state, resonating with trends at the national level.

Notwithstanding the proliferation of shahirs and troupes across Maharashtra and their nuanced positions on politics, there was paucity of scholarship in the area, barring stray analyses of the work of individual shahirs. Sharmila Rege's work comprised a key exception; in the introduction to *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy* (2013), she argued that print

⁴ KKM's song titled 'Vidrohi Aroli' included in the first CD provides a detailed list.

⁵ Examples of efforts by Ambedkar to build alliances between subaltern groups through politics included his founding the Indian Labour Party, newspapers such as *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrut Bharat*, and his role as a member of the drafting committee of the Constitution. Zene (2016) sees his conversion to Buddhism as a political act.

and music comprised the terrain for the emergence and consolidation of an 'Ambedkarite counterpublic' in Maharashtra.

The fifth reason for focussing on Maharashtra arose against stereotypes about cultural resistance being propagandist, formulaic and sectarian; they applied for shahirs/ kalapathaks encompassing a wide variety of ideological positions, geographical locations and time periods in the state. Such stereotypes clearly existed across the country, and prompted Sumangala Damodaran (2017) to undertake a study of IPTA's protest music. Damodaran showed that protest music was 'a highly varied and historically evolved kind of music (12),' and its collective production, while undermining individual talent, unleashed immense creativity. Although she did not examine the role of caste in defining and sustaining these stereotypes, the question begs attention because nearly all contemporary shahirs and members of kalapathaks were from subaltern caste-class backgrounds, including a large number of Dalits. The stereotypes resulted in massive underestimation of their artistic and intellectual prowess. The study sought to address this gap.

The sixth reason for focussing on Maharashtra derived from my familiarity with the state; apart from residing in Mumbai since 2003, I travelled widely across various regions of Maharashtra between 2010 and 2018 in my capacity as a reporter, including during the period of fieldwork. This contributed to my understanding of how caste and class operated similarly yet differently in various contexts/ regions of the state, and how shahirs and troupes sought to counter these trends.

Sample and limitations

The thesis addresses the questions and gaps posed above by analysing three prominent 'voices' of cultural resistance from three distinct periods between the 1940s and 2020, who stressed that cultural resistance was connected with and inseparable from political resistance.

Acclaimed shahir Annabhau Sathe (1920-1969) who remained a member of the CPI till his last years comprises the first voice. Discussions about his life and work provide insights regarding cultural activism during the heydays of the statehood movement between the 1940s and 1950s, when a number of political parties committed to caste and class emancipation joined forces to counter the dominance of the Congress and mobilised lakhs of people from working class backgrounds as well as the middle classes to demand a unified state for Marathi-speakers.

The Bombay-based Avahan Natya Manch (1979-1997), a cultural troupe with Marxist-Leninist leanings that established Sambhaji Bhagat and Vilas Ghogre as radical shahirs, comprises the second voice. Discussion of its activities and interventions provide insights regarding cultural activism in the post-Emergency period, when the 'provincial propertied class'⁶ established a firm grip over political power and agricultural production in Maharashtra, and demands for affirmative action by OBCs following the Mandal Commission report fractured the unity of lower caste groups and boosted sectarianism and identity politics.

The Pune-based Kabir Kala Manch (2002-) comprises the third voice. Discussions of its activities and interventions provide insights into cultural resistance in the post-2000 period, when it was detached from conventional political resistance and more attuned to 'new social movements'⁷. The designation of these movements as 'new' derived 'from the political conjuncture in which they emerged, the social

⁶ K Balagopal uses the term "provincial propertied class" to designate the consolidation of landed castes in rural areas in the 1970s who had interests in modern farming but also extending to real estate, transport, cinema and contract work. See Balagopal 1987.

⁷ NSMs were 'the products of a post-industrial social formation where the welfare state had made classic forms of exploitation and deprivation obsolete, but where modern society created new forms of alienation' (Baviskar 2009).

groups and issues they mobilised around, and the strategies and forms of organisation they developed to pursue their goal' (Dharampal-Frick et al. 2015, 188).

