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

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'Ideologies and Spaces of Cultural Resistance in Maharashtra: Performance and Caste-Class Politics since the 20th Century' submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of Priya Sangameswaran, Associate Professor, Development Studies, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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ABSTRACT

The three prominent voices of cultural resistance in Maharashtra analysed in the thesis cover nearly a century, but display significant continuities vis-à-vis the insights that emerge from their work.

The chapter titled *Interpreting a Shahir* examines the predominant position of shahirs in the scene of cultural resistance via a close scrutiny of the life and work of Annabhau Sathe. It shows that shahirs are organic intellectuals in the Gramscian mould who reinterpret traditions and emancipatory ideologies to fashion a philosophy of praxis ‘keyed to human emancipation and equality’ (Rao 2020a, 45) in their time and place. The chapter titled *Interrogating the Collective* examines the role and scope of artistic collectives in cultural resistance via the examples of Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch. It shows that such collectives occasion the materialisation of a microcosmic counter-hegemonic community premised on radical egalitarianism and fraternity, where members work together acknowledging and enhancing each other’s skills, strengths and differences and mature into fine artists. The chapter titled *Collective Art Production*, which elaborates on the process followed by Avahan and KKM to create new songs and plays, shows that both troupes underplayed individual talent and produced new work *collectively*, which unleashed immense creativity and resulted in songs and plays whose popularity and appeal exceeded their time and space. The chapter titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken*, which examines the predominant role of performance in cultural resistance via a close reading of KKM’s jalsa, shows that performance accomplishes the realisation of a critical, collective consciousness encompassing the performers *and* the audience that strikes at the roots of Brahmanic-capitalist hegemony.

From the discussion and findings in these chapters, it appears that cultural resistance constitutes and, in turn, also creates a counterpublic whose ideas and practices differ sharply from the official middle class public sphere as well as from the Ambedkarite counterpublic. Shahirs and kalapathaks seem to play a preeminent role in forging this counterpublic comprised of various subaltern caste-classes, whereas their efforts to combine strands from Marx(ism) and Ambedkar(ism) in order to elaborate a political model conducive to human freedom in the here and now provide the public its contrarian, radical character.

For,

Vira Sathidar and Edward Rodrigues, shahir and professor respectively, who were deeply involved in conceptualising this study on cultural resistance, but passed away before the project could reach completion. I am to blame, of course, for the long delay, but couldn't you have stayed on a little longer, to illuminate these dark times?

Core members of Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch in Maharashtra and Relaa member Kaladas Deheriya from Chhattisgarh who taught me to be critical by their own example. To you, I owe a feeling of solidarity and belonging that seems outwardly, yet real and pulsating with life!

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GLOSSARY

- **Bhajan** – Devotional songs and hymns.
- **Bhallari** – Traditional form of singing that accompanies the sowing and transplantation of paddy in Maharashtra.
- **Bharud** – A form of singing used by Warkari sant kavis to spread their philosophy. Bharuds can be classified into two broad types – bhajani bharuds that deal with religion/spirituality and songi bharuds that often feature men dressed as women and are more popular.
- **Biraha/Birha** – Literally, longing for reunion with the beloved. Biraha is a common theme in bhakti and sufi literature, as well as various folk traditions across the Indian subcontinent.
- **Bonga** - Mobile loudspeaker.
- **Daffi** – Hand-held percussion instrument that consists of a membrane on a circular frame with pairs of small metal ringlets all around the edge.
- **Dholki** - A two-sided percussion instrument played with hands.
- **Ghungroo** – Anklet bells.
- **Halgi** – One-sided percussion instrument played with hands/sticks.
- **Jalsa** – Politicised reappropriation of the tamasha.
- **Jhaanjh** - Cymbals.
- **Kalapathak** – Artistic collective.
- **Khanjiri** - Small percussion instrument.
- **Lavni*** – A form of secular love poetry sung and performed as a dance characterised by vigorous rhythms and precise footwork, often as part of the tamasha. Lavnis emerged from the repertoire of lower caste groups such as Kolhati, Mang and Mahar, and are typically performed for predominantly male audiences in semi-private settings or in outdoor public arenas. During the Peshwai period, lavnis composed in the voice of the lower caste prostitute provided ideological justification for the enslavement of lower caste women; whereas hypersexualised lavnis that were part of Marathi films from the 1960s facilitated consolidation of caste and gender hierarchies.
- **Lejim/Lezim** – A folk dance form involving vigorous movements and exercise that is widely performed in Maharashtra during the Ganapati festival. The dance takes its name from the wooden idiophone fixed with jingling cymbals, also called lezim, that dancers use during performance.

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- **Madari ka khel** – Street performance involving a monkey and its human handler.
 - **Mime** - A form of performance that involves acting or communicating using only movements, gestures, and facial expressions. A person performing mime is also called a mime.
 - **Ovi** – An overwhelmingly women-centric musical form that evolved as women created and sang couplets while crushing grain in hand-driven grinding mills.
 - **Peti** - Harmonium.
 - **Powada*** - Ballad typically extolling the brave deeds of Maratha heroes in battle. The form is seen as emerging from the cultural practices of bards and genealogists who belonged to the Gondhali (bard), Gavli (cowherd), Mahar, Mang, Sali-Mali (weavers and gardeners) and Bhat (bard and genealogist) communities. Powadas emerged as a key ‘vehicle of group identity’ during the second half of the nineteenth century, when they began to be used in overtly political and contradictory ways; in the hands of Phule and other anti-caste poets and shahirs, powadas became ‘representative of the popular sudra tradition’, whereas for the elite caste, powadas were ‘representative of a pan-Indian, brahminical Hindu tradition’ (Rege, 2002, 1042).
 - **Qawwali** - A musical form associated with ‘sama’ or spiritual concert in Sufism and performed by an ensemble. The form is usually credited to Amir Khusro (1244-1325), and is closely linked to the Hindustani classical tradition. Qawwalis have also featured prominently in Hindi cinema.
 - **Sant Kavi** - Saint poets such as Chakrapani from the Mahanubhav tradition and Namdeo and Tukaram from the Warkari tradition who preached of human equality through performances of abhangs, bharuds and other forms composed in Marathi. Sant kavis are thought to comprise one of the three traditions of oral performance-poetry in Maharashtra; the other two being pant kavis (religious poets) whose poetry dealt with Brahmanic, Puranic themes and was composed in Sanskrit, and tant kavis who were concerned with transformational social change. Shahirs are seen as belonging to the tradition of tant kavis.
 - **Shahir** - Likely derived from the Urdu word shahyar (poet), the term shahir has been widely used in Maharashtra since the seventeenth century to denote performer-poets aligned with emancipatory struggles. The title is not conferred by any institution/organisation, but by ordinary people who closely follow the work of performer-poets. Most shahirs were/are from lower caste backgrounds, whereas upper caste/Brahmin shahirs often identify them-

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- selves with subaltern groups. Though some commercial singers/artistes are referred to as shahirs in the mass media, the claim is strongly contested in sections of Marathi society that believe shahirs do not work for money and personal growth but for decisive social change.
- **Tamasha*** – A form of folk theatre that combines several discrete segments like vag (farce), song (including lavnis, powadas, qawwalis, ghazals and film songs), dance, drama and narration, which are elaborated, abbreviated, dropped or adapted to suit the setting, audience and circumstances. The performance history of tamasha – which emerged from the repertoire of Kolhatis, Mangs, Mahars and other lower caste groups – has been traced to the 17th century, mainly as a form of popular entertainment for Mughal armies, and later Maratha armies. Commercial tamasha *phads* or troupes emerged in the late 19th century, and two kinds of tamashas became distinguishable – the ‘dholki-phad’ tamasha wherein the vag or spontaneous theatre was central; and the sangeet barees, the earliest form of middle class, urban theatre in Maharashtra, which centred on the erotic lavani. Tamasha also comprised important raw material for the Marathi film industry.
 - **Tuntuna** - Single/multi stringed instrument.

*Note: The discussion of the starred terms is from Naregal (2008) and Rege (2002).

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In April 2011, the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested Deepak Dhengle, a *shahir* (performer-poet associated with emancipatory struggles) from the Pune-based cultural troupe Kabir Kala Manch (KKM henceforth) whose aim is to ‘create a culture free of caste, class and women’s slavery’ (Kabir Kala Manch 2009). Dhengle was among 14 accused who were booked by the ATS under sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA henceforth) for alleged links with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI(Maoist) henceforth]. 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 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 whom I befriended in Mumbai indicated that although punitive action targeting shahirs/cultural activism was not new, their intensity and scale had increased since the Samyukta Maharashtra movement that preceded the establishment of Maharashtra as a 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 that 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,

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 D. Bhagat 1982; Korgaonkar 2021.

as the Indian National Congress (Congress henceforth) was 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. How were troupes as well as individual activists affected by these measures, and how did they respond to them?

The thesis sought to address these and other related concerns via an analysis of three prominent examples of cultural resistance in Maharashtra from three distinct periods since the early twentieth century. The first, focussed on acclaimed Shahir Annabhau Sathe (1920-1969), covers cultural activism during the late colonial and early post-colonial periods that shaped India’s development as a secular nation-state; the second, focussed on Avahan Natya Manch (1979-1997), covers cultural activism during the post-Emergency period, when the politics of reservation and caste occupied centre stage in Indian politics; whereas the third, focussed on Kabir Kala Manch (2002 onwards), covers the post-2000 period when Hindutva ideology was ascendant across the country, reflected in the BJP’s increasing share of votes and seats in elections. All three entities were connected to various movements for the emancipation of subaltern caste-classes during their respective periods of activity, and the analysis of their activities and interventions is undertaken using a combination of interviews with activists, publications of their songs, plays, manifestos and memoirs, and scholarly literature.

The following section of the chapter titled *Cultural Resistance in India: Key Trends* introduces the meaning(s) of cultural resistance and reviews key trends from India based on existing scholarship that provide an overall context for the study. *Why Maharashtra* enumerates key reasons why Maharashtra is especially suited as a location for this study: viz., its rich, diverse history of cultural resistance, presence of a unique shahiri ‘tradition’ and the centrality of both caste and class in state politics over the past several decades. *Research Questions* outlines four broad sets of questions roughly corresponding to each of the four core chapters; these pertain to the nature of the shahir’s work, the role and scope of *kalapathaks* or artistic collectives, the process of art production, and the meanings and potential of performance. *Sample and Limitations* accounts for the choice of Annabhau Sathe, Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch as representative of cultural resistance in their time, and is followed by a brief *Research Methodology* section. *Conceptual*

Framework summaries scholarship on three broad themes that are crucial to understanding and analysing contemporary iterations of cultural resistance in Maharashtra. These include connections between performance and social identity/history; resonances between Ambedkar and Gramsci's approach towards resolution of the Dalit/caste and subaltern questions; and counter-publics as parallel discursive arenas that are distinct from the official middle-class public sphere in India. The last section titled *Chapterisation and Findings* provides a summary of the four chapters and the main findings of the study.

CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN INDIA: KEY TRENDS

The word 'culture' has a long, intricate history in several European languages and intellectual disciplines. Summarising these, Raymond Williams (Williams 1976; reprinted in Duncombe 2012, 35-41, emphasis added) delineated three broad active categories of its usage, each denoting a different meaning:

- The independent and abstract noun which describes *a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development*;
- The independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates *a particular way of life*, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general;
- The independent and abstract noun which describes the *works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity*.

Similarly, the term 'cultural resistance' belies firm meaning and can be applied to a wide variety of resistant practices in the field of culture including individual efforts to challenge the dominant system, artistic and literary products, subcultures (including on the internet) and so on. Nevertheless, in the introduction to *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Stephen Duncombe advanced a useful summary; he used the term to 'describe culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure' (Duncombe 2012, 5). He also outlined three key parameters of cultural resistance that are crucial to any study on the subject (ibid, 5-8).

The first parameter considers 'how cultural resistance works to foster or retard radical political activity', and encompasses a wide variety of positions. Cultural resistance can 'provide a sort of free space to develop ideas and practices' to counter the dominant culture and build an alternative community. It can be a 'stepping stone into political activity' or itself 'be thought of as

political resistance'. It can also be seen as an escape valve – 'a way to release discontent that might otherwise be expressed through political activity'; or as something that 'does not and cannot exist' because any 'cultural expression that appears rebellious...will soon be repackaged and transformed into a component of the status quo'.

The second parameter pertains to how culture conveys its politics. Apart from content and form, interpretation – i.e., 'how culture is received and made sense of' – plays a key role here. Additionally, 'the very *activity* of producing culture has political meaning...The first act of politics is simply to act' [emphasis in original].

The third parameter outlines three key 'scales of resistance'. The first, political self-consciousness, encompasses efforts that are avowedly apolitical on one end to ones that are consciously political at the other end. The social unit engaged in cultural resistance comprises the second scale; it spans the individual to the societal, with subcultures of specific groups located in the middle. The result of cultural resistance comprises the third scale; its spectrum ranges from survival – i.e., 'a way to put up with the daily grind and injustices of life while holding on to a semblance of dignity' – to revolution when the 'culture of resistance becomes just culture'.

Over and above these three parameters, Duncombe drew attention to another aspect of cultural resistance in an interview in 2013 (Bettel and Zobl 2013). He said:

The question that I think needs to be asked is not "resistance to what?", as I think this is often self-evident, but rather the much more difficult question of: "resistance for what?". This means asking ourselves...if the point of resistance is merely to resist, or is resistance a necessary step toward something bigger, namely the transformation of the existing order, that is: revolution? (5)

Duncombe clarified in the same interview that if art is defined broadly 'to include all creative expression' including 'music, movement and visualisation', then it is 'the foundation of cultural resistance' and 'cultural resistance is a form of politics that expresses itself through the arts' (7). This raises questions about if and how the activity of intervening through the arts in itself can comprise a step towards transformation of the existing order.

Walter Benjamin provided several important cues in this regard in his seminal essay titled *The Author as Producer* (Benjamin 1986; reprinted in Duncombe 2012, 67-81). He contended that though capitalism had limited the autonomy of artists and forced them to choose 'in whose serv-

ice' they placed their work based on an understanding of class struggle, it was not enough for them to extend their solidarity to the masses in attitude; that is, be 'at the side' of the worker as a 'well-wisher, an ideological patron of sorts'. This was more so because the most radical content could be easily assimilated and thus neutralised if presented within the context of high art or commercial entertainment. Instead, artists had to live and struggle with the masses, acquire other practical and organisational skills and discover solidarity as a 'producer'. Banerjee (2014) writes:

So, a solidarity far beyond the life of the mind is being demanded: a solidarity that requires mobility and physical participation in political labour and organisation, as well as a complete transformation of the life practices and techniques of production of the middle-class intellectual/artist who claimed to be one with/of the masses. (435)

With regard to the aim of revamping the process of art production, Benjamin demanded that artists must go beyond genres and specialisations, learn new art forms, and create artistic interventions most suited to the 'living social context'. Their works 'must have, over and above their character as works, an organising function' (Benjamin 2012, 77): they should be able 'first to induce others to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers' (78). He cited Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre as an example of radical art, especially for how it combined musical technique with theatrical technique; dispensed with plots to portray situations; and used interruptions to engage audiences and turn them into collaborators. He wrote:

To construct from the smallest elements of behaviour what in Aristotelian dramaturgy is called "action," is the purpose of epic theatre. Its means are therefore more modest than those of traditional theatre; its aims likewise. It is less concerned with filling the public with feelings, even seditious ones, than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives. (Benjamin 2012, 79-80)

Scholarship on cultural resistance in India bears out the relevance of Duncombe's and Benjamin's insights. Among instances of cultural resistance that were detached from politics, the Bhakti movement of the medieval period stands out as a prominent example for its geographical and temporal sweep and its impact on society and culture. Spirituality was the leitmotif of the movement and *sant kavis* (saint poets) mostly from subaltern castes, who composed poetry in

vernacular languages rejecting the sanctity of Brahmanic scriptures and the caste system, comprised its leaders. The movement, writes Mani (2015), represented ‘a whole climate of opinion that challenged the tenets of caste-feudalism in a caste-feudal age’:

Starting in the south in the later half of the first millennium, gradually spreading northward through Karnataka and Maharashtra, and engulfing north India and Bengal from the fifteenth century onward, these movements from below represent a cultural revolt and scintillating examples of ordinary people’s extraordinary creativity. Though the brahmans occasionally climbed aboard the Bhakti bandwagon, the radicalism of the movement was shaped and spearheaded by artisans, cultivators and labourers who composed poems of exquisite beauty in people’s languages. (140)

However, true to Benjamin’s apprehensions regarding the assimilation of radical culture under capitalism, the colonial period paved way for the hegemonic appropriation of bhakti. Omvedt (2009) notes that ‘the whole process of interpretation and maintenance of records of the bhakti movement’ (13) – including the compositions of sant kavis – passed on to the hands of rich, upper caste men (mostly Brahmins), which facilitated the Brahmanisation of bhakti. Print and other mass media contributed to this process in substantive ways in the ensuing period. Omvedt writes:

Another sign of Brahmanisation is...stressed in Parita Mukta’s study of Mirabai (1997): the existing most popular cassettes and CDs by and large use a style of singing that is classical or semi-classical, which must be far from the rhythmic, popular forms used by the sants themselves. The greatest sants must have been powerful, rhythmic singers, capable of awakening and inspiring listeners who were not aristocrats lounging on cots or pillows but women and men, farmers and labourers tired from long days of toil; their songs must have been very different from the ‘raga’ forms we hear in cassettes and CDs today. (12)

Nevertheless, the colonial period brought forth numerous instances of cultural resistance that were directly engaged with politics. For instance, folk theatre and songs are thought to have played a key role in the nationalist struggle. In the introduction to a compilation of folk songs on the 1857 revolt, Joshi (n.d.) writes:

There is evidence to show that the organisers of the 1857 uprising planfully and effectively used this method of mass propaganda to stir people to revolt. Kaye, the British historian of 1857 stated, “There were two subjects which the Kathputleewallas (puppeteers) extremely delighted to illustrate the degradation of the Mughal and the victories of the French over the English, the one intended to incite hatred, the other contempt in the minds of spectators.”³ Trevelyan, in Kanpur states that festivals and tamashas were used for revolutionary propaganda. “The dolls employed in theatre began to speak a strange language and to dance a dangerous dance. Panwadas (ballads) and Lawaniyas (folk musical art-form that stir softer emotions) were sung near police stations. Alha Udal (a heroic ballad that stirs the blood) was also employed. From Calcutta to Punjab dangerous tamashas (folk drama) in the night were exhibited...Female gypsies were also used. Bhishtis (water-carriers) refused water, ayas (maid-servants) left service.” (xviii-xix)

Additionally, Duncombe (2012) advances MK Gandhi as a key proponent of cultural resistance that sought ‘not only to break the classical economic dependency that binds the colony to the colonizer, but more importantly, to free oneself mentally and spiritually from Western machines and materialism’ (200).

Caste and class also emerged as key axes of cultural resistance in India during the colonial period, giving rise to two different yet overlapping sets of issues and challenges that remain relevant today. As regards resistance around the question of caste, leaders from subaltern caste backgrounds starting with Jyotirao Phule played a primary role in shaping a new cultural politics that foregrounded caste as opposed to the erasure of caste in nationalist discourse. Mani (2015) writes:

They argued that the brahmanic socio-religious system was a form of colonialism and, therefore, its annihilation must constitute an integral part of nation-building. Phule, the first person to articulate this view, declared war on the internal colonialism and its ideological matrix, arguing that smashing its intellectual defences was essential even before targeting its material

³ The citation in Joshi is from Kaye 1870, 246.

basis of exploitation. (52)

In similar vein, Nagaraj (2013) traced the birth of ‘a great tradition of Dalit politics’ (96) to the very beginning of the twentieth century. He offered a tentative definition for the category ‘social movement’, which clarifies how different examples of cultural resistance in Maharashtra analysed in this thesis could be seen as comprising a movement – ‘It is I would say the manifestation of the political will of a community, where the community in question itself is partly newly invented and mobilised to influence the shape and course of historical change’ (95).

Nagaraj then identified three specific epochs in the Dalit movement. The first spanned 1900-1930, which he referred to as the phase of ‘proto-Dalit activism’ or ‘untouchable activism’. ‘In Dalit self-representations of this phase, cultural rage was missing... (and) the confrontational or agitation mode, which constituted the most important trait in the next two phases, was not predominant’ (96). Drawing attention to the crucial role of cultural memory in forging lower caste solidarity during this phase, Nagaraj said:

The intricate structure of lower castes, with their local specificity and divergent cultural memories, came to be simplified for the purpose of building a larger alliance across cultural stratification, enabling caste sabhas to build larger coalitions. The colonial practice of the census and its fascination with numbers also played a significant role in the making of caste identities. (95)

The second phase of the Dalit movement in Nagaraj’s schema, spanning 1930-1972, marked the ‘emergence and consolidation of Ambedkarite paradigms’ (95). It encompassed ‘a clash between the modes of self-respect and self-purification, represented by Ambedkar and Gandhi respectively’ (98). The ‘new Dalit’ was full of rage and intolerant of ‘subtle forms of denial of self-respect’ (100), noted Nagaraj, invoking the example of a Kannada play named *Panchama* (The Fifth One) to elucidate his point, which foregrounded the role of art in anti-caste cultural resistance. He said:

This short play, which has the locale of an interview conducted by a pompous upper-caste officer and his comic-absurd relationship with interviewees, offers a typology of untouchables. Some are timid. Some are full of self-pity. Some cringe before authority. Allusive and direct references to Gandhian Harijans gave the play its satirical tone. The upper-caste officer

grows from strength to strength; but, then the Fifth One, a youth, turns up – as the last candidate for the job...the Fifth One is radically different from the others. He is savagely witty and ridicules the officer. Dramatically, the relationship changes; the arrogant boss becomes scared as the interviewee's rage grows. Finally, the youth beats up the official and leaves, defining himself as a new-generation Dalit. Rage is more real to him than any plea for mercy. (100-101)

The third phase in Nagaraj's schema 'begins with the birth of the Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra in 1972' and its spread to other parts of the country 'in the same decade' (95). While the task of building a cultural memory was an essential part of all three phases, Nagaraj identified three different modes of the same. The pragmatist mode represented by constitution-ists like MC Raja was 'indifferent to questions of cultural symbolism and memory' (149). The mode of radical revival such as the Ad Dharm movement of Punjab used the 'ascetic model to challenge upper-caste hegemony' (150) and concentrated 'on the possibility of bringing marginal structures to the centre in a way that could be appealing to the conservatives as well' (151). Whereas the mode of alternative memory, which Nagaraj equated with Ambedkar, had 'a fascination with the paradigms of modern development' (159) and did not 'accept the existence of liberating elements in the living experience of Dalits' (158). Notwithstanding these nuances and differences, the search for an alternate religion as the ethical foundation of an alternate culture was a common concern of most lower caste leaders (Omvedt 1994). Mani (2015) writes:

Phule formulated the *sarvajanik satyadharm* (the universal religion of truth); Iyothee Thass and Ambedkar returned to their 'old dhamma' Buddhism and fashioned a new Buddhism out of it; many in the south found solace in a radicalised version of Shaivism; Narayana Guru formulated 'one religion, one caste, one god' while his more radical follower Ayyappan, in the manner of the atheist Periyar, proclaimed 'no religion, no caste, no god for mankind'. Some preferred to convert to Christianity and Islam while sub-alterns in the north sought to create independent religions out of the teachings of their cultural icons such as Kabir and Ravidas. (53)

The case of cultural resistance centred on the class question is different, in that religion rarely seems to have been a matter of serious concern or engagement. The idea that religion is

‘the *opium* of the people’ was and is popular in circles of Left politics in India. Yet it is not obvious that this phrase – taken from the introduction to Marx’s “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844) – represents the full extent of Marx’s views on the subject of religion, and would instead need to be situated in his wider corpus of writing.

Another key characteristic of Left wing cultural resistance in India is the preeminent role of political parties rather than individuals. From the Communist Party of India (CPI henceforth) in the 1930s to various other Marxist parties that cropped up in different parts of the country in subsequent decades, nearly of them had their own cultural troupes. Tensions between the party and the troupe were common, and there were several instances of controversial purges and expulsion of cultural activists throughout the study period.

Two prominent examples of Left wing cultural resistance that will illustrate these trends are the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA henceforth) and the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA henceforth), set up in 1936 and 1943 respectively. Associated with the CPI, both organisations had pan-India presence and used literature and culture proactively to speak about political issues. Damodaran (2014) writes:

The IPTA and PWA aimed to assimilate and build upon spontaneous cultural responses to political events taking place from the 1930s, to consciously bring aesthetics to bear on politics, in literature, theatre, music, dance, art and photography. (420)

The three-volume *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Chronicles and Documents* compiled and edited by Sudhi Pradhan provides rich insights into the workings of IPTA, PWA, All India People’s Theatre Conference, and other organisations aligned with the CPI between 1936 and 1964. The IPTA, among them, was specifically geared towards revamping the process of art production à la Benjamin in its initial years. Banerjee (2014) writes:

The development of artists and producers from amongst the people – the kisans and the majdoors, or peasants and workers (along with the ‘functional transformation’ of middle-class artists) was an inalienable part of the IPTA’s agenda... The idea of ‘people’s theatre’ implied a novel cultural relationship between the urban middle classes, workers and the rural poor. It was a theatre for, of and by the people, where ‘people’... were envisioned not simply as the consumers, but also as the active producers of cultural ar-

tefacts. (435-436)

Damodaran (2017) draws attention to the autonomy given to music and theatre squads of the IPTA in the initial years:

Cultural work was given the status of full-time Party work, with artists living in the Party communes being paid a monthly stipend like any other full-time party worker and running the cultural squads like professional companies, without the commercial aspect. (51)

The exclusivity granted to cultural work and the autonomy of cultural activity within the political movement were both called into question at the IPTA's 1949 national conference in Allahabad. The report on the conference, included in the second volume of documents compiled by Sudhi Pradhan (1982), noted that the IPTA was to work 'on behalf of the revolutionary masses' (52) and the People's Theatre movement would 'have to be built among the different revolutionary classes as an integral part of their struggles' (53). Damodaran (2017) notes that these moves 'reflected the emergence of hardline cultural positions in the international communist movement' that occasioned 'a move from 'culture as representation' or 'culture as expression' of and by 'the people' to 'culture as weapon' (50). The IPTA's stringent stance was largely reversed at the 1953 national conference; reflecting the 'unfolding of the peace movement worldwide and the involvement of the left in it', the IPTA 'was called upon to forge a wider solidarity between artists across diverse fields, ranging from theatre, music, dance, art, and film,' writes Damodaran (2017, 51).

Another related issue that posed serious challenges to the functioning of the IPTA between its formation in 1943 and its disbanding as a national organisation in 1957 was the class position and backgrounds of cultural activists. Banerjee (2014) writes:

The imagination of the middle-class cultural activist as a 'vanguard' individual, who must first activate the imagination of the rural 'masses' in order to bring them into a 'continuous active exchange' with their urban counterparts, was a pervasive one within the cultural front. It is not difficult to see how the thought of Kautsky and Lenin on the primacy of the vanguard revolutionary intelligentsia's role in the fostering of a socialist consciousness might have influenced and shaped this conception. (436)

The anxiety over middle-class activists and their preminent role in the IPTA came to the

fore in a big way at the 1949 Allahabad conference. A review report prepared after the conference, also included in the second volume of documents compiled by Pradhan, noted:

The present state is that after seven years of movements, a few middle class artistes and talents have gathered round IPTA...many of them are incapable of building up the organisation with changed outlook and the movement has not developed as a mass movement. (Review report citation in Pradhan 1982, 58)

The idea of the *artist-organiser*, articulated for the first time at the Allahabad conference, was partly an attempt to undercut the influence of middle-class activists in the IPTA; it also derived from the stringent stance adopted at the conference. The review report noted:

The People's Theatre movement...should emerge principally through different mass movements...it should have an independent organisation on the basis of these movements and an able and conscious leadership...we should clearly define the role of the organisers who will be deputed to the different organisations...every member shall become both a soldier of the cultural front and of the larger struggle...the work of building up the People's Theatre movement should not rest solely on the people's theatre workers but shall naturally grow up under the leadership of organised mass fronts. (cited in Pradhan 1982, 57)

Annabhau Sathe, the acclaimed working-class shahir from Maharashtra, was elected as the President of IPTA at the same conference, which Damodaran (2017) says was 'symbolic of the push against middle-class domination of the IPTA' (49). Yet, the irony of this situation becomes evident when the caste question is taken into account; Annabhau was born into the Matang jati, considered more lowly than most other untouchable castes, and he consciously and consistently positioned himself as a Dalit as much as a Communist. Naregal (2008) argues in this regard that the CPI leadership ignored and marginalised his self-conscious positioning, thus indicating that Dalits and other lower caste artists were mere 'cultural labour' in the political/cultural movement. She writes:

Seemingly, as reiterated by other testimonies, even within the leftist trade union movement, low caste subaltern activists like Annabhau could not hope to be seen as providing anything more than mere cultural labour that

would need to fit pre-given moulds determined by a theoretical elite. No wonder, then, that Annabhau should have felt marginalised within IPTA circles! (589)

Nevertheless, the subordination of cultural work to the political movement at the 1949 Allahabad conference and the foregrounding of the artist-organiser elicited strong criticism within the IPTA and Party circles. The most scathing comments were made by the acclaimed filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak in a document titled *On the Cultural Front* (1954; 2006), which comprised a draft of ‘the political and cultural ideology of IPTA in West Bengal’ (6). Ghatak was commissioned to prepare the draft by IPTA’s Pradeshik Khasra Prastuti Committee (Provincial Draft Preparatory Committee) in March 1951, and he submitted this to the Party in 1954. Criticising the CPI’s instrumentalist approach to culture and the cultural front, he wrote:

At present, the Party is more interested in taking things from Culture. It is very difficult to determine how much the Party cares for culture as the property of the people. (18)

The party generally sees the Cultural Front in two ways – one, as a “money-earning machine” (these are harsh words we know, but they just cannot be helped), and, two as a mobilizer in meetings and conferences to keep the crowd (and not masses) engaged with whatever the artistes can offer. (17)

On the artist-organiser, he stated:

There is no such occupation as an Art-organizer: it is a monstrous tautology. No such job exists. The nature of the task indicates that only artistes can handle the job... This is not a mass-organization where problems are of a general nature. This way of thinking is shallow and a dangerously wrong approach to organization building. All the tasks here are to be executed by the artistes themselves, because Communist artistes are the organizers. (25)

Ghatak advanced a number of suggestions to build a strong, autonomous cultural movement that was guided but not controlled by the Party, including deep engagement with traditional art forms and the creation of an Academy for Histrionic Arts and a Conservatory for Music for the creation of collective art and music. While the CPI reportedly never responded to Ghatak’s draft, in October 1955, he received a letter informing him that he was no longer a member of the

Party.⁴

Notwithstanding the split of the CPI in 1964 resulting in the formation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) and the emergence of several parties aligned with versions and interpretations of Marxism in later decades, engagement with cultural resistance has remained a constant feature of Left-wing politics in the country. For instance, in the post-Emergency period, Bombay had a number of cultural troupes aligned with Marxist politics – they included Jaagar associated with the CPI(M), Magova associated with the Shramik Mukti Dal, Navnirman Sanskrutik Manch associated with Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist – New Democracy), and Avahan Natya Manch associated with the Marxist Leninist students' union Vidyarthi Pragati Sangathana. Debates and controversies over the role of culture in politics, the autonomy of cultural work vis-à-vis the party and the caste and class position of activists were also common throughout the period.

WHY MAHARASHTRA?

This thesis pursues the trends outlined above via a close study of cultural resistance in Maharashtra since the twentieth century. Maharashtra here refers to all areas included in the present-day state, which was established on May 1, 1960.

A key reason for choosing Maharashtra as the location for the study derives 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 sant kavis countered the idea of caste as divinely ordained which was advanced in the Vedas, Upanishads and other Brahmanic texts, and stressed on the equality of all human beings in their compositions (Eaton 2008; Feldhaus 2003; Gokhale-Turner 1981; Novetzke 2009; 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.⁵

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 the 1910s to 1950s (Omvedt 2011; Rege 2000; Thakur 2005). A reworking of the traditional

⁴ The letter is included in Ghatak 2006, 13.

⁵ See the documentary *Shahiri* (Sable 2017) for oral accounts.

tamasha, these jalsas ‘praised modern science, mocked the sacred books and religious traditions in their songs, 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. For instance, many activists and commentators refer to three streams of shahiri (Communist, Socialist, and Ambedkarite) and specific shahirs are often identified with particular ideological camps; for instance, 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* (revolutionary tradition) of resistance against Brahmanism dating back to Buddha and Charvak,⁶ 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 comprises the second key reason justifying the location of the study.

The third reason for focussing on Maharashtra pertains 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 – until recently – 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; similarly, the CPI, CPI(M) 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

⁶ KKM’s song titled ‘Vidrohi Aroli’ included in the first CD provides a detailed list.

through actions in the domain of politics till his death in 1958.⁷ 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 2010, 333).

Additionally, innumerable shahirs and kalapathaks seem to have existed in different regions of Maharashtra like Vidarbha, Marathwada, Khandesh, 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 2020b). Their interventions also responded to shifts in the policies and practices of the state at the national and regional levels.

Notwithstanding the proliferation of shahirs and troupes across Maharashtra and their nuanced positions on politics, there is paucity of scholarship in the area, barring stray analyses of the work of individual shahirs. Sharmila Rege’s work comprises 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 and music comprised the terrain for the emergence and consolidation of an ‘Ambedkarite counterpublic’ in Maharashtra.

The fourth reason for focussing on Maharashtra is in response to stereotypes about cultural resistance being propagandist, formulaic and sectarian; these are applied to shahirs/kalapathaks encompassing a wide variety of ideological positions, geographical locations and time periods in the state. Such stereotypes have 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 underplaying 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 have resulted in massive underestimation of their artistic and intellectual prowess. The study seeks to address this gap.

⁷ 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 too as a political act.

The fifth reason for focussing on Maharashtra derives 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 field-work. This contributed to my understanding of how caste and class operates similarly yet differently in various contexts/regions of the state, and how shahirs and troupes have sought to counter these trends.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions for the study were drawn up based on the trends outlined above as well as 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 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 that their role is intellectual, focussed 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, that is, 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 artistic collective and the wider society, and questions of intra-group hierarchy and decision-making. This question is important because nearly all prominent 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 also 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 and/or 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 have 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 do they use and why? What role does writing play in the creative process? Does the undermining of individual talent in the artistic collective affect creativity? How does the presence of activists from various castes impact the ability of the collective to produce songs/plays? And who owns 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 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 of 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 is connected to the formation of counter/public(s). If yes, what is the ideological and ethical grounding of such publics, and their demographic composition? How do they change over time?

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’⁸ established a firm grip over political power and agricultural production in Maharashtra, and demands for affirmative action by Other Backward Classes (OBCs) following the Mandal Commission report fractured the unity of lower caste groups and increased sectarianism and identity politics.

The Pune-based Kabir Kala Manch (2002 onwards) comprises the third voice. Given that it is a group that is detached from conventional political affiliation and more attuned to ‘new social movements,’⁹ discussions of its activities and interventions provide insights into the specificities of cultural resistance in the post-2000 period. The designation of these movements as ‘new’ derive ‘from the political conjuncture in which they emerged, the social 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 as well as contributed to their influence, which partly offsets the 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 that 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 throughout the study period. There is also no database of troupes and shahirs who worked in various parts of the state during this period, although anecdotal evidence indicates that their number is massive, and that their professed ideological positions cover a wide spectrum.¹⁰

⁸ 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 including in the nearby towns. See Balagopal 1987.

⁹ New social movements 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 2010, 333).

¹⁰ Marxist, Ambedkarite, Marxist-Leninist, Marx-Phule-Ambedkarite and so on.

Given these circumstances, and the centrality of subaltern performative traditions transmitted orally across generations in the realm 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 crises, 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; further, 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 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 [see the concluding chapter for more details]. 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 analysis is 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 resistance with minimal mediation and adequate 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 by 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 sant kavis 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 in which subaltern social identity and History were shaped.

Secondly, scholarship on resonances between the political philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and BR Ambedkar (Zene 2013; 2016), 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.

Gramsci wrote profusely on these aspects, especially during his time in prison.¹¹ 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’ (326), 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’

¹¹ The summary is primarily based on Gramsci’s writings and David Forgacs’ discussion in *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (Gramsci 1916-1935; 2014).

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, 545). 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 is especially useful to connect the various instances of cultural resistance analysed in the thesis and draw out those tendencies and characteristics that are common to all of them to a greater or lesser degree. Counterpublics can be thought of as 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). 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 argued that 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, 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 Stroomukti* (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 has constituted and in turn also created a distinctive counterpublic, whose ideological grounding and composition has responded to and opposed shifts in the nature of domination.

CHAPTERISATION AND 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 key themes in cultural resistance in India, and provides a detailed overview of the gaps in scholarship, aims and objectives of research, research questions, conceptual framework and methodology. The chapter ends with a summary of the subsequent chapters.

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)’¹² 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 Samyukta Maharashtra struggle. Annabhau’s inaugural speech at the first Dalit Sahitya Sannam 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 had begun to be 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 the All India League for Revolutionary Culture, a confederation of Marxist-Leninist troupes from several states. It was active during the 1980s and early 1990s 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. The second troupe, 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 evident 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.

¹² Anupama Rao uses the term to refer to RB More in *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of RB More* (Rao 2020a).

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 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.

The discussions in the chapter provide clear evidence that when a set of individuals from different backgrounds deliberately decide to work together in politically oriented cultural troupes 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, 58), 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 whether to abide by or counter the line of the party/movements that the collective is aligned with, are taken consensually.

The discussion further shows that collectives in such instances 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 *Collective art production: authorship, quality, cultural capital*, 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 that they followed to produce new songs and theatrical pieces including the act of ‘writing’ scripts and lyrics, questions of authorship and efforts that they undertook to train new members and develop their ideas regarding art, literature and quality.

The chapter shows that while the processes that 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 the 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, could also provide the weapons for counter-hegemonic struggles.

The fifth chapter, titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken: Unpacking of a KKM 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 Sodun Ya*, *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 came across as more critical, self-aware versions of the subaltern caste-class audience and they pushed their understanding on the operations of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies including in their own embodied practices through songs, acts and commentary; they also conjoined struggles for class emancipation and caste annihilation, (re)affirming the humanity and agency of Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis and other subaltern groups. Seasoned performers excelled at dismantling the distinction between them and the audience, and between the enactment on stage and the audience's embodied behaviours and expressions, while a chorus after every stanza in songs allowed the audience to sing along. It appeared as if the performers and the audience lived out an alternate reality, where they resisted hegemonic ideas, structures and practices together, in practice, in the here and now.

The discussion in this chapter shows that while not apparently caring about the spiritual, performance facilitates subaltern/Dalit auto-critique, stitches together an alternative code of ethics that is rooted in egalitarianism, rationalism and fraternity, and realises what Czech philosopher Jan Patočka (1996, 134-135) called 'the solidarity of the shaken,' which has 'bonds other than a common enemy' and includes 'caring for the soul.' Performance, thus, renders spirituality immanent and transformative, even as it spiritualises 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 keyed to human emancipation and equality under present conditions.

CHAPTER 2
INTERPRETING A SHAHIR
TRADITION, IDEOLOGY AND SELF-PRAXIS

INTRODUCTION

The figure of the shahir – performer-poets associated with emancipatory struggles – has remained central to most major iterations of cultural resistance in Maharashtra since the early twentieth century. Leading artists in Satyashodhak and Ambedkari jalsas, which played a crucial role in the spread of the non-Brahmin and the Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra between the 1910s and the 1950s, were referred to as shahirs (Thakur 2005). Three distinct streams of political shahiri – Communist, Socialist, and Ambedkarite – are believed to have emerged in later decades. Further, interviews with activists from Vidarbha, Marathwada, Khandesh, and western Maharashtra attest to the presence of numerous shahirs across these culturally diverse regions throughout the period of study. Predominantly from subaltern caste backgrounds including a large number of Dalits, and in more recent decades women, shahirs were/are often detached from party politics. But they have been highly venerated in and around the places they lived in for their participation in emancipatory movements of subaltern caste-classes.

Noteworthy here is the absence of any canon delineating what it means and entails to be a shahir; neither is there any institution to confer the title on a performer-poet as such. Instead, the honorific is used on the basis of commonsensical notions prevalent across Maharashtra, which raise important questions about the figure of the shahir, particularly regarding their person and persona, their role and placement in society and their consciousness.