All three entities were based in Mumbai or Pune, which are important centres of political and cultural power in Maharashtra. This likely facilitated their exposure to latest developments vis-à-vis political and cultural resistance and contributed to their influence, which partly offsets bias in the sample towards existing regional disparities. In examining the activities and interventions of these entities, the thesis teases out those trends and processes that were common to the scene of cultural resistance, which also ensured it thrived in times of immense state repression and social divisions. It does not cover questions regarding the dissemination, circulation and reception of their work unless directly relevant to the discussion.

Research Methodology

A major impediment to research on cultural resistance in Maharashtra is the absence of documentation of activities undertaken by leading shahirs and cultural troupes over the past few decades. There is no database of such troupes and shahirs who worked in various parts of the state during this period either, although anecdotal evidence indicates their number is massive, and their professed ideological positions cover a wide spectrum.⁸

Given these circumstances, and the centrality of subaltern performative traditions transmitted orally across generations in the scene of cultural resistance, the dissertation primarily draws upon fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2018. Data collection was undertaken via the use of ethnographic tools including participant observation, extensive interviews and informal conversations; primary informants included shahirs and members of troupes under study, whereas secondary informants spanned a wide variety of activists, troupe members and their supporters/ sympathisers and audiences across the state. Secondary material including popular books and booklets, manifestos, pamphlets, fact-finding reports and scholarly literature was also collected during fieldwork.

Even then, research work was often undistinguishable from other pursuits. This was partly because I travelled widely across the state during this period reporting on development, natural calamities, agrarian crisis, caste atrocities, elections, the Maoist conflict, popular movements and so on. Often, respondents of the research study transformed into sources for news reports and vice versa, whereas on many reporting trips, local activists from varied social locations and political positions – spanning Dalits, Marathas, Brahmins, soft Hindutva proponents, Leftists and Ambedkarites – hosted me in their homes. This afforded me an experiential understanding of the current situation of various social groups in Maharashtra, their ideological inclinations/ affiliations and the different ways in which they were affected by political processes.

Additionally, I also developed close friendships with cultural activists from several states during this period including primary respondents in the study, and assisted them in small ways. Many of us were also part of Relaa – a national level collective of groups and individuals resisting Hindutva and oppression that included KKM; among other things, I was closely involved in coordinating a three-day long residential workshop in Mumbai (2017) involving Relaa members from Maharashtra, Odisha, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh and Delhi, which was focussed on the production of new songs and acts for an ensuing performance tour. These experiences afforded me deep insights into the praxis of cultural resistance in India.

Although I seldom refer expressly to these events in the dissertation, the discussions are guided by insights gleaned therein. The thrust is not on providing a neutral, objective account of cultural resistance in Maharashtra, but on foregrounding the 'voices' of subaltern resistance with minimal

⁸ Marxist, Ambedkarite, Marxist-Leninist, Marx-Phule-Ambedkarite and so on.

mediation and contextualisation, and on theorising what is already incipient in practical experience. This is partly an effort to counter the excoriation and appropriation of such ‘voices’ in India by the state as well as sections of civil and political society, of which the dissertation provides ample evidence. The choice also derives from Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru’s (2012) deliberation on the long and troubled relationship of social theory with the notion of experience, particularly in Indian social science that ‘represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras’ (10). Primary respondents of the study appear similarly motivated – they regard experience ‘as the source of reflective consciousness,’ and deny any text/ ideology ‘the advantage of being authorial’ (2).

Conceptual Framework

Scholarship around three broad themes is crucial to understanding and analysing contemporary iterations of cultural resistance in Maharashtra.

The first, especially from the discipline of Performance Studies, draws attention to how subaltern groups across the world have relied on performance to advance their claims to social identity and history. Diana Taylor (2013), among them, refers to the archive and the repertoire as two distinct systems of knowledge and modes of transmission. The archive exists as documents, maps, literary texts, archaeological remains and other items supposedly resistant to change; it works across distance, over time and space.

The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing-in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge (Taylor 2013, 20).