This chapter examines these questions closely with reference to Annabhau Sathe (1920-1969), one of Maharashtra's most influential shahirs whose songs, plays, stories and novels remain popular to this day. It analyses available literature by/on Annabhau and delineates the forms of reflection and thought that he insisted on and lived by as well as the continuities and connections of such efforts with the Warkari and other subaltern performative traditions and modern emancipatory ideologies such as Marxism and Ambedkarism.

The following section of the chapter titled *Self-praxis of Shahirs: Key concerns* reprises major commonsensical notions about shahirs and the questions they raise about their day-to-day practice, which I refer to as self-praxis. It introduces the 'ascetic modality' of Communist self-fashioning (Dasgupta 2014) that was prevalent among the leadership of Communist parties in India during this period, from which Annabhau is seen to differ sharply. It also introduces Gramsci's idea of the 'organic intellectual', which Annabhau is seen to correspond with in substantive ways. This is followed by a brief biography of Annabhau.

The subsequent section *Salience of the Warkari tradition* deals with the picky question of if and how the Warkari tradition is relevant to the work of shahirs by focusing on those strands that point towards its emancipatory and liberatory potential despite its co-option by the upper caste-class in the colonial period. Two subsequent sections of the chapter titled *Tukya's childhood* and *From Tukya to Shahir Annabhau* discuss key events from Annabhau's childhood in Wategaon village of present-day Sangli district and his initial years in Bombay. 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)'¹ like Ramchandra Babaji More.

The sections *Synthesis of tradition and emancipatory ideologies* and *Bridging the 'unholy rift'* comprise analyses of three key interventions by Annabhau. The songs *Maharashtrachi Parampara* (Maharashtra's Tradition) and *Majhi Maina* (My Maina) posit Annabhau as a communitarian leader who sought to forge a subaltern Marathi 'public'² conscious of its heterogeneity and common purpose vis-à-vis the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, while Annabhau's inaugural speech at the first Dalit Sahitya Sannam in Maharashtra (1958) offers a striking example of his attempts to fashion a critical politics by drawing on Marx(ism) and Ambedkar(ism).

Broadly, the chapter covers cultural activism in Maharashtra between the 1930s to the 1960s – a period that brought tensions between Left and Ambedkarite politics to the fore in a big way. In the 1930s, Ambedkar was receptive towards Marxist analyses of the political economy of caste (Omvedt 1994), and Marx's influence was evident in the model of caste-class unity on which the Independent Labour Party (1936-42) was based (Gokhale 1993). But by the 1940s, and especially after Ambedkar established the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation to challenge Congress' claim of representing 'the nation in waiting' and 'negotiate with the British government about the rights of Scheduled Castes', there was 'growing antagonism between Ambedkarites and Communists,' including violent clashes in Bombay (Rao 2020a, 44). Teltumbde refers to the CPI's persistent attacks on Ambedkar's leadership during this period, which took place especially because Ambedkar challenged prospects of workers' unity by introducing the caste question into the mix; he also draws attention to the development of a sizeable Dalit (largely Mahar) middle class by the 1960s that acquired control of the RPI and eschewed all references

¹ Anupama Rao (2020) uses the term to refer to RB More in the introduction to his memoirs.

² The reference to 'public' here draws on Warner's (2005) conception, and is discussed later in the chapter.

to class politics (Ambedkar 2020; Teltumbde 2010). In a similar vein, in *Ambedkar ani Marx* (1985), Raosaheb Kasbe notes that there was an effective ban on revisiting the relationship between Marx and Ambedkar until the 1970s, when the Dalit Panthers reopened the issue in a major way.

Nevertheless, several efforts were made during this period to conjoin caste and class politics. Rao (2020a) writes:

RPI used the language of class and labour exploitation in an early manifesto, positioning Dalits as the vanguard of the exploited classes in their struggle for total emancipation. The RPI was also influenced by Dadasaheb Gaikwad, who was prominent in the Ambedkar movement since the Nashik satyagraha (1930-34), and worked closely with the Communists to organise bhumineen (landless) satyagrahas in 1956, and 1964. (41)

Rao also draws attention to the Dalit Communist RB More who remained a lifelong member of the CPI till his death in 1972 and submitted a special memorandum to the Party in 1953, which was revised in 1957 and 1964. More challenged CPI's representation of Ambedkar as 'reformist' and 'separatist' and criticised Communists for believing that caste could be annihilated solely through economic reform. He also offered a 'sustained, if localised challenge to the categorical imperialism of Marxist thought and practice' (47) and developed a 'Maharashtrian Marxism' that was 'interrupted and enlarged...by a majoritarian, political non-Brahmanism' (44).

Also important in this context is the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, which emerged in the late 1930s and peaked in the 1950s, and was centred around demands for a separate state for Marathi speakers with Bombay as the capital. The movement occasioned significant overlaps between caste and class politics. The Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti, which was formed in 1956 and led the movement in its final phase, comprised an alliance between CPI, RPI, Shetkari Kamgar Paksha and the Praja Socialists, all located variously in the caste-class matrix.

As a member of the CPI and close to RB More, Annabhau is seen as responding to and intervening in these trends in significant ways.

A brief conclusion corroborates the findings about Annabhau with examples of other shahirs from Maharashtra, showing how shahirs are organic intellectuals in the Gramscian mould who foster group/class consciousness.

SELF-PRAXIS OF SHAHIRS: KEY CONCERNS

COMMONSENSICAL NOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

The term shahir, likely drawn from the Urdu word ‘shayar’, has been widely used in Maharashtra from the eighteenth century onwards to refer to performer-poets aligned with emancipatory struggles of subaltern caste-classes (Duduknale 2015a; Sable 2017). It is used primarily on the basis of common sensical notions that contend that:

- Shahirs are legatees of a *vidrohi parampara* (revolutionary tradition) of resistance against Brahmanic hegemony stretching back to Buddha in ancient India. For instance, *Vidrohi Aroli* (Revolutionary Call, included in KKM’s first CD), a song by KKM, claims for the group the legacy of a wide cast of figures from across the subcontinent who resisted Brahmanism in different periods in different ways; the lineage traced by the song resonates strongly with the counter tradition that Braj Ranjan Mani (2015) elaborates on in *Debrahmanising History*. References to the *vidrohi parampara* are also common in radical strands of the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. For instance, a member of the erstwhile Dalit Panthers and fiery orator Bhai Sangare is seen talking about the *vidrohi parampara* before a massive gathering in Mumbai in the late 1990s in the film *Jai Bhim Comrade* (Patwardhan 2011).
- Shahirs are *prabodhan-kartas* who engage in the act of truth-telling about contemporaneous life and times through their songs, poetry and performances and conscientise the masses.
- Shahirs are born of / produced by emancipatory movements, and embody the values portrayed in art in their everyday lives, including by not putting their work on sale. This is why many commercial artistes who are referred to as shahirs in the mass media are often discounted in circles of cultural resistance.
- Shahirs are associated and/or identified with particular ideological/political camps. For instance, Annabhau Sathe and Amar Shaikh are acclaimed as Communist shahirs; Liladhar Hedge and Shahir Sable as Socialist shahirs; and Wamandada Khardak as an Ambedkarite shahir.

Although fragmentary and uncritical, these commonsensical notions open up multiple lines of inquiry into what it means and entails to be a shahir and the possibilities and implications this has for politics. The notion of shahirs being produced by emancipatory movements suggests that community plays a very important role in their emergence. But what is the relationship between

the shahir and the community? What is their role in it?

The notion that shahirs conscientise the masses indicates that their role is intellectual, focussed 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.³ They 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.

The notion of shahirs as legatees of the *vidrohi parampara*, particularly their resemblance with the medieval Warkari sant kavis, raises another important set of questions. What do they draw from the counter tradition 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?

The common practice of identifying shahirs with ideological/political camps, including by shahirs themselves, assumes ideology directs their praxis. But is such identification conceptually accurate, especially in light of their stress on embodying values portrayed through art in everyday life? Does embodiment not make 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?

A close scrutiny of the life of a popular shahir, into his/her sense of self as evidenced in practice, is the best way, I believe, of answering these questions. In this, I follow the lead of the editors of *Critical Studies in Politics: Exploring Sites, Selves, Power* (Menon, Nigam, and Palshikar 2014), who speak of the urgent need for 'making sense of 'practice' through an understanding of the subject's own world and her categories of thought' (8). They write:

There is something deeply problematic about 'applying theory' produced in one context to 'understand practice' in another. For it assumes that 'political practice' is 'non-theoretical', completely bereft of any discursive-

³ Academics like Sharmila Rege and Veena Naregal have critically examined the contribution of Amedkarite jalsas and shahirs in altering social relations in Maharashtra; this provides important insights into the selfhood of shahirs and is referred to later in the chapter.

theoretical content so that any theory (from the West) can be used to make sense of political practice anywhere. This is far from truth. All political practice, we believe, is always constituted by some form of reflection and thought—theoretical or non-theoretical (8).

Accordingly, this chapter is devoted to making sense of the shahir's practice by analysing Annabhau's world, his categories of thought and his interventions. Two concepts – briefly given below – are important for the ensuing analysis.

ASCETIC MODALITY OF COMMUNIST SELF-FASHIONING

Dasgupta (2014) delineated the workings of the ascetic modality of Communist self-fashioning by analysing exercises of self-criticism / disciplinary action by/on leaders of various Communist parties in West Bengal in the latter half of the 20th century.

In the ascetic modality, says Dasgupta, 'the individual 'I' must be sacrificed to the party; the habitual, familial, 'I' must be dissolved in a communal 'us', ideally so that the 'I' only functions as a linguistic protocol, not a state of being or identity thought in practical isolation' (72). Here, 'something (like the self) consciously appears only to negate itself, to dissolve itself into a universal abstract, which is fiercely involved with the world but without any interest or relation to itself, which must sacrifice itself always to mark the arrival of a new community' (70). Such a self is invested in ideas of declassing, swears by version(s) of 'proper Marxism', and conceives of and seeks to realise a politics based on universalisation of abstract categories like class.

It is noteworthy that the examples Dasgupta cited to describe the ascetic modality all involved upper castes, mostly Brahmins. Similar tendencies may be noticed in the upper caste, largely Brahmin, leadership of the CPI in Maharashtra between the 1930s and 1960s; party leaders and top artists who were part of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural front of CPI, lived in a commune in Bombay, and led a frugal life. In contrast, the examples of RB More and here, Annabhau Sathe, indicate that they distinguished between Marxism as party politics and 'as a form of thought keyed to human equality and emancipation' (Rao 2020a, 45).

ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

In the *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Gramsci (1929-1935; 2009) defines

intellectuals as those who give a fundamental social group ‘homogeneity and an awareness of its own function’ (5). ‘Traditional’ intellectuals ‘put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group’ (7) to which they belong; they are ‘the dominant group’s “deputies” exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government’ (12). ‘Organic’ intellectuals, on the other hand, are from ‘the historically (and concretely) progressive class’ (60) who remain in close contact with the masses and work as educators, organisers and leaders; they foster group/class consciousness (Zene 2016). Gramsci writes:

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator; from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains “specialised” and does not become “directive” (specialised and political). (Gramsci 1929-1935; 2009, 10)

Forgacs (2014) notes that in Gramsci’s original use of the term ‘intellectual work’ in Italian, it also means ‘mental work’ or ‘work by brain’ and ‘intellectual’ defines a function as much as the concrete individual who fulfils this function. He writes:

Gramsci is thus able to envisage a situation in which, as part of the revolutionary transformation of society, the intellectual function is massively expanded – in other words, more and more people share the tasks of mental activity, of organizing, deliberating and leading, both politically and within the sphere of economic production. (425)

Along similar lines, Annabhau is seen playing the roles of a ‘constructor’ and organiser of subaltern caste-class resistance in Maharashtra, especially in the case of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement. He remains a ‘permanent persuader’, ‘directive’ of the itineraries of caste(-)class politics within forums of the CPI and its affiliate organisations, among Dalits and authors, and in wider society encompassing sections of the Marathi middle class.

ANNABHAU SATHE: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE⁴

⁴ For this brief profile of Annabhau Sathe, I draw largely on his elder brother Shankar Sathe’s memoirs titled

Annabhau Sathe was born on 1 August, 1920 in a village named Wategaon, presently part of Sangli district in Maharashtra. The second of Bhau Sathe and Walubai's four children, his parents named him Tukaram, most likely after the 17th century Warkari sant kavi whom they revered.

Tukya, as he was called, belonged to the untouchable Mang/Matang jati, designated as a 'criminal tribe' under The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which was enacted by the colonial government in the wake of the 1857 revolt and directed against communities that resisted colonial expansion. Tukya's own maternal uncle Fakira (the protagonist of his novel *Fakira* written decades later) was a fierce bandit who looted colonial/royal treasuries together with his caste peers for a living. It is likely that he grew up listening to songs about such exploits hailing as heroes those who were dubbed 'criminals' in official discourse. Dalit activists in the Sangli-Satara region noted the presence of a separate community – a sort of sub-jati of Mangs called Mang-arudi – in villages until the mid-twentieth century; their traditional occupation comprised singing songs of Mang pride and valour and they could accept alms/food only from Mangs.⁵

The family lived in the *Mangwada* located on the outskirts of the village and concealed from its surroundings by thick shrubs. Most residents were abjectly poor; they rarely managed two square meals a day, and depended on begging, foraging or looting for sustenance. But Tukya's father and, before that, his grandfather worked as a gardener for European households in Bombay and sent money orders to the family at regular intervals to cover their expenses. So, the family's economic status was relatively secure and unlike other kids in the neighbourhood, young Tukya and his siblings were unencumbered with the need to earn a livelihood. Tukya's everyday life comprised herding his family's cow in pastures around the village, wandering about listlessly in the Koyna valley, and memorising and singing folk songs before his friends, mostly Mangs and Mahars. He also assisted them in odd jobs so that they could earn money, and accompanied them on raids including on the farms and houses of those who spited them.

Even then, he closely experienced the humiliation and oppression characteristic of his low caste status, including when police raided the *Mangwada* after any theft or robbery in the vicinity, or when dominant castes in the village turned up at his door accusing him and his friends of stealing. Fed up with his wayward ways, Walubai often pleaded with Bhau Sathe to take the

Majha Bhau Annabhau (2018) and Milind Awad's *The Life and Work of Annabhau Sathe* (2010).

⁵ Interviews with Bharat Patankar, Ashok Tangde, Manisha Tokle and others in Satara and Beed districts in 2018.

family to Bombay or enroll Tukaram in school. Bhau Sathe himself was deeply appreciative of education, especially its potential in ameliorating caste discrimination. When Tukya was about 10-11 years old and he was visiting Wategaon on a break, he enrolled his son in the village school.

Tukya's brush with formal education, however, lasted all of one and a half days. He was unable to make much sense of the lessons on the first day of school, when he sat alongside his lower caste peers at the back of the class, at a distance from upper caste students and the Brahmin teacher. Yet on the second day, the teacher thrashed him severely for failing to answer a question. Enraged, Tukya assaulted the teacher with a wooden plank he fetched during the recess, and the matter was brought to the attention of the village *pant* (priest), who summoned all parties for a hearing.

Although the *pant* reprimanded the teacher severely for his act, Tukya refused to go back to school. In 1931-32, he migrated with the rest of his family to Bombay covering around 400 kilometres largely on foot over a period of 5-6 months, most likely after a crushing drought in the countryside. He learned to read and write by deciphering signboards above shops in the city while working as a helper with a cloth seller in the initial weeks. He took up a bewildering range of odd jobs for sustenance thereafter, and spent long hours with Gyandev – a distant relative and performer in the commercial tamasha circuit in Bombay – reading and discussing texts by Warkari sant kavis, among others.

Tukya joined the workers' movement within months of his arrival in Bombay and caught the attention of RB More and other CPI comrades for his interest in reading and his ability to write, compose and perform folk songs and plays explicating politics and history in simple language. The songs and performances were well appreciated by his comrades and audiences, who began referring to him as Shahir Annabhau. The name and honorific stuck, and in due course, Annabhau became a member of CPI, met its top leadership, and started working as the party's *pracharak* (publicist).

The period between 1938 and 1942 was marked by distress as well as new beginnings for Annabhau. Since the Communist party was banned by the British government between 1934 and 1942, he went underground on multiple occasions to evade detention and arrest. In 1938, he lost his job as a *badli* (temporary) worker in a textile mill, migrated back to his village, and married a girl from the Matang community selected by his family, with whom he had a son. He worked in his maternal cousin's tamasha troupe as an actor and musician during this period,

learning to play a variety of instruments within a short span of time.⁶ He also participated in anti-colonial demonstrations and struggles in the Satara region and fled to Bombay in June 1942 when colonial authorities issued a warrant in his name for involvement in anti-government activities.⁷

Annabhau's association with working class struggles deepened after his return to Bombay. Within a few months, he found employment in Kohinoor Mills, and in 1944, teamed up with Shahir Amar Sheikh and Shahir DN Gavankar to establish Lal Bawta Kalapathak, the CPI's cultural arm in Maharashtra that was part of the more well-known IPTA.

Annabhau wrote, travelled and performed extensively as part of numerous political struggles through the 1940s and 1950s, including the Samyukta Maharashtra movement and the Goa liberation struggle. He was President of the IPTA All India Executive between 1949 and 1953 and played a key role in the drafting and adoption of its manifesto, which posited the creation of a national democratic culture as central to the task of revolution. He was also close to Ambedkar and engaged with the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, including after Babasaheb's death, when he wrote a searing ode to him titled *Jag Badal Ghaluni Ghav* (Strike a Blow of Change the World).⁸

During this period, Annabhau came in close contact with Jaywantabai, a party comrade in Pune, and married her. The couple later took up residence in Bombay's Goregaon neighbourhood with Jaywantabai's two daughters. When the Congress government in Bombay state banned tamasha performances in the late 1940s claiming that they were obscene and promoted prostitution, Annabhau re-appropriated the traditional tamasha to come up with a new form called the *loknatya*, which allowed performances to go on unabated despite the ban.

The latter part of Annabhau's life, especially since the late 1950s, was marked by turmoil and crises on several fronts. He had differences with Jaywantabai, leading to their separation. Performances reduced considerably, and the kalapathak he co-founded was embroiled in factional fights reflecting trends in the parent party. He lived alone, drank heavily, fell severely ill, underwent rehabilitation and returned to the bottle with a vengeance on several occasions; he wrote novels and short stories feverishly in short bursts in between.

⁶Matangs constituted a large proportion of tamasha artists in Maharashtra, and several of Annabhau's ancestors and relatives on his mother's side were tamasha artists.

⁷Annabhau was enamoured by and worked alongside revolutionary leader Nana Patil, who led the famous *prati sarkar* (parallel government) in around 150 villages in the Satara region between 1943 and 1947.

⁸ Like most other writings of Annabhau, it is difficult to date precisely when Annabhau wrote this song, but most observers say it was written following Ambedkar's death.

In 1961, he travelled to Russia as part of a delegation at the invitation of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society, fulfilling a long-standing wish to see 'how Lenin must have turned Marx's dream into reality' (Sathe 2014, 5). He recounted his experiences in *Majha Russiachi Pravas (My Journey to Russia)*, which is considered the first travelogue in Marathi literature. He died in 1969, leaving behind a rich corpus of songs, plays, novels, short stories and essays.

In a life spanning 49 years, Annabhau wrote hundreds of songs and poems, around 20 plays including tamashas, 13 collections of short stories, 33 novels, and one travelogue. Seven of his stories/novels were adapted into films and he was closely involved in writing a few screenplays; his writings have also been translated into numerous Indian and foreign languages, including Russian, Polish, German and Czech.

SALIENCE OF THE WARKARI TRADITION

Many activists in Left Ambedkarite circles in Maharashtra feel that the Warkari tradition has little relevance for the emancipation of subaltern caste-classes. Dalit writers, for instance, see the tradition's understanding of caste and solution to untouchability 'as an ideological mystification perpetrated by the higher castes and succumbed to by the lower castes' (Gokhale-Turner 1981, 33), whereas Marxists criticise bhakti for being quietistic, system supportive and detached from politics.

Along similar lines, many shahirs in Maharashtra claim that their interventions have nothing in common with current iterations of Warkari bhakti. Yet, they stress that the Warkari tradition is foundational to their work and that the medieval Warkari sant kavis were a historical precedent to the modern shahirs. A wide body of scholarship on the emancipatory liberatory tendencies and potential of the Warkari tradition, which emerged through a movement, lend credence to this view.

Briefly, the Warkari movement in Maharashtra was part of a larger subaltern upsurge against Brahmanical orthodoxy under the rubric of bhakti in medieval India. It flourished between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, when a remarkable line of saint poets – mostly from subaltern caste-classes including women such as Chokhamela, Savta Mali, Janabai and Bahinabai, as well as Brahmins like Jnaneswar and Eknath who mingled with Untouchables and lower castes – composed and performed poetry questioning and critiquing scriptural authority and the caste-based social order.

These sant kavis 'gave voice to a deep-rooted collective identity among Marathi-speakers, particularly among non-Brahmins of Maharashtra' (Eaton 2008, 141). They were conscious of caste and oppression (Gokhale-Turner 1981; Omvedt 2009; Zelliott 1987; 1981), and they relied on discourse and persuasion to discover new meanings in valued symbols, myths, beliefs and rituals (Lele 1981a; 1981b).

Tukaram, the last of the major Warkari sant kavis, was also the most radical⁹— he 'disdained caste pride of any kind and included Untouchables, Muslims, barbers and artisans of all sorts as his spiritual predecessors' (Eaton 2008, 133). "Who is purified by the pride of varna, tell me if you know!" (Excerpt from abhang no. 4299, Tukaram 1973 cited in Omvedt 2009, 18).¹⁰ Rejecting the salvational value of the entire Sanskritic scriptural tradition, he wrote:

Vishnu's servants have no caste,
the Veda's science so decrees.
Tuka says, which of your books
have saved the fallen? I know of none.

(Excerpt from Abhang No. 4299, Tukaram 1973 cited in Omvedt 2009, 18)

Despite offering strong resistance to Brahmanism and attracting subaltern caste-classes as followers, sant kavis stopped short of advocating collective resistance or open revolt against Brahmanical authorities, most likely because material conditions were not in their favour. Their movement petered out after the controversial death of Tukaram,¹¹ and by the early colonial period, control of interpretation and dissemination of the teachings of leading sant kavis passed into the hands of Brahmin men.

'This upper caste control had several important consequences,' observes Omvedt (2009, 13). *Abhangs* and commentaries critical of traditional authorities were downplayed or ignored; upper caste saints were given more importance; lower caste saints were given Brahmin gurus; Dalit saints were posited as Brahmins in earlier births who were born Untouchable due to past sins; and Muslim influences on the bhakti movement were systematically downplayed. She writes:

Today, the surviving institutions of almost all the sant traditions are domi-

⁹ The critique of Brahmanical orthodoxy in Warkari literature sharpened through the centuries, as changes in material conditions enabled subaltern social groups to exercise some degree of independence in society.

¹⁰ Omvedt refers here to Tukaram's abhang included in his collected works *Shri Tukarambavancya Gatha* (Tukaram 1973). The original abhang is in Marathi and translated by Gail Omvedt and Bharat Patankar.

¹¹ Many believe that Tukaram was persecuted by Brahmanical authorities leading to his death, and the same is reflected in mythical lore about the santkavi. But there is no evidence yet that fully substantiates these claims.

nated by Brahmanism and are heavily Sanskritised, from the Kabir Panth to the ‘official’ Warkari organisation in Maharashtra, which is controlled by the Vishva Hindu Parishad. (15)

Although it is not clear which Warkari organisation Omvedt designated as ‘official’, observers say that nearly all top Warkari organisations and leaders have been aligned with the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) since the 1990s.¹² Nevertheless, Omvedt and several other scholars cited here argue in favour of the continued relevance of the Warkari tradition in contemporary times.

Lele (1981a), among them, contends that the Warkari sant kavis embodied a ‘critical impulse of tradition’ that could ‘regain its potential in a changed social practice’ (105). In his essay “Community, Discourse and Critique in Jñaneswar”, he identifies ‘those core elements of Jñaneswar’s thought which in their original form, constitute the basis for a critical appropriation of Warkari tradition’ (111). Though Jñaneswar is considered more conservative than other Warkari sant kavis and is accused of ‘legitimising the authority of dharma,’ Lele draws attention to how the poet was invested in producing new knowledge with the productive classes in society through his commentary on the Gita. He writes:

Jñaneswar does not speak of translating the great message from Sanskrit into folk language. He declares:

We will present you your native language as it makes the world of literature come alive and as its sweetness makes one find fault with even the elixir of the immortals. JN 17:85¹³

and even more:

Thus the youthful beauty of this native tongue will infatuate and make the muses young again. It will then communicate the otherwise incomprehensible meaning of Gita.

In these lines the inference that Sanskrit, as a dead, fossilised language had lost its ability to generate live, new meanings is unmistakable...Jñaneswar is confident that Marathi can bring to life that universal and contemporary

¹² News reports from recent years provide evidence of the connections between Warkaris and VHP. See Arya 2021; “Warkari Sena Accuses Govt of Divide and Rule” 2012.

¹³ All excerpts from *Jñaneswari* (JN) cited by Lele (1981a) and included in this chapter are from *Sarth Jñaneswari*, edited and translated by MS Godbole (Poona 30: Shri Vidya Prakashan, 1977). The original verses are in Marathi and translations that ‘are at the same time reinterpretations’ (106) are by Lele. It is not clear what the numbers following JN denote as Lele does not specify the same.

meaning of Gita which remains encrusted in its original Sanskrit shell.

(109)

As suggested in the above lines, discourse or dialogue was of fundamental significance to Jnanesvar, as it made possible the discovery of new meanings as a communal enterprise. Lele writes:

Through discourse you enjoy that which is beyond expression. It is like seeing yourself in a mirror. JN 18:80

However, this mirror is a mirror with eyes. It is capable of producing not mere reflections but meanings. It is capable of producing an intersubjective unity of subjects.

Thus Jnanadeo and Chakrapani [important Mahanubhav sant kavi] are like mirrors with eyes. When they thus witness each other their dualism evaporates. CH:62¹⁴ (109)

Lele notes that the unity produced by dialogue is ‘a differentiated unity, a state of intersubjectivity and not of pure subjectivity or objectivity’; it is a ‘unity of equals’ that ‘creates the possibility of a discourse without words, and of knowledge without senses. One can grapple with a theorem even before it is shaped in words (JN 1:58)’ (109).

While language comprised the basis for community in Jnanesvar’s work, Lele points out that he rejected the renunciatory path saying ‘the human body itself is activity-oriented, it is incapable of meaningful renunciation (JN 18-222)’. He addressed an actual community of active producers who experience oppression but cannot find a way to transcend it, and was most interested in getting his point across to the audience. Lele writes:

Jnanesvar’s emphasis on community with his audience is not only a ploy to get a message across – it is inherent in all his reflections on life. Hence, we find in him none of the aggressiveness, obstinacy, deviousness or argumentativeness of a debator (Vinoba, 1958). Emphasis is on the discovery of new meanings through dialogue. A differentiated unity of the teacher and the taught, which is always implicit in a dialogue situation, is to be fully realised as a goal. (107)

¹⁴ The excerpt from Changdeopasasti (CH) cited by Lele is from LR Pangarkar’s *Shri Jnanadev Maharaj: Caritani Granth Vivechan* (Poona: LR Pangarkar, 1912). The original verses are in Marathi and translations that ‘are at the same time reinterpretations’ (106) are by Lele. It is not clear what the number after CH denotes.

Jnanesvar urged the actual community to not indulge in rituals and pilgrimages or worship of idols and deities, but to embody the principles of potential community, characterised by universality and a cessation of the dualisms of truth and beauty, content and form, search of knowledge and enjoyment of the muses (*rasawad*). He projected the experience of the potential community as an aesthetic experience, and insisted that unity of theory and practice be realised in daily, productive life, saying:

If unity of theory and practice has not been realised in daily, productive existence, then anyone who believes that he has resolved the enigma of existence through inference is doing no more than attempting to irrigate the soul with a mirage. JN 9:136 (110).

Lele also points out that Jnanesvar rejected reliance on any external authority including the Vedas, saying: Even though Vedas have said a great deal and suggested many paths one must choose only that which ensures one's well-being (JN 2:260). He contended that only those who were active in social life had the authority for providing guidance, for interpreting and directing social action, saying:

What is called authority rests on accomplishment through activity. How do you expect it to arise at the outset of one's journey? JN 6:340

In the equanimity of consciousness, in the unity of mind and intellect, rests the essence of authority. JN 17:85

'In this way, Jnanesvar's thought returns to practical life after a discursive journey into the meaning of tradition. He advocates a revolutionary and critical productive activity within social practice,' (111) writes Lele, suggesting that sant kavis were practical philosophers who embodied the critical impulse of tradition and the same impulse could regain its potential if it was adequately reinterpreted in another time and space.

Christian Lee Novetzke's essay titled "Bhakti and its Public" (2007) that discusses the work of prominent saint poets from the subcontinent reiterates many of Lele's insights into the praxis of Warkari sant kavis. But he departs from Lele chiefly in terms of arguing that bhakti seeks to form publics that are resistant to homogeneity rather than communities that imply a single cohesive issue or idiom. He writes:

Unifying the myriad forms that bhakti has historically taken and continues to take is the idea of a public, which I think of as a social unit created

through shared cultural phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena. (259)

Novetzke qualifies his idea of a public by citing Michael Warner, who says ‘a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity’ (Warner 2005, 11-12 cited in Novetzke 2007, 261). Novetzke writes:

... the object of belief, in this case of a public, is a fiction. It is not a physically demonstrable thing, like a state, village, township, or other polity; nor does it exist in a carefully constructed discourse, like a judiciary, a set of laws, or a dogma. A public relies as much on the imagination of each individual as on a collective agreement as to its existence. People must believe they are part of a public, and this gives it both its strength and its ephemeral quality.

Likewise, the public created when bhakti is invoked is ruled neither by dogma nor coercion, but made cohesive by a kind of social agreement. Bhakti indicates a practice of sharing, equal distribution, and mutual enjoyment, what Karen Prentiss calls “participation”. (Novetzke 2007, 261)

Just as the public sphere requires literacy, the publics of bhakti in South Asia require “embodiment,” the human as medium, writes Novetzke:

This very useful notion of “embodiment” does not simply exist as a trope of literature, but is deeply engaged in the performance of the discourse of bhakti. By “discourse” I mean the manifestations of bhakti not only in performance through song or literacy, but also through all those actions and bodily displays that make up bhakti in the broadest sense, such as those outlined above: pilgrimage, puja, darsan, the wearing of signs on the body, and so on. Embodiment, then, is not so much a technique of bhakti as its very epicenter: bhakti needs bodies. (Novetzke 2007, 261)

Publics of bhakti signify common good without erasing the individual, he writes:

Unlike the term “popular,” which makes a utilitarian appeal to a majority, or the word “communal,” where the individual is subordinated to the whole, the idea of a public implies a measure of resistance to homogeneous

social entities that cause the erasure of the individual. (Novetzke 2007, 262)

Building on Lele and Novetzke's insights, I argue that the modality of shahirs draws substantively on and critically reinterprets the Warkari tradition. Although the tradition today mostly comprises a set of performative practices such as ritualised worship, collective singing of *abhangs*, and annual pilgrimages to Pandharpur and other important temple towns in Maharashtra, insights from Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor provides grist to my argument.

Taylor (2006) contends that embodied practices and 'the physical mechanics of staging' – as in the case of the hegemonised Warkari tradition – can keep alive 'a practice or know-how, an episteme' for critical politics (68). She writes:

Embodied practices make the "past" available as a political resource in the present by simultaneously enabling several complicated, multilayered processes. By this I mean that a performance may be about something that helps us understand the past, and it may reactivate issues or scenarios from the past by staging them in the present. But performance does more than that. The physical mechanics of staging can also keep alive an organisational infrastructure, a practice or know-how, an episteme, and a politics that goes beyond the explicit topic. (68)

In addition, Feldhaus (2003) notes that among the various pre-modern conceptualisations of Maharashtra, the region defined by the Warkaris' pilgrimage to Pandharpur (the site of the principal temple of the god Vithoba) was most congruous with the politico-administrative unit of Maharashtra created in 1960 (216). This suggests that the Warkari tradition is available for critical reappropriation across Maharashtra.

Accordingly, the following segment summarises Annabhau's childhood in Wategon village in Satara. Among other things, it discusses his brief encounter with formal education to show that although the egalitarian Warkari tradition guided life in the local community, Brahmins retained positions of power and lower castes experienced oppression in intimate ways, including in the school. But the same tradition also seemed to protect Annabhau from sanctions when he asserted his agency and attacked the casteist teacher.

TUKYA'S CHILDHOOD

Shankar Sathe's memoir on his younger brother Tukaram aka Annabhau Sathe titled *Mazha*

Bhau Annabhau (2018) is perhaps the only account of the shahir's formative years in Wategaon village in present day Sangli district in Maharashtra.¹⁵ It provides rich insights into the family's relatively secure economic status, young Tuka's risky, wayward life and his interest in memorising and singing folk songs. It also shows that though the Warkari tradition at times allowed for the acknowledgement of lower castes as human, Tuka and his peers experienced constant humiliation. Ambedkarite politics arose in later decades owing to the kind of examples of caste discrimination cited by Shankar Sathe, and show why the rural was framed in a negative way therein.

The *Mangwada*, where Tuka's family lived, was physically separated from the main village and enclosed within thick cactus-like foliage such that an unless an 'outsider specifically sought out the neighbourhood, they wouldn't know about its existence' (12). Most residents were abjectly poor and foraged, stole or begged for alms to make ends meet.

The Sathes were better off compared with other families in the *Mangwada*; they were known as Mumbai-wallahs because Annabhau and Shankar's grandfather and his brothers had migrated to Bombay decades earlier, before everyone else in the neighbourhood. Their father Bhau Sathe too lived and worked in Bombay as a gardener for European households, and visited the family in the village every two months or so. Every 15-20 days, he also sent a money order that covered the family's basic needs. Hence, unlike other Mang kids, Annabhau and his siblings did not have to earn a living or shoulder any economic responsibility in the household. Shankar writes:

Before everyone else, our grandfather and their brothers began going to Mumbai. Our connection with Mumbai commenced then. That's why people used to refer to us as Mumbai-wallah. Our father used to visit home every two months or so. He would bring us clothes and stuff to eat. Every 15-20 days, he would send home a money order of Rs. 15-20. That's why we did not lack anything. (13)

...At that time, everything was good. Tea and sugar worth two paise was enough for five of us to have tea to our hearts' content. Four measures of paddy cost Re 1, and five of us together found it difficult to consume paddy worth two annas in a single day. Our father used to send money 2-3 times a month. So we had no idea about poverty; how can those who eat

¹⁵Shankar Sathe's memoir is in Marathi and translations are mine.

for free understand the value of money? The responsibility of running the family was neither on my shoulders nor on Anna's. (50)

Despite the family's secure economic status, the humiliation of belonging to the lowly, untouchable Mang jati stuck to the Sathes. This was partly because Mangs were designated as a Criminal Tribe by the colonial government, and 'whenever there was a theft or robbery in the region of Kolhapur, Satara and Sangli, government officials landed up in Wategaon for investigation. They caught hold of and assaulted whoever they found, harassed them' (13). On one occasion, while a police raid on Wategaon was ongoing, Bhau Sathe sat in the village square holding his two sons close to him and crying, fearing they might be arrested.

In addition, dominant castes and peasants also visited the *Mangwada* often and harangued residents, accusing them of stealing their crops and belongings. At times, such accusations were levelled against Annabhau as well, more so because he accompanied his friends – mostly children from the Mang, Mahar and Chambhar jatis – on raids to settle scores with those who spited them. For instance, 'if some peasant refused to give them some sugarcane, they'd raid his farm at night and steal all the cane' (13).

Meanwhile, Bhau Sathe seemed especially appreciative of the 'sahibs' (British) for not discriminating on the basis of caste and giving him tea in cups that they also used when he worked in their houses. He also seemed to think that education and government service could help his children and lower castes escape humiliation and oppression and be recognised as human. Shankar recounts a conversation between Bhau Sathe and Anna where the former says:

We too are human, yet no one touches us. But this day will also pass. It won't stay. Caste also won't stay if every person gets educated. Look here, how many people are there in the police force from Mang, Mahar and Chambhar jatis? ... There is no caste distinction there (29)

The Warkari tradition likely influenced Bhau Sathe's understanding of caste, as Shankar recalls him telling him that Tuka held that the caste system was not divinely ordained but created by humans. He also mentions a confrontation between Tukya and an upper caste boy during the annual Dusshera rally, wherein he climbed atop the chariot and threatened to touch the latter leading to his fall. Tukya was neither punished nor reprimanded for his aberrant behaviour, and village elders decided to carry on with the procession regardless after they found out what had happened. This indicated that the Warkari tradition played an important role in regulating social

life in the village, especially on occasions when lower castes asserted their agency and transgressed caste-based codes of behaviour.

This is evidenced most clearly in incidents around Annabhau's brief encounter with formal schooling. One day, recounts Shankar, when Anna was eleven years old and their father was visiting the family, a cousin turned up at their door, and said: 'Uncle, this boy is turning wayward by the day. He has no work at home, no school, only going around the place trapping and catching pigeons' (15).

The next day, Bhau Sathe took Annabhau to the village school and enrolled him, telling the teacher, a Brahmin, "I want him to be literate and get ahead in life." Shankar, who was enrolled in the same school, writes of the presence of graded inequality thus:

Aaba enrolled Anna in school and left, but Anna's condition resembled cattle that had been tied to a pole in the shed. Boys of different castes were sitting separately. Brahmin kids sat at a distance from Marathas, and Chambhar kids sat far away from Mangs and Mahars. At the time, the Chambhars looked down on us Mangs and Mahars because we ate cattle meat, although they depended on us for skinning dead cattle and readying their hides. The Chambhars lived on our labour, but because they worked on hide processed by us, they considered themselves superior (16-17).

Seating arrangements, however, was not the only arena where caste-based discrimination held sway. The teacher's conduct with students was reflective of Brahmanical disdain for lower castes, and their so-called inability/incapacity for knowledge – he paid no special attention to Annabhau, for whom the lesson in class on writing letters of the alphabet was entirely new, if not foreign.

On the second day in school, the teacher picked on Annabhau while checking if students had written the letters they had been taught the previous day. Shankar writes:

"You idiot! An entire day has passed and you are still trying to write four letters. Are you a human being or an animal," he lashed out at him, full of rebuke.

Not one to be beaten back, Anna replied: "Master, I joined school only yesterday. The fruits of eating ghee aren't visible in a day's time; the beauty of it appears gradually."

“You don’t know how to write a single letter, and you talk of ghee and beauty. Extend your hand; I will give you some ghee,” the teacher responded. (19-20)

As Annabhau extended his right hand, the teacher struck his palm with a stick repeatedly till it had swollen and the skin had peeled off. During the break, Annabhau was in tears. He told his friends—Mang, Mahar and Ramoshi children he shared space with in school, as also in his everyday life—that he had never been beaten this way even by his own father.

“How will you learn if you don’t get a beating,” Shankar recalls them reasoning with him, suggesting that being beaten was a common experience for lower caste students, a part of becoming ‘human’ and fit for knowledge. But Annabhau was not willing to take things as they were.

When the class commenced after the break, the teacher busied himself with writing something on the blackboard. Annabhau, armed with a branch of a coconut tree that he had fetched in the interim, approached him discreetly. Once within striking distance, he swung the branch with all his might, ensuring it landed on the teacher’s chest.

Toppled over and hurt, the teacher raised a cry; he sent the Mang, Mahar and Chambhar boys after Annabhau, who fled from the scene. When the boys had almost caught up with Anna, he turned around, the branch still in hand, and said: “Dare you come here, you sons of your mothers, or I will pierce your eyes. Don’t die in vain for the master. If any of you want to die, you can step ahead.” None dared cross young Anna.

Meanwhile, dismayed by the assault, the teacher approached the village *pant* and pleaded for severe punitive action against the errant boy. But the *pant* summoned young Tukaram, his father Bhau Sathe and other Mahar, Mang and Ramoshi students to get to the truth of the matter.