Taylor historicises the role of writing in concentrating power in the hands of the conquering elite in the Americas, and critiques History and other academic disciplines invested in Western logocentrism for failing to see how indigenous groups advanced claims to history and identity through embodied practices. She stresses that

performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behavior” (2).

Taylor’s insights about writing sustaining elite power and subaltern groups turning to performance to advance their claims to History are especially relevant in Maharashtra, where lower castes and women were denied access to scriptural knowledge for centuries, and where medieval bhakti saint-poets mostly from subaltern castes preached and practised resistance to Brahminical hegemony and the caste order through performances. Satyashodak and Ambedkari jalsas, similarly, were instances where performance constituted the ground for shaping subaltern social identity and History.

Secondly, scholarship on resonances between the political philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and BR Ambedkar (Zene 2016; 2013), particularly their approach towards resolution of the subaltern and the dalit/ caste questions respectively, alerts us to the prerequisites of cultural resistance under conditions of domination and coercion. Born in 1891 but operating in entirely different environments, both Gramsci and Ambedkar were resolutely concerned with the liberation of subalterns/ lower castes and minorities who were denied recognition as (fully) human in their respective societies. They were especially critical of the role of official religion in perpetrating these ideas, including by rendering spirituality idealist and transcendental. But they also emphasised that religion was an important aspect of social life, and stressed on the need for cultural resistance – i.e., resistance against dominant ideologies in and through embodied practices – that could render spirituality innovative and transformational.

Gramsci⁹ wrote profusely on these aspects, especially during his time in prison. Interested in transforming Marxism from ‘a faith of sorts’ imposed by vanguardist parties on ordinary people from the outside into an organic philosophy of praxis suited to its time and space, he developed the concept of hegemony or ‘moral and intellectual leadership’ and showed that ‘traditional intellectuals’ from the ruling class played a key role in ‘organising hegemony’ by popularising the particular ideas of their class as universal and responsive to the needs and interests of all classes in society. Thus, an essential part of any revolutionary project was the creation of a counterhegemonic culture that could be practised by the ‘popular classes’ (even those disinterested in politics) of their own free will. ‘Organic intellectuals’ who belonged to and remained in constant contact with the ‘popular classes’ had to lead these efforts – they were not required to create an entirely new culture, but sift through ‘common sense’, discover its progressive potentialities, and ‘raise it to the level of the most advanced thought in the world’, so as to fashion a philosophy of praxis most suited to the context.

Gramsci considered the attainment of group/ class consciousness as an eminently ‘spiritual’ enterprise and stressed that this was not a private, individual pursuit, but rather the task of a ‘collective thinker’ who aided and promoted the ‘inner life’ of the masses by inviting them to develop new ways of thinking and new politics, as a common effort (Zene 2016). Whereas Ambedkar, much like the Gramscian ‘collective thinker,’ played a foundational role in drafting the Constitution premised on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity as they applied in the Indian context (Rathore 2020); he also developed Navayana Buddhism as a social religion committed to the promotion of social and political justice.

Thirdly, scholarship around the idea of counterpublics – i.e. discursive arenas parallel to the official public sphere in which subaltern groups ‘invent and circulate counter discourses’ and ‘formulate oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests and needs’ (Fraser 1990, 67) – is especially useful to connect the various instances of cultural resistance analysed in the thesis and draw out those tendencies and characteristics that were common to all of them to a greater or lesser degree.

Nancy Fraser developed the concept of counterpublics via a critique of Jurgen Habermas’ theorisation of the bourgeois public sphere, which ‘designated a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk’ (57). The public sphere, in Habermas’ view, was a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest;’ discussants, whose inequalities were bracketed off, deliberated therein as peers, which resulted in ‘public opinion’ or ‘a strong sense of consensus about the common good.’ Based on a review of revisionist historiography on the subject, Fraser stated the bourgeois public sphere was ‘a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule’ (Fraser 1992, 116). She wrote:

...the official public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination. This is the shift from a repressive mode of domination to a hegemonic one, from rule based primarily on acquiescence to superior force to rule based primarily on consent supplemented with some measure of repression (Fraser 1990, 62).