After hearing all versions, and taken aback by the wound on Annabhau’s right hand from the previous day’s beating, he severely reprimanded the teacher. Shankar recounts the scene thus:

The pant calmly told the teacher, “Guruji, sant Dyaneswar had spread knowledge among the ordinary folks with his Redya mukhi Ved. Who are these redyas—they are these very lowly Dalits. I suggest you take Dyaneswar’s lead and teach them to be better human beings. Don’t cast them away. Don’t forget that if this kid receives education, he may become a Tukaram or a Dyaneswar from among the Dalits. Sant Tukaram left his body and mi-

grated to the heavens; this Tukaram may well conquer foreign shores...

Please teach him properly. Don't bother with what caste he comes from.

That's all I have to tell you."

"Master, we are sick and tired of stealing. We send our kids to school to educate them and bring them on the correct path, but you are hitting them and turning them away. Don't hit them. If someone wants to study, help them. Kids don't get educated through beatings. And do not forget that you have come to Wategaon from Kurundwadi," said Fakira.

The master did not know what to say. He was staring blankly at his paunch...

"Now you go and do not come to me again with complaints about kids," the *pant* said.

The master fled like he was being chased. He did not even turn back and see. (24-25)

The passage shows that while Brahmins retained positions of power in the village, engagement with the Warkari tradition that regarded all humans as equal in the eyes of god was drawn on by some individuals to regulate social life.

The *pant* was clearly more powerful and highly regarded than the school teacher. He was more considered, in that he wanted to hear all sides to the story instead of taking summary action against Annabhau, and more appreciative of the need for education. He was also more critical and interested in synthesising theory and practice, as he asked the master to follow the lead of Jnaneswar and not bother about what caste students came from.

At the same time, his paternalistic attitude towards Dalits was unmissable, especially when he referred to them as 'lowly' and 'redya' and said they had to be *taught* how to become better human beings by Brahmins such as himself and the teacher. Yet, it is striking that the *pant* took no action against young Anna, not even warning him to refrain from similar acts in future. He likely saw Anna's assault on the teacher as reproachment for his casteist behaviour. So, he warned the teacher against beating up students and asked him to be patient with new learners. Moreover, when Fakira spoke out of turn and threatened the teacher with assault if he repeated the act with any student again, the *pant* was not offended by the uninvited interjection of a lowly Ramoshi; instead, he urged the same and dismissed the teacher.

All of this suggests that the Warkari tradition allowed lower castes in Wategaon to assert their agency and at times protected them from punitive action when they transgressed caste-based norms. Annabhau's engagement with the tradition deepened after he moved to Bombay in 1932 and read Warkari literature with help from his cousin Gyandev, who worked in the commercial tamasha circuit. It continued even after he joined the Communist Party of India, despite the party leadership's reluctance in engaging with tradition.

FROM TUKYA TO SHAHIR ANNABHAU

Young Tukya transitioned into Shahir Annabhau after he plunged into the working class movement following his arrival in Bombay. Though he did not offer any reason as to why he joined the Communists, it is clear that his experiences in the city exposed him to the tensions and overlaps between caste and class politics during this period and made him familiar with Marxism but also able to engage with it critically. Living in and around central Bombay neighbourhoods that were famous for tamashas and Ambedkari jalsas along with his proximity to RB More and other Dalit Communists also exposed him to the role of lower caste performative traditions in shaping the itineraries of a popular Maharashtrian Marxism; such exposure, in turn, preceded his own interventions in this direction in later months and years.

Shankar Sathe (2018) recounts the family migrating from Wategaon to Bombay over several months in 1931-32 following a crushing drought in western Maharashtra. They undertook a large part of the journey on foot, and halted at major centres along the way to work for a few days and earn some money. The Sathes in fact followed a long line of Dalits from various parts of Maharashtra, mostly from the Mahar jati, who moved to Bombay in large numbers from the 1870s largely to escape exploitative caste relations, debt bondage, excessive colonial revenue demands, famines and riots. Between 1872 and 1881, the number of Dalits in the city rose by about 66 percent, whereas by 1921, outcaste labour comprised 12 percent of the city's workforce (Rao 2020a, 29).

Although Dalits migrated to Bombay seeking to embrace new economic possibilities, their access to employment and housing in the city remained severely limited by their social location. Textile mills, railways and dockyards, the largest employers in Bombay, had few Dalits on their rolls barring in low-paying sections like the ring-spinning department in mills, and Dalit life was 'defined by the prevalence of informal and episodic labour' (Rao 2020a, 29). Most workers lived

in overcrowded chawls in Girangaon – the mill district – where demarcations between private and public or between home and street were untenable; neighbourhoods were segregated according to caste clusters, and kinship connections that drew on jati, locality, village or region played a key role in accessing housing (Chandavarkar 2004, 19). In the case of Dalits, in particular, Rao points out that:

Dalits often lived in tin sheds. Created by hammering out kerosene tins after they were opened and fitted together, or in zavlis, huts made of dry leaves of coconut or date palm. Built in long row like warehouses, their roofs covered with rubbish, and a thin tin wall providing privacy between sheds, these places had no water, taps, or lavatories. (Rao 2020a, 36-37)

Upon arrival in Bombay, the Sathes took up residence in a rented single room tenement in a chawl in Byculla. They stayed here for the next couple of years, sharing the space for a few months with a Matang couple who landed at their doorstep pleading for accommodation. When Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in the neighbourhood, the family moved to the Matunga Labour Camp, a dump on the city's fringes that housed the lowest jatis from the most impoverished regions of the state. Awad (2010) writes:

The Matunga camp was inhabited mainly by immigrants from the underdeveloped and poverty stricken western Maharashtra region. They were mostly employed in menial jobs by the municipality or at the Bombay's booming and exploitative cotton mills or in the godowns of large factories.

(3)

Young Tukya took up a bewildering range of jobs during his initial years in Bombay including hawking, boot polish, babysitting, dog keeping, security guard, sweeper and loader. While some jobs like dog-keeping were easy-going and provided him access to rich European households unmindful of the caste order, most temporary jobs he had access to as a Dalit were menial, and involved strenuous labour. Awad writes:

Annabhau spent his youth in Kalyan, filling coals into sacks, brought huge bundles of clothes on his back to washermen and took them back, swept the grounds of the Morbagh factory and then rose to be a supervisor of sweepers because he was a good sweeper. (3)

Given these experiences, Tukya was likely aware of the hierarchies and divisions within the

working class, but he was also clearly drawn to class politics. The Communist Party of India had strong presence in Byculla, where the family first took up residence, and Shankar recounts him volunteering with the Communists by distributing pamphlets and handbills; making and putting up posters; and writing announcements on roads within weeks of their arrival in Bombay. As comrades in the party's youth wing learned of his abilities in performing povadas (ballads), lavnis, short plays (vags) and folk songs, they appreciated and encouraged him, and often scheduled his performances during political meetings, most likely in a bid to draw in crowds.

Tukya acquired the moniker Annabhau during this period, recounts Shankar. When he failed to turn up at the appointed hour and place or when his comrades needed to contact him, they went looking for him to his tenement in the chawl in Byculla, where they heard his sister referring to him as anna – meaning brother in Kannada and dialects of Marathi spoken in regions like Solapur-Sangli-Satara region bordering Karnataka. They mistook the term for his name, attached a bhau – meaning brother in popular Marathi – for respect, thus referring to him as Annabhau.

The name stuck, and in due course, after the family moved to Matunga Labour Camp in 1934-35 and Anna started composing, writing and performing original songs and plays, it was prefixed with the honorific 'Shahir'. Shankar's account indicates Communist party members such as RB More, KM Salve, Shankar Narayan Pagare, Vishram Gangurde and Tukaram Surtape who ran a study circle at the Labour Restaurant in Matunga Labour Camp played a key role in his emergence as a shahir. Noticing his keen interest in reading, they provided him books on the history of working class struggles, the Russian revolution, and Marxist literature. They praised his early compositions – such as a povada on mosquitoes that infested the labour camp, and another on the 1936 anti-fascist struggle in Spain – and encouraged him to write more, at times luring him with rewards. They also helped arrange a meeting between Annabhau and senior leaders of the party including SA Dange at the union office in Parel in 1936, following which he became a card-holding member and *pracharak* of the party. In 1944, Anna teamed up with Shahirs Amar Sheikh and DN Gavankar to establish Lal Bawta Kalapathak, CPI's cultural troupe in Maharashtra.¹⁶ He also served as Chairman of IPTA, CPI's cultural wing at the national level, between 1949 and 1953.

Although these instances confirmed his interest in Marxism and class politics, Annabhau also

¹⁶ Unmarried full timers in the troupe were paid Rs 40 per month, and married full timers Rs 60 per month. See Pradhan 1982.

militated against the official line of the Communist party. For instance, in 1935, Annabhau grappled with the caste question by founding Dalit Yuvak Sangh, a 'club' for Dalits in the Matunga Labour Camp.

This near simultaneous assertion by Annabhau of his interest in caste and class politics at the very start of his political life was not surprising given his closeness with RB More. As one of the key organisers of the 1927 Mahad Satyagraha led by BR Ambedkar who joined the Communist party in the late 1920s, More 'imagine(d) social justice through a joint commitment to caste annihilation and emancipation of labour' (Rao 2020b). He played a key role in attracting Dalit youth from central Bombay into class politics through the 1930s, despite the strong presence of Dalit-focussed organisations in the neighbourhood. Rao writes:

More was...involved in creating a distinctive political Dalit culture in this area: the first Ambedkar Jayanti, or the public gathering on Ambedkar's birthday, was organised by him on the maidan of the BDD chawls on Delsile Road in 1933. Later, he would work with Comrade KM Salvi to organise in Matunga Labour Camp, where he came in contact with the mangshahir Annabhau Sathe, and the writer Baburao Bagul (39).

Rao mentions that More played a central role in the 'circulation of popular cultural forms such as tamashas and (Ambedkari) jalsas, which were crucial to the rise of a Dalit public sphere' (25) in Maharashtra in the early twentieth century. His proximity with the young Annabhau indicates that the latter was well exposed to the salience of folk traditions in politics and social history.

While Rao refers to More as 'a bridge between communities with different ideologies' (25) and credits him with developing a vernacular, Maharashtrian Marxism, attempts to build on and carry forward his legacy are clearly evidenced in Annabhau's wide body of work.

SYNTHESIS OF TRADITIONS AND EMANCIPATORY IDEOLOGIES

This section comprises a close reading of two of Annabhau's songs, *Maharashtrachi Parampara* and *Majhi Maina*, which provide ample evidence of his efforts to synthesise the 'critical impulse' of Warkari, lavni, povada and tamasha traditions with ideologies of caste and class emancipation to forge the Marathi-speaking masses into a cohesive public. Though different in form as well as content, both songs were marked by an attempt to demarcate Maharashtra as a 'place' – i.e., 'an

area with a distinct identity and significance for people who live in it and for others who think and care about it' (Feldhaus 2003, 5). *Maharashtrachi Parampara* outlined the location of this place, its physical geographical environs and inhabitants, and instances of past resistance against Brahmanism and capitalism, effectively projecting the statehood movement as an inheritor of these struggles. *Majhi Maina* tapped into the social nature of the feeling of longing or *biraha* that was common to large sections of the Marathi-speaking working class, positing self-transformation and social transformation as inseparably linked with and contingent upon the other.

Like Annabhau's other songs and plays and unlike his novels and short stories, both *Maharashtrachi Parampara* and *Majhi Maina* were 'written for a particular moment in time', 'made for an audience seized of the issues at hand' and marked by a 'a desperate immediacy' (Awad 2010, 8). A major part of the state in waiting was then included first in Bombay Presidency and then in Bombay state, which also included large parts of present-day Gujarat. The Vidarbha region was part of Central Provinces and Berar; Marathwada was part of Hyderabad; and parts of the Konkan were under Portuguese control. This territory also encompassed various regions that were distinctive in terms of their geography and culture (Feldhaus 2003, 3-4). Konkan and Desh—the coastal plains of the west and the Deccan plateau respectively—were the most prominent of these regions. Then there was western Maharashtra, a dry, arid region straddling the leeward side of the Western Ghats that comprised the heartland of the Maratha kingdom from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Khandesh in the northwest, that was under Muslim rule from 1296 to 1760; Vidarbha in the northwest, that was famous in Sanskrit literature as the home of Krishna's wife Rukmini; and Marathwada in central Maharashtra that was under the Nizam of Hyderabad's control till 1947.

Notwithstanding these differences, Marathi was the mother tongue of a majority of inhabitants in all these regions. This emerged as a unifying factor in the late 1920s, when the Shetkari Kamgar Paksh (Peasants and Workers Party) and other groups began demanding a separate state for Marathi speakers. These demands intensified through the 1930s and 1940s, coinciding with movements for linguistic states in other parts of the country. The Congress, which was in power at the Centre as well as in Bombay state in the post-independence period, was opposed to linguistic states fearing they might weaken national unity. Hence in Maharashtra, the statehood movement brought together a number of non-Congress political parties/groups.

Annabhau Sathe played a key role in the statehood struggle as a member of the Samyukta

Maharashtra Samiti, which spearheaded the movement in its final phase. He also wrote many songs and tamashas and travelled widely across Maharashtra in the late 1940s and 1950s with comrades from Lal Bawta Kalpathak, staging performances in support of the movement. Documents and chronicles of IPTA and other Left wing cultural formations published in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India: Volume II* (Pradhan 1982) capture the excitement around the troupe's performances and their role in nurturing cultural squads in various parts of the state in the making. An article by Niranjana Sen from 1952 excerpted below sheds some light on the composition of the kalapathak and their reach. It notes:

A whole-time troupe of about eight people having these three persons [Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh and DN Gavankar] as the nucleus prepared Tamashas, Powadas, some powerful songs in folk tunes, and some folk dances, like Valladi. Annabhau started writing tamasha, each surpassing the other in content and form, dealing with the life of the people and their burning problems. Gowankar also wrote powadas and Omar Sheikh a series of songs. The first tour of this troupe in different parts of Maharashtra before all sections created a tremendous upsurge among the people and the tamasha world. Wherever they went, they were always welcomed by a procession of villagers. News spread like fire. On one occasion, 1400 bullock carts carrying peasants from distant villages came to greet them. In their tour they performed 250 shows to an audience of more than 20 lakhs... In these eight years, 14 tamashas have been written by Annabhau Sathe, one Lok-Mantri (People's Minister) being banned. Seven editions, each numbering 3,000, were printed. Most of the books have been sold out. Fourteen powadas have been written and Omar Sheikh has written about 250 songs during this period. This above mentioned troupe performed an average of 50 shows a year, totalling 25 lakh audience per year. This covers the whole of Maharashtra, including a one lakh middle class audience in Shivaji Park. This has led to the formation of nearly 300 squads drawing professional tamasha-wallahs too, as the old tamasha is more or less obsolete now. These squads prepare programmes on the pattern of the main troupe, and stage tamasha and powada songs and dances composed by An-

nabahu, Gowankar and Omar Sheikh.

The squads are under the influence of different political parties. (83-84)

Although the claim of reaching 20 lakh people per year through 50 performances appears exaggerated, the troupe's appeal across a wide spectrum of Marathi society is clearly evidenced above. For instance, its audiences included villagers and city folks – peasants who arrived from distant villages in bullock carts and the middle class – whereas its collaborators included professional tamasha artistes and activists associated with parties other than CPI. The article also provides an insight into Annabhau's status within the troupe as a prolific writer, especially of traditional forms such as povadas and tamashas. Further, the reference to several editions of his published tamashas being sold out indicates that his work was extremely popular not only among those who regularly read literature but also among the illiterate masses.

The two songs analysed in this section provide further evidence of his importance and popularity. They are performed regularly by professional artists and troupes in Maharashtra till today, more so *Majhi Maina* which was included in several Marathi films. Both songs are also included in popular books and booklets as well as academic literature in Marathi featuring his work.

MAHARASHTRACHI PARAMPARA

The basic premise of *Maharashtrachi Parampara* was that Maharashtra became defined as a 'place' through a distinctive tradition of resistance against caste and class exploitation and domination by colonising outsiders. Written in 1947, the powada traced instances of such resistance through the preceding eight hundred years, creating 'a history sufficient to base a unified Maharashtra movement on' (Awad 2010, 19); it also foregrounded Annabhau's role as a 'constructor' of the Marathi (counter)public that heralded the formation of the state.

The song began with a reprise that referred to Maharashtra the 'motherland' of Marathi speakers; of saints, wise and learned persons; of brave hearts and warriors; of 'jewels of humanity' who resided in 'Dakkhan,' lived with dignity and self-respect (*swabhimaan*), and were large-hearted; it implied that Marathi language and discourse played a foundational role in creating and sustaining the counter-tradition and demarcating its space of influence.

The reference in the second part to medieval Warkari sant kavis as the first major embodiment of this tradition reinforced its basis in language and discourse. As discussed earlier, Warkari sant

kavis were the first to compose poetry in Marathi and accord the language and its speakers dignity and respect. They also relied on discourse or dialogue to discover new meanings and possibilities collectively with audiences – something the powada was attempting to do by urging audiences to struggle for a linguistic, federal state within the Indian union.

Reference to sant kavis also underscored the tradition's opposition to Brahmanic hegemony that prioritised Sanskrit over 'lowly Marathi' and considered subaltern groups who conversed in the language unworthy of knowledge and incapable of intellectual activity. Verses recounted how the sant kavis waged a 'valiant struggle' against false pride and injustice and 'taught us to speak our Marathi tongue with pride', thus establishing a continuity between their efforts and the struggle for a linguistic state.

Additionally, reference to Warkari sant kavis invoked the geographical conceptualisation of Maharashtra in the Warkari tradition. Feldhaus' observations on the congruence between the region defined by the Warkari pilgrimage and the present-day state show how and why this was especially relevant in the context of the statehood movement, which sought to unify the distinct regions that comprised Maharashtra and their people. Feldhaus (2003) writes:

The many regions that intersect in the area of modern Maharashtra State do not add up to the whole of Maharashtra, nor is any one of the regions studied in this book coextensive with the one that became the state of Maharashtra in 1960. There is one possible exception to this rule, one religiously defined region that closely approaches congruence with the modern Maharashtra State. This is the region defined by the Varkaris' pilgrimage to Pandharpur, the site of the principal temple of the god Vithoba. (220-221)

Feldhaus' observations indicate that Annabhau's reference to the sant kavis enabled Marathi-speaking audiences to think of Maharashtra, the state in the making, as a 'place'. Subsequent verses of the powada further fleshed out the ideological standpoint of the tradition that defined this 'place'.

They represented Shivaji as a people's hero who thwarted and defeated the Mughal empire's imperialist designs on Maharashtra in collaboration with 'other brave Marathas', providing a historical precedent to the central and (Bombay) state governments' reluctance to a linguistic Maharashtra state, and painting the Indian National Congress that ran both governments with the same brush as the imperialist Mughal empire.

The third and fourth parts of the powada recounted struggles against colonialism, laying out a wide cast of characters from various social locations and political affiliations and representing them as embodiments of the counter-tradition.

They mentioned entire communities such as Tandels, Bhandaris and Kolis who attacked the ‘derby’ vessel in 1727; groups that participated in the 1857 revolt; peasants who participated in armed rebellion and established a *prati sarkar* (parallel government) in Satara in 1946, challenging the colonial state.

They also hailed individual leaders, always highlighting how their efforts benefitted wider society, especially subaltern groups: Umaji Naik broke ‘the chains of slavery’ and ‘company rule’ and roused Mangs and Ramoshis – who were classified as Criminal Tribes and perceived as beggars, criminals and thieves in wider society – to fight these circumstances; Mahatma Phule ‘halted injustice and provided justice to Dalits’; Bal Gangadhar Tilak ‘let out a lion’s roar giving us courage’; and Vasudeo Balwant Phadke led an armed revolution to overthrow foreign rule.

The inclusion of Hindutva leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak among those who embodied the counter-tradition might seem surprising, especially because both Annabhau and the Communist party disagreed with his politics. But it also buttressed his popularity among large sections of the audience that Annabhau sought to attract and enlist in the statehood movement.

In a similar vein, the exclusion of BR Ambedkar from the list appears surprising. But it was likely necessitated by the vicious turf war between Communists and Ambedkarites in Bombay and other places in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It also did not seem to matter much, as references to Umaji Naik and Mahatma Phule re-asserted the historical role of lower castes in struggles against colonialism and foreign rule, suggesting they were obligated to join the statehood movement.

The fifth part of the powada narrated the story of the 1946 naval mutiny in Bombay, foregrounding the place and role of the working class in the counter-tradition, and clarifying its opposition to capitalism.

References to *khalasis* (manual workers in ports) being severely underpaid, ill-treated, called pigs and kicked around by British naval officers; to their being rebuked as ‘bastard’ when they demanded a pay raise; to British bosses promising to honour their demands and calling them for talks, only to ambush and kill their representatives, all underscored the exploitation of workers under capitalism and the vacuity of promises made by the ruling class.

Verses recounted khalasis being dejected but desperate for a remedy and reaching out to 'Mumba-puri's workers' in textile mills and factories, who heeded their call, joined the strike and hit the streets in massive numbers to demand better pay and working conditions. This reiterated the need for unity, whereas references to workers enduring air attacks and assault by troops while participating in mobilisations in Communist strongholds such as Lalbaug and Parel hinted at the nexus between capitalist forces and the post-colonial Indian state.

The sixth and last part of the powada suggested that Maharashtra's traditions of resistance against Brahmanism, capitalism and imperialism had to be interpreted afresh for the 'new era' so as to establish Maharashtra as a linguistic state, as a 'mythical forest of democracy'.

Overall, the powada narrated events from different epochs to demarcate 'the historically (and concretely) progressive class' in Maharashtra and make it conscious of its own composition, history, agency and the immediate goal of the statehood movement. References to numerous social/occupational groups that occupied similar positions in the mode of production and comprised this embryonic class (such as peasants, khalasis, textile mill workers, telis and tambolis) underscored Annabhau's interest in localising the concept of class, instead of adopting it as is. Further, his foregrounding of tradition provided ample evidence of his departure from dominant trends in the Party, which appeared deeply suspicious of tradition.

This suspicion is clearly evidenced in documents from the first Communist Party Conference on Culture held in Calcutta on 7-8 April, 1952 (Pradhan 1985, 38-42). The conference was organised by the party's Central Committee and 'the two days were spent in finding out what the difficulties on the cultural front were in the matter of ideological understanding as well as in organisational functioning'. While 'both questions were controversial and evoked discussion', the most serious inner party differences arose over the evaluation of 'our cultural heritage from a Marxist standpoint' and its relevance in efforts to formulate a national democratic culture.

Delegates such as Comrade Chinmohan Sehanavis advocated a careful approach owing to the prevalence of reactionary trends in cultural traditions. The influence of 'religious fanaticism or passivity, blind communalism, opposition to all science and scientific thinking...is operative on a very large scale also on folk culture in general and helps to keep back the peasantry, also the workers to a large extent, from taking to the revolutionary path', he noted in his report. In contrast, delegates like Ram Bilas Sharma stressed that 'we must adopt a positive attitude of pride in our old national culture'.

Though discussions were inconclusive, the report of a committee appointed by the conference recommended the formation of Cultural Commissions of the party at the all-India and state levels whose immediate task was to 'prepare reports on our cultural heritage from the Marxist standpoint'. It noted, 'We are of the opinion that open discussion on the critical evaluation of the cultural heritage should be organised through the cultural and party journals.'

Annabhau, who was the chairperson of IPTA at this time, seemed much more certain and proactive about the need to engage with folk traditions. This is clearly evidenced in his presentations in party forums and meetings such as the Samyukta Maharashtra Loknatya Sammelan held in Bombay from 14-18 January, 1953 (Pradhan 1985, 101-105). The convention brought together exponents of classical, folk and theatre arts on a single platform, and a report on its proceedings by VM Bhale mentioned at least three presentations advocating engagement with folk traditions. It noted:

The paper by Sjt. MN Sahasrabudhe on the tradition of lavni showed how in spite of its romantic and religious content, it at the same time, reflects various phases of Maharashtra society and is a dynamic art form.

The paper on 'Shahir Art (art of bards) by Lahari of Kolhapur, which had been specially prepared and sent for the conference traced the controversies between its various forms such as Kalji and Tura; showed how each contributed to the development of that art, finally emphasised that no art can remain aloof from the life of the people.

Annabhau Sathe spoke on the Tamasha, pointing out how it developed as a form of dramatic art by the most oppressed sections of people such as Mahars and Mangs among the untouchables; how at various phases of our social renaissance and political awakening, the Tamasha had taken up cudgels against social, economic and political evils despites its being corrupted for a long time by cultural perversion which was sought to be imposed on the masses; and how, today, when attempts are being made today to turn it into a weapon in the hands of the oppressed for their emancipation, it is coming in for repressive attacks at the hands of the present rulers. (103)

The report indicates that all three presenters drew attention to the role of subaltern communities located at the bottom of caste hierarchy in developing popular traditions and forms

such as lavni, tamasha and shahiri, and stressed on their relevance in emancipatory politics. They differed sharply from those who believed that the performative forms in themselves marked particular castes as low, and thus were irrelevant to politics.

Nevertheless, Annabhau seemed more interested in tracing instances of tamasha being used to critique and resist oppression, and it is possible that he mentioned Satyashodhak and Ambedkari jalsas to buttress his point. He spoke of ‘efforts being made today to turn it (tamasha) into a weapon in the hands of the oppressed for their emancipation,’ likely referencing Lal Bawta’s Kalapathak’s work with ‘300 cultural squads’ across Maharashtra that included professional tamasha artistes, and staged tamashas and powadas produced by the troupe. Whereas his mention of repressive attacks by present rulers referenced the ban on tamashas imposed by the Congress government in Bombay state on grounds that it was vulgar and obscene. All this indicates that Annabhau was well aware of the importance, prospects and challenges of engaging with tradition and traditional categories in pursuit of politics.

Maharashtrachi Parampara demonstrated how he went about this activity. Annabhau repeatedly referred to various subaltern communities by their jati names or pejorative titles – such as jahil (the condemned), agyan (ignorant), din dalit (poor oppressed), adivasi (indigenous groups), kamgar (worker), shetkari (peasant), tandel, bhandari, Koli, bhil, mang, ramoshis, teli and tamboli – throughout the powada, indicating he saw re-appropriation of traditional, ascriptive identities as crucial to emancipatory politics.

Overall, the powada shows that Annabhau was invested in forging a ‘public’ along the lines outlined by Novetzke (through Warner) – a public that was resistant to homogeneity, that relied as much on the imagination of each individual as on a collective agreement as to its existence. He repeatedly pointed at divisions within the public – into castes and communities, into distinct geographical and cultural regions, into various political entities, even as he made them party to collective agreement to establish a unified, linguistic Maharashtra state through verses of the powada. The last few lines of the powada demonstrate this attempt clearly:¹⁷

Foreigners divided the land. What was one, they made three.

The Nizam in Marathwada, Portuguese exploited Goa.

Mahavidharbha got separated.

Come all, let’s join forces, come come, surge ahead

¹⁷ Original verses are in Marathi. Translation is mine.

Maharashtra's tradition, they take ahead.
 Call out Warlis, Hetkaris, Kolis, Bhils
 Tell 18 pagad jatis to conjoin
 Alongside the Portugese, destroy the Nizami
 Create Maharashtra of three crore unified by language.
 Keep Mumbai within massive Maharashtra.

MAJHI MAINA

Majhi Maina Gavavar Rahili, a song written by Annabhau Sathe in 1949 re-presenting the feeling of *biraha* or longing as ground for participation in the statehood movement, comprises a striking example of his efforts to reinterpret the Warkari and lavni traditions according to the demands of the emancipatory caste-class politics of the time.

The song featured a lower caste worker from rural Maharashtra living in Bombay, and was composed in the form of lavni, which could be traced back to the second century and generally dealt with the theme of erotic or sexual desire. The earliest lavnis expressed the everyday desires of common people, but in later centuries, most lavnis were composed in the voice of women. Further, though there were some lavnis expressing biraha or the pain of separation, the form was largely associated with overt depiction of women's sexuality.

By the Peshwai period, lavnis emerged as a popular mode of constructing lower caste women's sexuality and justifying their sexual abuse and enslavement. Rege (2002) writes:

An analysis of the erotic lavnis of this (Peshwai) period suggests that it was produced as a popular form and became one of the modes of constructing the sexuality of women of the lower castes. The bodies of lower caste women were constructed in the lavani as either arousing or satiating male desire. This construction was crucial to the pre-colonial Peshwa state in the appropriation of the labour of lower caste women through the institution of slavery. (1041)

In the post-World War I period, Marathi cinema further extended the role of lavnis in justifying upper caste control of women's sexuality. Rege writes:

In the post-war period, the revival of the regional cinema sought to produce the lavani as the popular regional culture.. The lavani from the Mara-

thi films constructed the lavani dancer as a 'pakhrū' (bird) 'bijlee' (lightning), and 'jawanichibaag' (garden of youth) [Khebudkar 1980], the focus being on a native, wild and rustic sexuality which was to be tamed and reformed by the hero (invariably either the patil's son or school master, i.e., always upper caste. (1044)

In *Majhi Maina*, Annabhau departed from these trends in significant ways. The lavni was composed primarily in the voice of a lower caste male worker who had migrated to Bombay to earn a livelihood leaving his beloved Maina behind in the village. This was likely a conscious choice, and certainly an astute one. Firstly, because it foregrounded the role of class in the statehood struggle as opposed to linguistic or caste identity (which was implicitly contained in its Marathi verses), and spelt out the Marathi-speaking labouring caste-classes as the vanguard of the movement. Secondly, because it tapped into and multiplied Bombay's importance in politics – the city attracted migrants from across castes and regions of Maharashtra and a key objective of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement was to keep it within the state in waiting. Thirdly, because it intervened with the audience at the level of feeling and everyday experience, which is likely why the song remains popular to this day and is routinely sung by many commercial artists and groups across the state.

The choice of a male worker as the main protagonist could be considered patriarchal, especially since this was a lavni. It likely reflected the preponderance of men in the leadership of the movement and Annabhau's own biases. But unlike typical lavnis, any attempt to overemphasise or control (lower caste) women's sexuality was missing; instead, the verses hinted at the intersectionality of caste and gender.

The most stellar aspect of the lavni, however, was its re-purposing of biraha – a key theme in bhakti literature signifying longing for the beloved, most commonly identified as god – into a vehicle for radical politics. Duduknale (2015) writes, 'One Maina was the beloved wife, and the other was Samyukt Maharashtra. Starting off with the biraha-bhav (feeling of longing) of husband and wife, the lavni later brought in the meaning of the Samyukt Maharashtra movement' (160). Similarly, Kawade writes, 'Its heroine Maina meant the people in Belgaum, Karwar, Dang, Umbergaon and Goa who were separated from Maharashtra' (Kawade cited in Dangle 1996, 57, as cited in Duduknale 2015, 160). By correlating the worker's biraha for Maina with the embryonic Maharashtrian public's longing for Marathi-speaking people in Belgaum, Karwar and

other places that were claimed by powerful groups, the song made the struggles for union in both cases appear concomitant.

There is reason to believe that Annabhau's personal experiences contributed to his understanding of *biraha*, both as a feeling and as a literary trope, and enabled him to undertake this exercise. For example, his experience of leaving behind his wife and son in the village when he fled to Bombay from Satara in 1942 suggests that he was deeply familiar with the affective aspect of *biraha*. His interest in memorising and performing folk songs since childhood and his work in a professional tamasha troupe in Satara between 1938 and 1942 suggest he was familiar with numerous *lavis* expressing *biraha* and their popularity among Marathi-speaking audiences. His engagement with the works of Warkari sant kavis suggests he was also familiar with *biraha* as a literary trope.

Yet, there is also ample evidence which shows that the feeling of *biraha* was social, common to large sections of the working class in Bombay during the period of the statehood movement. Chandavarkar (2004), for instance, notes that in the 1920s and 1930s, migrants comprised an overwhelming majority in Bombay; most migrants were young males who arrived in the city in search of better economic prospects, leaving behind their wives and families in the village. He writes:

In 1921, about 84 percent of the city's population had been born outside Bombay... The predominant pattern was for young males to come to the city in search of wages, generally leaving their families behind in the village to look after their holdings. They came to the city to work and often returned to their village in old age, in periods of sickness and unemployment and of course, each year to help with the harvest. (14)

As a result, social life in working class neighbourhoods of Bombay such as Girangaon often revolved around men reminiscing about their wives. Nivrutti Pawar, a popular shahir and a resident of the area, recalled how workers readily responded to songs and poems about *biraha* in neighbourhood gatherings. He said:

They were all living in the galas and their wives were in the village. They would meet only once a year, sometimes. They too would ask me to sing. I would sing this song: 'A simple village called Kolhapur, in the Sahyadri mountains—my husband has gone to Mumbai, almost a month ago. I

check in the village post office but there is still no word from him. My child weeps for him, what can I say to console him? I think of my beloved every moment, I wonder how he is doing; where does he eat? Where does he sleep?' This song would thrill my audience and they would make me sing it again and again. They would feel nostalgic for their homes. (Interview with Nivutti Pawar cited in Adarkar and Menon 2004)

A contemporary of Pawar, Annabhau lived in the same area of Bombay for most of his life. This indicates he was well-aware of the social nature of biraha, and the pull of songs expressing longing among workers in the city for their families back in the village and whose participation in the statehood movement was crucial to its prospects. As a key participant in communist politics, he was also likely aware of the predominance of Gujarati, bania businessmen among the owners of factories in Bombay, who exploited the Marathi working class and strived to keep the city out of Maharashtra in conjunction with the Congress.

Annabhau brought all this knowledge to bear on *Majhi Maina* by deploying the trope of biraha to collapse the personal and the social in startling ways. He wrote:¹⁸

I had to leave my beloved Maina in the countryside
My heart aches for her day and night;

Her slender figure, wheatish complexion
As lovely as the crescent moon
A bundle of virtues and generous disposition
As Sita was to Ram she is to me a boon
Her face lights up when she talks
Graceful is her gentle walk
The fragrance of flowers surrounds her
A glowing complexion becomes her
A shapely figurine of gold no less
A slender fountainhead of youthfulness
Shapely eyebrows like the arch of a rainbow
Like a diamond crystal did she glow

¹⁸ Original song is in Marathi. Translation by Ujwala Mhatre.

Like a blind man's supporting staff
 She was a poor man's better half
 She was a precious treasure
 The love of my life and my pleasure
 Gave me happiness beyond measure
 I sing her praises with all my might
 But my heart aches for her day and night;

It was poverty that did us part
 My things were packed for Mumbai to depart
 The time was the break of day
 Flat bread had been packed for the way
 Like the morning star she followed me to say goodbye
 As we reached the village border she looked as if she'd cry
 I tried my best to make her smile
 Promised to write and buy her jewels of every style
 Gold bangles, a choker, an ornament for her parted hair
 Necklace, earrings, toe-rings, arm band and nose ring so rare
 Yet neither in a smile did her lips part
 I set out for Mumbai with a heavy heart
 Maina was sad and with tears her eyes did well
 She did not smile, just raised her hand in farewell.

I was added to this sea
 Of unemployed that was Mumbai
 Our condition could only trigger remorse
 'Twas like scattering a fistful of earth on a corpse
 This was a city where machines and technology vied
 With people who lived and died
 Brahmins' braids and mullah's beards with Hudson cars of old
 Where sarees of nylon and georgette were sold

A city of shoes and books that one could buy
 And storey upon storey in buildings that rose high
 The city produced thieves, parasites and bullies
 Capitalists and scoundrels in high rises and gullies
 'Twas for a living that I had taken up work here
 Nor sun nor rain nor the cold did I fear
 There was nothing but water my pockets could hoard
 Even an umbrella I could ill afford
 It was then that began the 'Samyukt Maharashtra' agitation
 Belgaum, Karwar, Nippani, Goa - one language one state, our destination
 To fight injustice rose the masses
 Of workers, peasants and middle classes
 With fire and fury rose the Marathi state
 They took bullets on their chest to seal the enemy's fate.

Says Annabhau Sathe
 This battle drowned false pride, clashes between you and me
 Smuggling, hooliganism and cruelty
 Just as Indrajit was slain at Nikumbali¹⁹
 As the capital of Ravan's Lanka was burned down to ashes
 Morarji Desai and S.K.Patil met with the same fate in the modern ages
 And Mumbai became a part of Maharashtra at long last
 Thanks to the attacks at Parel, Lalbaag and the Flora Fountain blast²⁰
 At Fountain barricades were raised
 And a veritable war was waged
 The blood of martyrs was spilt
 The brave-hearts fought unto the hilt.

Maharashtra raised the flag of victory with honour

¹⁹ In the Ramayana, there is a reference about Lakshman, the brother of Ram, killing Ravan's son Indrajit at a place called Nikumbali.

²⁰ Parel, Lalbaag and Flora Fountain are places in Mumbai where the Maharashtra statehood battle was fought.

They showed us how to fight even when cornered
 Yet the turmoil in my mind was not quelled
 For my Maina still at the village dwelt
 Just as we were by distance separated
 Fractured Maharashtra from its districts was alienated
 Belgaum, Karwar, Dang, Umbargaon
 All owned by others now
 The burden of taxation
 And the height of criminalisation
 This internal rift we must heed
 Unity is what we need
 So the poet to the foot soldiers pleads
 Don't turn back now!
 Don't desert the battlefield is our vow!
 Don't deviate from your aim now!
 The vanguard has still to win this fight
 My heart still aches day and night!!

As is apparent in the song, the prospective audience it sought to reach out to and attract into the folds of the statehood movement was characterised by 'clashes between you and me'. But this same audience also included many young men from different castes, classes and regions who had migrated to Bombay for work and many others who were contemplating doing so, as well as their kin in rural Maharashtra.

By foregrounding the worker and his experience of biraha on account of migration to the city, Annabhau was able to bypass these 'internal rifts' and connect with his audience at the level of feeling. But this was only the starting point, for the thrust of the song was 'directive' – it put forth the statehood movement as the best chance of resolving this biraha and used an episodic format to draw the audience into 'active participation in practical life' (à la Gramsci).

The four episodes of the lavni proceeded like a dialogue between the worker and the shahir, each carrying forward and reflecting on the thoughts of the other.

The first episode had the worker speaking for himself and presenting his problem – that of

separation from his beloved Maina due to his move to Bombay, which apparently arose out of the domain of his personal experience and had nothing to do with the objectives of the statehood movement.

He described Maina as ‘a slender fountainhead of youthfulness’, endowed with a wheatish complexion and a shapely figurine. He compared her with nature – ‘lovely as the crescent moon’, ‘shapely eyebrows like the arch of a rainbow’, surrounded by ‘fragrance of flowers’; and with precious jewels – ‘a shapely figurine of gold’ who glowed ‘like a diamond crystal’. This fleetingly reprised the sexualised representation of women typical in *lavis*, and provided an erotic undercurrent to the worker’s longing.

He recounted his journey from the village to Bombay in pursuit of a better livelihood, and Maina’s unshakeable grief over this. He identified poverty as *the* reason for their separation, whereas the flat bread she packed for him to eat on the way indicated that they were very poor and unable to afford vegetables, cereals or condiments. Yet, she was not lured or comforted by his promises of buying her jewellery, and bade him farewell with tears in her eyes, bereft of a smile.

The worker then narrated his harrowing experiences in Bombay which resonated with the precarity of Dalit life particularly in terms of employment and housing in mid-twentieth century Bombay, indicating that the worker was of lower caste origin. In further descriptions of life in Bombay, he mentioned a number expensive objects such as sarees of nylon and georgette, books, shoes, and Hudson cars that were sold in the city. He juxtaposed these with descriptions of tall buildings, machinery and markers of caste and religious authority such as Brahmins’ braids and mullah’s beards, indicating that the city was a space where capital, caste and religion combined to oppress and exploit those like him. His separation from Maina was part of this design.

In such circumstances began the Samyukta Maharashtra movement for a linguistic state, he observed, and spelt out the ‘historically and (concretely) progressive class’ comprising workers, peasants and middle classes that ‘rose to fight injustice...with fire and fury’ and ‘took bullets in their chest’; the last a reference to martyrs who were killed in police firing in the early stages of the statehood movement in Maharashtra.

There was an implicit hint in the closing lines of the statehood movement of an avowedly political struggle to carve out a separate state for Marathi speakers being connected with the worker’s quest for union with Maina, a deeply personal quest concerned with feeling.

The second episode began with ‘Says Annabhau Sathe’ and summarised Annabhau’s take on the statehood movement, including its significance and prospects.

Instead of explaining how the worker’s problem was connected with the struggle for a unified Maharashtra, Annabhau identified the statehood movement as crushing a number of social evils such as ‘false pride, dominance, injustice, blame game and looting’ that appeared as an anti-thesis of the companionship, generosity and support characterising relations between the worker and Maina.