She further emphasised that while ‘the official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions’ such as gender and class, it existed alongside ‘a variety of ways of accessing public life and a multiplicity of public arenas:’

...the bourgeois public was never *the* public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere, there arose a host of competing counterpublics,

⁹ The summary is primarily based on Gramsci’s writings and David Forgacs’ discussions in *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (Gramsci 2014).

including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics. Thus, there were competing publics from the start, not just from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies (Fraser 1990, 61).

Drawing on Fraser, Rege (2013) argued that the 'middle class public sphere' in India that emerged during colonialism secured the ability of the privileged caste-classes to rule over a wide variety of subaltern groups. She wrote:

Historically, the colonial public sphere in India comprised different groups and communities forming publics and counterpublics, all of which were in friction with one another. The privileged castes, in constituting the middle class public sphere, used older resources of power and privilege and newer ideas of politics and society, stitching together Manu and Mill, thereby fashioning a fractured modernity. This modernity, while disavowing caste in the public sphere joined new principles of individualism with endogamy, and *varnashrama dharma* with notion of universal division of labour, and thus made claim to universal modernity (24).

While these claims were fiercely contested in many ways and in multiple arenas across the country, Rege emphasised that 'Ambedkarite booklet literature and music pertaining to *Ambedkar aani Stremukti* (Ambedkar and Women's Liberation)' from the late 1990s onwards constituted a 'distinctively recognisable Ambedkarite counterpublic for their oppositional claims and their alliance with alternative institutional dissemination' (45).

Building on and extending the scope of Fraser's insights and Rege's analysis, I argue in this thesis that cultural resistance in Maharashtra constituted and in turn also created a distinctive counterpublic, whose ideological grounding and composition responded to and opposed shifts in the nature of domination.

Chapterisation and main findings

The chapters in the thesis follow a chronological order, which allows us to track shifts in the conceptualisation and practice of cultural resistance and its role in shaping a distinctive counterpublic.

The introductory chapter summarises the rich and diverse history of cultural resistance in Maharashtra from the thirteenth century down to KKM in the current period, and provides a detailed overview of the aims and objectives of research, key questions, gaps in scholarship and conceptual framework enumerated above.

The second chapter, titled *Interpreting a shahir: tradition, ideology, and self-praxis*, examines commonsensical notions in Marathi society about shahirs through a close scrutiny of the life and work of Annabhau Sathe, one of Maharashtra's most popular and acclaimed shahirs. Analogous to the Gramscian organic intellectual, the shahir combines the critical impulse of tradition with ideologies of political emancipation; they historicise universal concepts and elaborate new conceptual categories, and the thrust of their efforts is directed towards fostering subaltern group/ class consciousness.

The first section of the chapter provides a brief biography on Annabhau, and foregrounds his departures from the 'ascetic modality' of self-fashioning which was prevalent among the upper caste leadership of Communist parties in India during this and later periods (Dasgupta 2014). Such a self was invested in ideas of declassing, swore by version(s) of 'proper Marxism', and conceived of and sought to realise a politics based on universalisation of abstract categories like class.

Given strong resemblances between the figures of medieval Warkari sant kavis and modern/ contemporary shahirs, the second section reviews existing scholarship on Warkari bhakti, focusing on those strands that point towards the emancipatory liberatory potential of this tradition despite its

upper caste-class co-option. Lele (1981) mentions that notwithstanding their focus on religion/ divinity, Warkari sant kavis embodied the 'critical impulse of tradition' – they rejected scriptural/ external authority, insisted that unity of theory and practice be realised in daily, productive life, and remained invested in producing new knowledge with the productive classes in society via performance. Novetzke (2007) stresses that bhakti, in all its diverse manifestations over time in South Asia, seeks to form publics that signify common good without erasing the individual; they require embodiment, the human as medium.

Two subsequent sections of the chapter discuss key events from Annabhau's childhood in Wategaon village of present-day Sangli district and his initial years in Mumbai. They provide glimpses into his deep familiarity with the Warkari tradition, his emergence as a shahir within the folds of the working class movement, and his closeness with 'Dalit Communist(s)'¹⁰ like Ramchandra Babaji More.

Thereafter, the chapter analyses three key interventions by Annabhau Sathe. This includes the songs *Maharashtrachi Parampara* and *Majhi Maina*, which posit Annabhau as a communitarian leader who sought to forge a subaltern Marathi public conscious of its heterogeneity and common purpose vis-à-vis the Samyukt Maharashtra struggle. Annabhau's inaugural speech at the first Dalit Sahitya Sammelan in Maharashtra (1958) offers a striking example of his attempts to fashion a critical politics by drawing on Marx(ism) and Ambedkar(ism) at a time when the two ideologies began being seen as incompatible in Maharashtra (Teltumbde 2010).

The third chapter, titled *Interrogating the collective: autonomy, caste and embodied culture*, focuses on the role and scope of collectives in cultural resistance via a close scrutiny of the activities of Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch.

Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch offer a good contrast in terms of time and political affiliation. Avahan was associated with All India League for Revolutionary Culture, a confederation of Marxist Leninist troupes from several states. It was active during the 1980s and early 90s, when mass movements encompassing various sections of society were common in Maharashtra; the namantar and Mandal-Kamandal agitations catapulted caste to the forefront of society; and Hindutva politics was gaining. On the other hand, KKM was not affiliated with any party. Its period of activity spanned the post-2000 period when the prominence of BJP and other pro-Hindutva parties in national and state politics rose sharply and steadily whereas the geographic and demographic spread of social movements shrank markedly compared to earlier decades; in 2014, the Narendra Modi-led BJP government was voted to power at the Centre, which cracked down heavily on dissent and activism by progressive groups.

The first segment of the chapter titled *Composition and Perspective* discusses the composition of the two troupes and their ideas regarding art, Indian culture and resistance as evidenced in their manifesto/ published works. It shows that while group composition was affected by changes in the nature of social movements and political formations between the two periods, there were striking similarities in their perspectives. Both were opposed to capitalism and Brahmanic Hinduism, and resolutely concerned with caste and embodied culture.

The second segment titled *Group Dynamics* teases out how group activity and interactions among members in Avahan Natya Manch and KKM catalysed a particular understanding of ideology. Both troupes clearly had an 'organising function' as they a) catalysed the evolution of activists with no professional training or prior experience in theatre, music and literature into venerated artistes, authors and shahirs; b) placed at their disposal an improved productive apparatus that took into consideration the latest ideas and experiments in socially-engaged art as well as changes in the political

¹⁰ Anupama Rao (2020) uses the term to refer to RB More in the introduction to his biography.

economy; and c) facilitated their participation in popular movements/ joint fronts and their connections and exchanges with cultural activists and troupes in other parts of the country.

Discussions in the chapter provide clear evidence that when a set of individuals from different backgrounds decidedly work together in a politically-oriented cultural troupe such as Avahan and KKM, it spurs the emergence of a cohesive, autonomous collective that considers cultural resistance as integral but never subservient to political resistance. When performance is the forte of such troupes, the collective space is especially amenable to a critique of caste in embodied behaviours. The collective is not 'rule-bound, or limited in terms of expression or form' (Damodaran 2017), but a space of free expression and empathy, where activists irrespective of differences in caste, class, gender, religion, linguistic background and ideological leanings express themselves without any fear or obstacle and are understood and acknowledged by others; it has no leader, and all decisions, including of whether to abide by or counter the line of the party/ movements that the collective is aligned with are taken consensually.

Collectives in such instances, the discussions further show, remain acutely alert to the evolving mechanisms and operations of Brahmanic ideology, including its neoliberal Hindutva avatar. But they also remain susceptible to forces outside that threaten their autonomy and/ or provide fuel for splits and fractures; the threats facing KKM were clearly greater including state repression that compromised its very existence.