Anna invoked the mythical story of Laxman killing Ravan’s son Indrajit in a place called Niskumbhali in the early stages of the Ramayana, and compared Morarji Desai and SK Patil (top ministers in the Congress government in Bombay state) with Indrajit. This identified Desai and Patil as second-tier, state-level leaders, and hinted at the role of the Congress’ national leadership in keeping Maharashtra’s statehood in abeyance. It also surmised that the extant state helmed by Morarji Desai, SK Patil and others was unjust and that the movement to establish a new state was also a struggle against injustice.

Annabhau also listed a number of places in Bombay that were famous for working class mobilisations such as Parel, Lalbaug, Flora Fountain as spots where the battle for statehood was fought and the blood of martyrs spilt. This referenced instances of participants in the movement being shot by police forces, as well as overlaps between the working class movement and the statehood struggle.

The third episode once again gave voice to the worker’s predicament: he realised how ‘Maharashtra raised the flag of victory with honour / They showed us how to fight even when cornered’ and saw hope in the movement and its struggle for foundational change. Yet, he was unable to fathom how it connected with his yearning for Maina, whom he had not met in a while.

Just then, he realised of his own accord that his separation from Maina resembled Maharashtra’s separation from its parts such as ‘Belgaum, Karwar, Dang, Umbargaon’ that were ‘owned by others now’. The verses implied Maina too was ‘owned by others now’; this pointed at the intersectionality of caste and gender because dominant caste landlords in rural Maharashtra were known to sexually exploit lower caste women working in their farms. He remarked on excessive taxation and criminalisation and the need to bridge ‘internal rifts’ if both these circumstances were to be transformed.

The fourth episode, rendered in the name of the Shiv-shakti inspired shahir, re-affirmed with conviction what the worker inferred, saying: ‘This is why this shivshakti-inspired shahir urges – don’t waver, don’t escape, don’t go away; fight till the death, and fight for life.’

The dialogic, episodic structure of the song demonstrated ‘mental work’ or ‘work by brain’, keeping the worker and the shahir – two concrete individuals who fulfilled the intellectual function – in sharp focus. They deliberated on a problem that was personal but also social, and called for conjoining personal and social/political struggles. Also, the use of words and idioms and the arrangement of verses provided clear evidence of Annabhau’s attempt to take audiences along in this journey.

The use of the word ‘majhi’ was crucial in this context, more so because most participants in the movement encountered the song in performances by Lal Bawta Kalapathak and other troupes. Majhi – meaning ‘mine’ in Marathi – signalled that the experience was not only the narrator’s, but also the receiver’s. The provision for a repeat of every line by the chorus allowed audience members to sing along, and tell each other: ‘don’t waver, don’t run, don’t go away; fight till the death, and fight for life’. Performances of the song thus enabled ‘more and more people (to) share the tasks of mental activity, of organising, deliberating and leading’ (the terms used to describe Gramsci’s intellectual work in Forgas 2014, 425) the Samyukta Maharashtra struggle. As opposed to clear reasons about why and how the statehood movement could resolve the average worker’s practical problem, the lavni reposed faith in collective struggle by subaltern caste-classes, hoping that it would lead to the establishment of a responsive state.

Overall, the song appears strikingly similar to the entreaty poems of Warkari sant kavis that simultaneously conveyed information and made an appeal, and demonstrated the linkage between self and social transformation. Lele (1981b) writes:

The entreaty poems...simultaneously convey information and make an appeal...They vividly combine the realistic awareness of the objective, material eventfulness of life with an imaginative consciousness of its potential transcendence as deliverance. An entreaty for deliverance is also a surrender, or liquefaction of the self. It begins with self-deprecation, is carried out in public, and ends in the experience of deliverance. The publicness of this action is quite striking. It is undertaken in the presence of – and is addressed to – the community of godly Vaisnavas. Thus the liquification of

self, of a certain kind of self, is into the community and involves the overwhelming mercy of the Vaisnavas. (10)

Lele's description foregrounds Annabhau's efforts to re-interpret the critical impulse of tradition according to the needs of his time and space.

Although an entreaty for deliverance that began with self-deprecation and was carried out in public, Majhi Maina was addressed not to a community of godly Vaisnavas/bhaktas, but to workers, peasants and middle classes who were rational citizens conscious of their agency. It equated deliverance not with 'being lifted up from the joylessness of samsara, the quotidian', but in radically transforming the polity by bridging internal rifts and discovering solidarity and common purpose with those occupying similar positions in the relations of production. 'The liquefaction of self' was not into community but into the revolutionary caste-class, and contingent upon their active participation in collective struggle as opposed to their overwhelming mercy.

Like Maharashtra Parampara, Majhi Maina issued a clarion call to audiences to participate in a class-based struggle for a new state without once resorting to the term *varga* (Marathi for class) to make the point. Although at odds with the official line of the party, this was reflective of wider practise within Communist circles in Maharashtra. Rao (2020a) writes:

It is worth noting that when Germany-returned Gangadhar Adhikari translated the Communist Manifesto as the Communist Jahirnama (1931), class was described through its association with the social experience of hardship, and through the use of terms such as *kashta* (hard work), *daridrata* (impoverishment, destitution), *bekar* (unemployed) *bhukekangal* (pauperised). Class identity was also related to social forms such as the degraded Dalit classes, *dalit varga*, Pathans (popularly associated with the 'flesh trade', money lending, extortion, and other parasitical activities that further impoverished working people), and the wild, rowdy *mawali*, identified with the communities of the hilly Sahyadri mountain range (and their traditions of banditry and guerrilla warfare). Each of these was imprecisely identified with class and constituted something like an excessively dispossessed multitude rather than a proletariat class per se. (33)

It is not known if Annabhau had access to or read the Jahirnama that represented class as a social heterogeneity, enmeshed with and inseparable from caste. Nevertheless, he used terms like

jahil (the condemned), agyan (ignorant), din dalit (poor oppressed), adivasi (indigenous groups), kamgar (worker), shetkari (peasant), tandel, bhandari, koli, bhil, mang, ramoshis, teli and tamboli to represent the revolutionary class and enlist its participation in the statehood movement, invigorating and taking ahead a vernacular, Maharashtrian Marxism.

BRIDGING THE 'UNHOLY RIFT'

Annabhau's speech at the first Dalit Sahitya Sammelan in 1958 bolstered his credentials as a 'permanent persuader' in Left as well as Ambedkarite politics, more so because it implied that the soul of class struggle in the Indian/Maharashtrian context had to be anti-caste. It showed that rather than being comfortable with either camp, he was interested in squaring Marxist thought with the lived realities of caste and in using the 'internationalist' dimension of caste to buttress the need to cultivate a Dalit consciousness in Maharashtra/India.

Naregal (2008) points out that the text of the speech offers an 'interesting contrast' (38) to Communist leader SA Dange's views regarding the caste question, advanced in the anthology of Annabhau Sathe's work issued in 1952.²¹ She writes:

Both these texts share an implicit understanding about the economic basis of dominance, exploitation and marginality. It is significant, however, that the term 'Dalit' figures only once in Dange's essay, and that too to reiterate what he terms the 'internationalist' dimension of contemporary Dalit consciousness, by which Dange means the ability of the working class to seek out international allies, ostensibly the distinguishing hallmark of the Communist poet. (39)

Annabhau's speech, on the other hand, forcefully foregrounded 'caste as class', writes Naregal:

It is true that none of what he says deviates explicitly from the underlying assumptions of the party position, and could even lend itself as a useful corollary to the official line. However, Annabhau's speech does point in directions that Communists were clearly not prepared to go, at least in the 1950s. (39)

Delivered close to two years after Ambedkar's death, the speech also sharply contradicted

²¹ The anthology was edited by Arjun Dangle (1998).

most popular literature about Annabhau that broke up his political life into a neat binary – they represented him as a communist in his youth who gravitated towards Ambedkarism in his later years. For instance, Vijay Satpute (2014) writes in *Krantisurya Annabhau Sathe*:

After 1955, it was clear to Annabhau that Marxist ideology was not applicable to India, as there was no class here. Instead, there was caste. Consequently, his writing moved from a focus on class struggle to emphasizing Dalits' struggles against the caste system (77).

This view is also endorsed by many prominent Dalit activists in Maharashtra. Yashwant Manohar, a well-known Dalit intellectual based in Pune, writes:

Annabhau, who imbibed political ideologies in his manner of speaking, began changing his very language. He left behind Marxist thought and gravitated towards Ambedkarite thought...

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar became his hriday-samrat, his source of inspiration and his place of pilgrimage... Annabhau began a phase of his life with Marxism and it ended with his accepting Ambedkarism – the initial part of his life was Marx-may and the latter part of his life was Ambedkar-may.

(Included in Ambhore 2015, 29)

These perceptions about Annabhau are indicative of the 'unholy rift' between Marxism and Ambedkarism created by the 'educated middle class of Dalits' following Ambedkar's death. The rift came to the fore a year after Ambedkar's death when the Republican Party of India, the primary vehicle of Ambedkarite politics in Maharashtra, split into two factions. The faction that split the party was led by BC Kamble; it foregrounded Dalit as an identity and called itself *durust* RPI. The rest of the party led by Dadasaheb Gaikwad, who was close to the Communists, was called *nadurust* RPI. Teltumbde (2017) writes:

Kamble's faction argued that since Ambedkar had given the Constitution, the Dalit struggle must be conceived within the constitutional framework. Anarchic methods like satyagrahas or agitation were not the Ambedkarite path. He justified his separation from the Gaikwad-led RPI on grounds familiar to us today: he accused it of being under the influence of the Communists as it spoke of the material deprivation of Dalits. Gaikwad, on the other hand, saw the importance of land to the emancipation of the Dalits

and wanted to launch an agitation for land redistribution. (11)

Kamble, then a sitting Member of Parliament, presided over the Dalit Sahitya Sammelan, indicating that the *durust* RPI faction that saw no connection between material deprivation and caste was influential among the organisers, viz., the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh. Early on in the inaugural speech, Annabhau underlined that he was not the first choice as inaugurator, and the opportunity was only available to him because Acharya Atre, a prominent editor and intellectual based in Mumbai, was not available.²²

Nevertheless, he used the opportunity to stress on the nuanced connection between caste and class in the speech. He began with the question of whether a separate conference for Dalit authors was required at all, and referred to many groups opposing it on the grounds that the term Dalit had lost relevance following the enactment of a law abolishing untouchability, showing that he was resolutely concerned with the views of the audience and wider society. Although in disagreement with such groups, Annabhau did not reject their claim outright. Instead, he dis-identified ‘Dalit’ as an ascriptive identity, and related it with class. Eschewing the indirect, associational references to class in his songs, he repeatedly used the term *varga* to stress that Dalits comprised a class. He said:

What is the need for a separate conference for Dalit authors? Many groups are asking this question. Many feel that since there is a law in place abolishing untouchability, the word Dalit has become meaningless. This is all fine, but those who are posing this question, even though they accept Dalits as human, do not accept that Dalits comprise a class. This is why such questions are arising. Because if we talk only of Maharashtra, Dalit people here comprise a big class. Their life is different but conjoined/adjacent with other classes. This class is progressive, so the entire society benefits from their struggles for justice.

Annabhau asserted that Dalits comprised the ‘social and cultural base of this country’; they were *the* class that was progressive and engaged in struggles for justice that benefitted the entire society. This posited that caste was an incipient part of class in the Indian context, and class struggle in the country was impossible without recourse to the caste question; further, this meant

²² The analysis of Annabhau Sathé’s speech in this section draws on the text given in Ambhore (2015, 16-18). Excerpts of the speech cited in the chapter are translated by me.

that past struggles against Brahmanism and caste oppression were also class struggles.

He then spoke of the back-breaking, strenuous labour Dalits undertook while digging tunnels and cutting through mountains, which often led to their death:

Dying while digging tunnels or being crushed under rocks. Or else death caused by the victors' march or due to destitution. Writers must grapple with the difference between these deaths and ascertain which is the best death.

Annabhau decried the caricaturing of Dalits as poor, oppressed and backward in Marathi literature, and urged Dalit authors to go beyond the description of pathos in their writings. 'Dalits are not mere assemblages of flesh and bones; rather, they comprise the productive force who mine through seas of tribulations to erect mountains of riches,' he stressed. He then narrated the story of a poor Dalit family, again laying emphasis on the co-existence of oppression and resistance in the lives of Dalits, and the role of capitalism in deepening their deprivation. Urging authors to interrogate the reasons for this oppression instead of merely describing it, and to present ways of overcoming it through literature, he said:

The cracked vessel on a three-stone makeshift fire placed under a tree and the Dalit that cooks for his two children and wife may appear pathetic. But this Dalit's will to survive is rich, phenomenal, and heroic. His faith and relation to his family structure is undiminished, unshaken. Capitalism has shoved his family under this tree. Observe this search for its causes. The need of the hour is to understand why this Dalit appears pathetic. And to cautiously render this in writing - because every move society makes is linked and powered by the Dalit.

He then narrated a couplet to impress upon his audience that Dalits comprised *the* productive class in society. He said:

If we are to speak in more poetic terms, we could say, Pruthvi Shesh Nagachya mastakavar tarleli nasun / Ti Dalitancha talhatavar tarleli ahe (This earth is not balanced precariously on the Shesh Nag's hood, but rests secure in the Dalit's hands).

The couplet countered the Brahmanical myth of the earth being perched on the hood of a hydra-headed snake named Shesh Nag with rationality, and asserted that the labour of Dalits

was key to its sustenance.

He also equated art with the mythical third eye that saw through superficial appearances, and contended that its role was not to inform but to conscientize Dalits and improve their lives. In order to do so, authors had to live with and understand Dalit masses and write from that experience, he said, invoking a couplet by Warkari sant kavi Tukaram:

This Dalit's life is like the birth of a fresh spring from a mountain's rocky peaks. Go close. Look. And then write. For Tukaram's truth still holds: To understand a people you must live with them.

Writings on Dalits must be committed to them. "You are not slaves. This world is in your Hands." Let them know this. Strive to improve their lives. To do this the author must live with his people. The artist that lives with the people is the artist the people stand by. The author who turns his back on people will find that literature has turned her back on him. As every artist knows, art is like the third eye that pierces the world and incinerates all myths. This eye must always be alert and must always see for the people.

He cautioned against attempts to produce literature from a distance, in a closed room isolated from the masses thus:

The artist who is not with the people, who creates art behind closed doors, his art cannot be people's art. Because art created behind closed doors regurgitates internal strife, and we Dalits are not interested in the same. Our art pulsates with the action of gunshots.

Annabhau's exhortation to authors to live with the people; to go close, observe and understand them before producing literature resonates strongly with Walter Benjamin's conception of the 'author as producer'.²³ In a seminal essay published in 1970, Benjamin drew on Russian journalist Sergei Tretiyakov and his idea of the 'operating' writer as opposed to the 'informing' writer to explain what he meant by 'author as producer'. He wrote:

Tretiyakov distinguishes the operating from the informing writer. His mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively. He defines this mission by the account he gives of his own

²³ Subsequent chapters titled *Interrogating the Collective* (Chapter 3) and *Collective Art Production* (Chapter 4) provide further evidence of resonances between Benjamin's ideas and cultural resistance in Maharashtra.

activity. When in 1928, at the time of the total collectivisation of agriculture, the slogan “Writers to the kolkhoz [collective farm]!” was proclaimed, Tretiyakov went to the commune “Communist Lighthouse” and there, during two lengthy stays, set about the following tasks: calling mass meetings; collecting funds to pay for tractors; persuading independent peasants to enter the kolkhoz; inspecting the reading rooms; creating wall newspapers and editing the kolkhoz newspaper; reporting for Moscow newspapers; introducing radio and mobile cinemas, etc.(Benjamin 2012, 70)

Following Tretiyakov’s example, Benjamin contended that the author as producer must stand in solidarity with the masses not in attitude, but as a producer; their work must be radical not in content or form, but in its process of production; and their work must have an organising function.

Preceding Benjamin’s seminal essay by more than a decade, Annabhau exhorted authors along similar lines. Where Benjamin demanded that authors recast established literary forms and produce literature to suit the ‘living social context’, Annabhau provided examples of such authors whose work corresponded with the living social context of Maharashtra through references to Mahanubhav and Warkari sant kavis. He spoke of the sant kavis as founders of Marathi literature who rejected Brahmanical norms that barred lower castes from knowledge and urged Dalit authors to follow their lead, thus reiterating the idea of caste as social class and of class struggle as encompassing caste emancipation. He said:

Our literature has to be clear like the Ganga. It should ensure our well-being, because the foundation of Marathi literature was born out of our life struggles. When the touch of Dalits was considered intolerable, Mahanubhav authors who understood that everyone was entitled to knowledge and knowledge was liberation announced rebellion – they are our authors. All people must be treated as human – the one who gave the beautiful Jnaneswari to Maharashtra in the language of Dalits knowing this, they are our authors. And the one who embraced the sons of Mahars, Eknath, they are our authors...

It is quite easy to construct meanings with words. And quite as difficult to

infuse meanings with soul. This is why only some authors are called simple. It is very important to study the historical tradition of this soul and convey its meaning.

We Dalit authors must understand this insight of Acharya Atre and try to study historical traditions. We don't want to be an appropriator to our own class, knowing this we should produce their literature. We must strive to ensure that the life of Dalits is happy and bountiful. We must try to take Dalits a step ahead in life through our art.

Annabhau's emphasis on the need for a 'soul' in Dalit literature and his advice that authors study historical traditions such as of Mahanubhav and Warkari sant kavis to imbue their writing with a soul and take their class ahead appears striking, especially in light of his earlier identification of Dalits as the productive class in society. He seemed to imply that the soul of class struggle in the Indian and Maharashtrian context had to be anti-caste.

As an author himself, Annabhau seemed to be living out his own advice to authors closely. Reviewing his literary output across formats, Awad (2010) observed that 'his writings show the contemporary conditions of the workers and Dalits' and create 'an independent identity for the Dalit working class in India' (8). All his work was a sort of 'associational autobiography' – it was based on his personal experiences or stories told to him; it was also imbued with 'a distinct morality...of existence, not testament...a dynamic morality' (8). His short stories:

...deal with particular human circumstances...Workers, the poor, Dalits, and women make up the central characters. The tensions that wrought survival are strung tight through his stories. The alienation of the characters and the conditions of this alienation are dealt with in depth but with careful brevity.

...The stories are not so much about plots as about Annabhau using the situations, to project and make available for solidarity, and understanding the mind and life space that the characters occupy. (30)

Similarly, Annabhau's novels offered 'detailed descriptions of the natural surrounding of rural life in middle Maharashtra'; they were 'peopled with dacoits, rebels, and urban criminals... people's leaders; both male and female' and 'can be seen to be dealing with specific themes such as: Marxism, rural life, feminism, and revolution' (41).

As such, Annabhau's speech at the Dalit Sahitya Sammelan comprises a striking example of his efforts 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. He chose an ascriptive identity that had wide traction among lower caste groups – Dalit – and radically reinterpreted it, highlighting the role of those subsumed under the identity in social and material (re-)production. He used a term that enjoyed wide traction in Marxist politics – class – to denote the latter formation, resulting in the term Dalit *varga*. This enunciated the particularity of class in the Indian context, especially its inseparable connection with caste.

SHAHIR AS AN ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL

The discussion in this chapter provides several important insights regarding the self-praxis of shahirs through the example of Annabhau Sathe.

It shows that akin to the medieval Warkari sant kavis, Annabhau stressed on the unity of theory and practice and on intersubjectivity in his everyday life as well as in his work as a shahir. From the Warkari, lavni, tamasha, powada and other traditions, he took those values, meanings, symbols, idioms, myths and practices that comprised its liberatory, critical impulse. From ideologies such as Marxism and Ambedkarism, he took those ideas that were 'keyed to human emancipation and equality' (Rao 2020a, 45) in his time and place. He synthesised these in and through his songs, plays, novels, short stories, speeches and other interventions, creating new(er) knowledge with the productive classes in Maharashtrian society. To use Gramsci's terms, he was as much a 'permanent persuader' in circles of Left and Ambedkarite politics as a 'constructor' of subaltern caste-class resistance in Maharashtra. The songs *Maharashtrachi Parampara* and *Majhi Maina* signpost his role in forging a Marathi counter/public during the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, a public that was differentiated into various subaltern caste-classes but united by language and the experience of oppression and exploitation.