The fourth chapter, titled *Elaborating the Production process: cultural capital, quality and authorship*, focusses on the process through which Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch produced new songs and plays collectively. It provides a brief summary of key questions and concerns regarding collective art production, as evidenced in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Sumangala Damodaran. It surveys the aesthetic formats used by Avahan and KKM, the factors and reasons that influenced this choice, and their potential in the eyes of troupe members. It elaborates on the processes they followed to produce new songs and theatrical pieces including the act of 'writing' scripts and lyrics, questions of authorship and efforts they undertook to train new members and develop their ideas regarding art, literature and quality.

Discussions in this chapter show that while the processes Avahan and KKM followed to create new work clearly underplayed individual talent, members did not seem to mind; besides, collective work unleashed immense creativity that allowed the troupes to produce at very short notice songs and plays whose popularity and appeal exceeded their time and space. The troupes went beyond specialisation, as more experienced members took on a number of roles such as composing and writing songs, scripting street plays, acting and so on, and new members were trained in theatre, music, writing and performance.

Both troupes relied on lavni, powada, tamasha and other folk forms to create new songs and theatrical pieces. The choice was apt as these forms were developed by lower caste groups, and they had comprised the terrain for social and political struggles in Maharashtra for several centuries (Rege 2000). Further, seasoned shahirs pointed out that songs of resistance based on folk forms functioned like tools for critical self-reflection, whose layers of meanings opened up slowly upon repeated hearing over time, enabling audiences to embody a radical politics even before they were aware of it. Hence while it is true that paucity of economic resources and social support, especially in case of KKM, held the troupes back from engaging with classical and contemporary forms, the cultural capital that sustained and enlivened their productions came primarily from subaltern social groups. This indicates that the caste system, from which subalternity accrues in a substantive way in the Indian subcontinent, also provides the weapons for counter-hegemonic struggles.

The fifth chapter, titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken: Analysis of KKM's Jalsa*, comprises a close reading of a 2017 performance by Kabir Kala Manch in the Nashik district of

Maharashtra. It covers four songs (*Ya Turungacha*, *Kagadi Nota Sathi*, *Bhima*, *Hazaron Saalon Se*) and one play (*Hora*) that featured in the jalsa, delineating their context as well as the theatricality that sustained the show, especially when seasoned performers were at the helm.

The section titled *Barriers to 'being heard,' circa 2017* focuses on the increased 'silencing' of minorities, lower castes, women and other subaltern groups in India coinciding with the ascendancy of Hindutva in national politics in the late 1980s, and the intensification of such efforts after the Narendra Modi-led BJP was voted into power at the Centre as well as several states including Maharashtra in 2014. The section also summarises the problems and pressures faced by organisers of the show, and shows that the barriers were overcome with close collaboration between troupe members, organisers and the audience.

The subsequent section titled *Cultivation of a Critical Consciousness* seeks to counter the silencing and erasure of subaltern voices in contemporary India via a written documentation of KKM's jalsa. Performers on stage come across as more critical, self-aware versions of the subaltern caste-class audience who push their understanding on the operations of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies including in their own embodied practices through songs, acts and commentary; they also conjoin struggles for class emancipation and caste annihilation, (re-)affirming the humanity and agency of Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis and other subaltern groups. Seasoned performers excel at dismantling the distinction between them and the audience, and between the enactment on stage and the latter's embodied behaviours and expressions, while a chorus after every stanza in songs allows the audience to sing along. It appears as if the performers and the audience lived out an alternate reality, where they resisted hegemonic ideas, structures and practices together, in practice, here and now.

Discussions in this chapter show that while not caring apparently about the spiritual, performance facilitated subaltern/ dalit auto-critique, stitched together an alternative code of ethics that was rooted in egalitarianism, rationalism and fraternity, and realised what Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1996) called 'the solidarity of the shaken,' which has 'bonds other than a common enemy' and includes 'caring for the soul.' Performance, thus, rendered spirituality immanent and transformative, even as it spiritualised politics.

The conclusion summarises key findings, which indicate that cultural resistance has resulted in the formation of counterpublics. It then outlines various developments that may have contributed to the shrinkage of the counterpublic in Maharashtra since the early twentieth century, and the challenges facing cultural resistance for human emancipation and equality under present conditions.

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