Similar tendencies are noticeable to a greater or lesser degree among other prominent shahirs in Maharashtra since the 20th century. Two examples from two different periods are given here. Wamandada Khardak (1922-2004) was Annabhau's contemporary and his work was similarly born of a restless anxiety to overcome exploitation and domination. In *Majhya Jivnach Gaan* (*Songs from my Life*), he wrote:

My only duty is to talk about Buddha, Phule, and Ambedkar through my

singing, in all possible ways. I have immersed myself into each and every aspect of human life, and written. I have been singing the song of humans, and humans have accepted it. It is true that I do not sing songs of the glorification of love, but my songs do not prod. I have never cared about literary principles. I have been publishing my songs as a representation of the anxiety of a restless man. (as cited in Maitreya 2018)

Although a self-professed Ambedkarite, Wamandada was deeply concerned about class inequality and domination. *Amcha Wata Khuthai Ho* (Where is our share, say?), a song which is immensely popular to this day and is sung in various subaltern caste-class movements in Maharashtra, clarifies this in no uncertain terms. Rendered in the voice of poor Dalit(s) and composed in the powada form, the song asks of powerful corporate groups – in this instance, Tata, Bata and Birla – where is our share in your profits, which is derived from our labour?

The case of Sambhaji Bhagat (1960-till date), arguably the most popular shahir in Maharashtra today, is similar. He emerged as a shahir in the Marxist-Leninist cultural troupe Avahan Natya Manch (1979-1997), whose activities and interventions are discussed in two subsequent chapters, *Interrogating the Collective* and *Collective Art Production*. ‘Heavily influenced by Annabhau Sathe’, and a ‘father figure’ to many young activists in Maharashtra and beyond, Sambhaji is ‘a self-proclaimed Ambedkarite’; yet, he is known to ‘disarm the audience with his razor sharp wit before striking them with songs about casteism, imperialism, and those who had been left behind by the processes of globalisation and capitalism’ (Kappal 2015). The song *Inki Soorat ko Pehchano Bhai* (Recognise their face, brother) is especially demonstrative of his efforts in this direction. Focussed on uncovering the antecedents and tendencies of ‘those who are ruling us’, it calls on the audience to stay alert to the mechanisms of ‘Hitler’s legatees’, the ‘setters (fixers)’, ‘cheaters’, ‘jhol-ers (swindlers)’ and ‘sellers’ sitting in ‘Delhi and Mumbai’, in the ‘Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha’, in ‘satsangs (religious gatherings of true company)’ and in ‘Wall Street’ and ‘Silicon Valley’, who talk of ‘Ram and Rahim’, of ‘Ved and Bhed (division)’, who sit on the ‘internet’ and ‘jumbo jet’ and ‘pickpocket’ from the ‘bheja (brain)’ while the public goes ‘khali pet (hungry)’ and lives as ‘murda (the dead)’; he talks of the evolving forms of capitalism, of ‘cyber capitalism’, built upon the pre-existing ‘shoshan (exploitation)’ and decries the ‘ego’ of religion, caste, language and knowledge that come in the way of emancipatory struggles (Bhagat 2015).

These examples, in addition to the preceding analysis of Annabhau Sathe’s life and work,

show that while Warkari sant kavis sought a ‘unity of equals’ with audiences and rarely advocated collective struggle, shahirs stand out as leaders and organisers of the productive caste-classes who consistently urge audiences to participate in transformational struggles. They possess a deep understanding of the lived experience of productive caste-classes including their trajectories of feeling, and reinterpret this shared experience in their work to make them conscious of their role in the production process as well as their agency, demonstrating that ‘all men are philosophers’ in Gramscian terms.

These factors establish shahirs as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian mould who reinterpret traditions and emancipatory ideologies to fashion a philosophy of praxis and ‘give a fundamental social group homogeneity and awareness of its own function’.

CHAPTER 3
INTERROGATING THE COLLECTIVE
AUTONOMY, CASTE AND EMBODIED CULTURE

Artistic collectives appear to have played a key role in realising interventions in cultural resistance in Maharashtra since the early twentieth century. This is partly because staging performances that include songs and acts, the most common form of intervention, require a number of individuals for specific tasks; apart from shahirs who lead the show as singer-cum-actor-cum-percussionist with a daffi¹ slung around their shoulder, there must be other actors as well as musicians to play the harmonium, dholki and other instruments.

Yet, examples such as Lal Bawta Kalapathak, Avahan Natya Manch, Kabir Kala Manch and others attest that a set of individuals became defined as a collective not only through staged performances, but also through the collective production of songs, plays and other cultural forms as well as participation in meetings, demonstrations and mass movements. This raises two sets of questions: one, pertaining to the process collectives followed while producing songs and plays, which is discussed in the following chapter; the other pertaining to the relationship between individuals, the collective and wider society, and questions of intra-group hierarchy and decision-making, which forms the crux of this chapter.

It is noteworthy that throughout the past century, nearly all collectives in Maharashtra engaged in cultural resistance included shahirs; oftentimes, kalapathaks were also identified by or with their leading shahir(s). The previous chapter (*Interpreting a Shahir*) argues that shahirs emphasise the unity of theory and practice and foster group/class consciousness. This suggests that collectives associated with shahirs ought to be non-dogmatic spaces that facilitate free expression, dialogue and the emergence of a consensual understanding regarding politics and the role, form and function of their cultural interventions. It also suggests that such kalapathaks ought to function autonomously of the party or movement(s) they are associated with, and the primary commitment of activists ought to lie with their collective.

Such an idea of the collective correlates strongly with one of the two key ‘clusters’ of positionings regarding cultural activism in Left-wing cultural practice in India as identified by Sumanmangala Damodaran (2017, 57-58). The first cluster views the cultural movement as only one part of the larger mass movement, whose degree of autonomy has to be ‘strictly circumscribed by the [Communist] Party’s view on various issues’. Its primary task lies in ‘converting political analyses into easily comprehensible aesthetic formats,’ in adherence with ‘strict aesthetic princi-

¹ Hand-held drum-like musical instrument that consists of a membrane on a circular frame with pairs of small metal ringlets all around the edge.

ples' that convey the dreams of a new world and forge new solidarities. The second cluster stresses that while the cultural movement is part of the larger mass movement, 'cultural work has to function autonomously of the movement and the Party.' Here, 'the responsibility of the artist is to the collective of artist-activists,' and the aesthetic principles that underlie their work are not 'rule-bound or limited in terms of expression or form,' but are determined by 'the demands of the craft, to do with innovations, experimentation, quality and training.'

The likelihood of collectives engaged in cultural resistance in Maharashtra adhering to the second cluster is further indicated by the views of many activists, who refer to their joining a cultural troupe as a life-altering experience.² This is especially in terms of how members from varied caste, class and gender locations stood in, supported and cared for each other during times of crises even as they collaborated on artistic productions responding to the needs and problems of their immediate audiences. That such views are also held by activists from troupes not avowedly concerned with the caste question indicates that irrespective of their professed ideology, collectives comprised of activists from varied caste positions countered in significant ways the middle class public sphere premised on an erasure of caste. It becomes pertinent therefore to examine how collectives grappled with caste distinctions among members, including if and how these distinctions affected processes of consensus formation and artistic production.

At the same time, numerous instances of splits and fractures in cultural troupes over their political position confirms the presence of the first cluster of positionings. Often, such splits are also attributed to ego clashes among shahirs and activists in the troupe. Many commentators, for instance, contend that a rift between shahirs Amar Sheikh and Annabhau Sathe, both members of Lal Bawta Kalapathak, lay behind their working in two different regions of Maharashtra, accompanied by their respective sub-troupes.³ That the rift was not merely personal, but had to do with fractures in the Party is indicated by the perceived closeness of Annabhau Sathe and Amar Shaikh with the SA Dange and PC Joshi factions in the Party respectively as well as the split in the troupe following the fracture of the Party in 1964.

Similarly, there are references⁴ to ego clashes between shahirs Sambhaji Bhagat and Vilas

² Personal communication with members of Avahan Natya Manch, Kabir Kala Manch, Samata Kala Manch, Yalgaar and other cultural activists in Maharashtra between 2013 and 2020.

³ For example, see Kadam, 2016.

⁴ Private conversations between 2013 and 2020 with activists from Mumbai who closely followed Avahan's activities in the 1980s and 1990s.

Ghore, both members of Avahan Natya Manch who found themselves on opposite sides following a controversial split of the troupe in 1994. In more recent times, the incarceration of several Kabir Kala Manch activists under allegedly fabricated charges from 2011 onwards is thought to have sharpened differences in understanding among activists and catalysed a split in the troupe in 2014.⁵

Although there is little worth in perusing accusations and counter-accusations of those who were party to such ruptures as they are highly internecine and vindictive of the other side, repeated instances of splits 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 have affected collectives including their positioning vis-à-vis Damodaran's two clusters.

A major impediment to research on these questions is the absence of documentation of activities undertaken by collectives; though many troupes brought out books and cassettes/CDs of their songs and plays, there is little detail in them about group dynamics and activities. Publications comprising interviews or memoirs of troupe members on these questions are also rare. Consequently, there is little choice but to limit the discussion to contemporary groups, and within that to instances where multiple members of a troupe are available for interviews so as to avoid biases and misrepresentation.

Even then, choosing a sample is tricky because there is no count of the vast number of troupes that existed in Maharashtra during the past fifty years. The Bombay-based Avahan Natya Manch (1979-1997) and the Pune-based Kabir Kala Manch (2002 onwards)⁶ appear as good choices on three counts: firstly, due to the abiding popularity of their songs and plays, which are still performed by other artistes and troupes; secondly, due to their consistent participation in emancipatory mass movements; and thirdly, due to the preminent stature of the shahirs/kalapathaks in Maharashtra and beyond.

Additionally, the two troupes offer a good contrast in terms of time and political affiliation that correlate with the questions and concerns raised above. Avahan was associated with the All India League for Revolutionary Culture (AILRC henceforth), a confederation of Marxist-Leninist troupes from several states. It was active during the 1980s and early 1990s, when mass

⁵ Private conversations between 2013 and 2020 with activists in Mumbai and Pune who closely followed KKM's activities and with troupe members on both sides of the split.

⁶ Discussion here limited till end 2021; the group continues to exist and produce new work.

movements encompassing various sections of society were common in Maharashtra; the *namantar* (name change) and the Mandal-Kamandal agitations catapulted caste to the forefront of society; and Hindutva politics was gaining. In contrast, 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 remaining length of this chapter is devoted to a close scrutiny of the positions and activities of these two troupes. Their positions are elaborated by drawing on the manifesto/self-descriptions provided by the troupes in their publications. Their activities are summarised and analysed based on interviews with core members (four from Avahan and seven from KKM), field observations and secondary literature where applicable/available.

The first segment of the chapter titled *Composition and Perspective* discusses the composition of the two troupes and their respective ideas regarding art, Indian culture and resistance. 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; they also claimed that their interventions – i.e., publications, recordings, performances, campaigns etc – were directed towards a creating a counter culture free of caste, class and gender domination and hierarchy. Further, in both instances, activists' understanding of ideology resonated with that of Stuart Hall (1996), who defined ideology as 'the *mental frameworks* – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representation – which different classes or social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works [emphasis added]' (26).

The second segment titled *Group Dynamics* teases out how group activity and interactions among members in Avahan Natya Manch and KKM catalysed such an understanding of ideology. It shows that when a number of individuals decide to work together as a cultural troupe as opposed to a loose assemblage of activists (politically motivated or otherwise) that materialised during stage shows, it provided for the emergence of strong, well-defined, autonomous collectives. Notable in both cases was the absence of any 'artist-organiser' – a category that created

much furore in Left-wing cultural resistance in India in the 1950s and 1960s. As seen in the case of Avahan especially, activists from subaltern caste backgrounds played a key role in spurring autonomous artistic collectives courtesy their knowledge of popular forms, myths and embodied practices, and enabled troupes to produce artistic interventions most suited to the milieu and context. The emphasis in both troupes was not on converting pre-given political analyses into aesthetic formats, but on coming to terms with and resisting the impact of dominant ideologies – chiefly, Brahmanism and capitalism, and variants thereof – on embodied culture, including their own. The kalapathak functioned as a space for free expression and empathy, where activists from different backgrounds and ideological leanings expressed themselves without any fear or obstacle and were understood and acknowledged by others; it had no leader, and all decisions, including of whether to abide by or counter the line of the party/movements that the troupe was associated with, were taken collectively. Because performance was the forte of these troupes, the collective space was especially receptive to the expression of subaltern caste activists, who sometimes managed to communicate via performance what could not be spoken or written in words – for instance, that the attitude, body language and manner of speaking of the thespian conducting a workshop for members clearly reflected his Brahmin background!

Further, both troupes also had an ‘organising function’, which in Walter Benjamin’s view comprised a key characteristic of the work of the author as producer (Benjamin 2012). Though Benjamin advanced his views while referring to the individual author and contended that their productions must firstly induce other producers to produce and secondly, place at their disposal an improved apparatus, his views are equally applicable to collectives engaged in cultural resistance. A review of the activities of Avahan Natya Manch and KKM shows that analogous to Benjamin’s demands, both collectives 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 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.

Both the kalapathaks were susceptible to forces outside of it that threatened its autonomy and/or provided fuel for splits and fractures, but the threats facing KKM were clearly greater including state repression that compromised its very existence. The collectives, in final measure,

appear like microcosms of a counter-hegemonic community premised on radical egalitarianism and fraternity where members from different castes, classes, genders, religions, linguistic backgrounds and ideological affinities met, deliberated and worked together, acknowledging and enhancing each other's skills and strengths and maturing into fine artists; but they also remained critical of their blind spots and weaknesses.

PART 1: COMPOSITION AND PERSPECTIVE

COMPOSITION

AVAHAN NATYA MANCH

Avahan Natya Manch emerged out of the ferment of the late 1970s, when most sections of the population in Maharashtra (and the rest of India) were drawn into a wide range of mass movements. Several interconnected factors seem to have contributed to this trend.

Firstly, developments in international and national politics, such as the Vietnam war, the Cultural Revolution in China and the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal attracted progressive sections of the middle class in urban centres into the folds of insurrectionary Left-wing politics. In Bombay, this led to the birth of a number of organisations such as the VPS, the Naujawan Bharat Sabha and others, sections of which later coalesced into Marxist-Leninist parties such as the Communist Party of India (ML)-New Democracy and the Communist Party of India (ML)-People's War. Although many subaltern activists were part of these formations, their leadership was firmly in the hands of upper caste, middle class students and youth who lived frugally; in many cases, they also left behind the comfort of their homes in the city and settled in far-flung rural areas to organise the masses.

Secondly, the clampdown on civil and democratic rights during the Emergency years mobilised sections of the middle classes behind organisations such as Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights (CPDR henceforth) and Lokshahi Haq Sanghathana, which were formed in Bombay in 1977 and 1979 respectively. Like in the earlier instance, the leadership of these organisations was in the hands of privileged caste-class activists and a large number of members and sympathisers were drawn from subaltern groups.

Thirdly, the namantar movement centered around demands to rename Aurangabad Univer-

sity after BR Ambedkar, which erupted in the end-1970s drew large sections of Dalits into militant street politics. Although the Dalit Panthers movement fractured after 1977, a large number of localised organisations emerged in Bombay and other parts of Maharashtra that combined demands to rename the university with an insistent focus on caste atrocities to rally lower caste groups behind them. Nevertheless, the Dalit middle class that mostly comprised Mahars retained the leadership of the namantar movement.

Fourthly, the late 1970s and first half of the 1980s witnessed the last flourish of the textile mill workers' movement in Bombay that mobilised large sections of the working class. Although parties of the Parliamentary Left such as CPI and CPI(M) controlled many of the trade unions that participated in the movement, this period also witnessed the emergence of professional trade union activists such as Datta Samant who attached themselves to various workers' struggles.

Fifthly, attempts by the Bombay University in the post-Emergency period to raise its fees led to mobilisation by a cross-section of students and the formation of the Students' Anti-Fee Rise Action Committee – a joint front comprising numerous party-affiliated and independent students' unions and associations, which steered the movement against fee rise. The movement brought together students from diverse backgrounds and caste-class positions, and facilitated the emergence of a broad solidarity, if only for a few years.

These trends contributed variously to the emergence of Avahan Natya Manch. The founding members of the troupe comprised students from privileged caste-class backgrounds such as Ashwin Tombat, Sanjay Singhvi and Sanober Keshwar, who studied in colleges in south Bombay. Already politically oriented and members of or closely associated with VPS, they set up a cultural troupe in January 1979 to reach out to students and the general public. However, within the span of a few months, a number of subaltern students and activists with varied understandings of politics joined the troupe; this included Salim Saboowala, a working class Muslim, and working class Dalits such as Sambhaji Bhagat, Vilas Ghogre, and Bapu Kamble who comprised its mainstay in later years.

The troupe's period of activity can be broken down into three phases. During the first phase from 1979 to 1981, Avahan comprised a loose assemblage of activists who produced performed street plays responding to the needs of VPS and other allied organisations such as CPDR, Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS henceforth), trade unions, and women's groups. In terms of positioning, it was close to Damodaran's first cluster, and activists were redesignated from cultural work

to organisational work. During the second phase, kicked off by the entry of Sambhaji, Vilas and other Dalit activists and lasting till 1994, Avahan existed as a specialised, autonomous cultural troupe that took up positions contradicting the stand of its allied organisations. The third phase began with a split in the troupe in 1994; both the official Avahan and the rival Lok Avahan formed by dissident members folded up after Vilas Ghogre's suicide in 1997.

Avahan had no formal membership or hierarchical designations demarcating individual activists, but everyone was required to abide by one rule of thumb: they could not charge professional fees for performances or campaign/sing for any political party. Floating members, who were part of the troupe for a few months or years, comprised a sizeable section of Avahan's team that averaged around 10-12 activists. Activities of the troupe were steered by a core group comprising privileged caste-class activists and subaltern caste-class activists including a woman; in 1994, most members who comprised its nucleus formed a rival troupe. Although the rebel troupe and the official group existed for another couple of years, they were rarely active and produced little new work.

The nucleus of Avahan between 1979 and 1994, the group's peak activity period, included the following members:

Sanober Keshwar was born into a wealthy, Iranian Zoroastrian business family. A student of St. Elphinstone College in south Bombay, Sanober was deeply inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, struggles against the Emergency and ideas of political theatre. She was also a budding actor on the proscenium theatre circuit when she co-founded Avahan with friends in VPS. She let go of an opportunity to study in the prestigious London School of Economics after her graduation in Bombay, and stayed on in the city to work in the trade union movement alongside Avahan. She studied law and appeared for workers and activists in numerous cases in the Bombay High Court and other lower courts, and travelled and performed widely in Bombay and other parts of Maharashtra. In 1994, she formed Lok Avahan with other dissident Avahan members, and worked with other organisations in subsequent years to produce new plays and train young activists. She taught law and allied subjects in colleges in Bombay till 2016, and presently spends most of her time caring for her ailing mother in Pune. She also remains associated with a number of emancipatory movements and political formations.

Salim Saboowala was born into a poor Muslim family that lived in the working class neighborhood of Byculla. Salim studied in a school run by Christian missionaries and learned English

at a young age and was interested in social issues. He joined VPS in 1978 while studying in Burhani College in central Bombay, and joined Avahan in early 1979 because he liked acting. After graduating from Burhani College in 1979, Salim worked in marketing research firms in Bombay for several years and thereafter earned a living by selling progressive books and literature at seminars, conferences, political gatherings and protests. He was the de facto documentation specialist in Avahan, and acted in nearly all plays of the group between 1979 and 1994, when he formed Lok Avahan with other dissident members. Salim gave up selling books a few years ago due to his advancing age and inability to carry heavy loads alone, but remains associated with several emancipatory movements and organisations. He also retains a small library of invaluable documents, journals, little magazines, fact-finding reports and other material on/about popular movements of the past few decades.

Sambhaji Bhagat was born into a poor Chambhar family in Mahu, a village located at the foothills of Panchgani in Maharashtra. Sambhaji's father was a drunkard and it was his mother's labour in the fields and homes of dominant caste families in the village that helped them get by. Interested in memorizing and performing folk songs from a young age, he studied in government-run Marathi medium schools near his village till class 8, where he was entitled to free education. For several months thereafter, he trekked for three hours each way to reach the higher secondary government school in Panchgani; he also composed his first song during this period where he recounted the long, strenuous trek and pleaded with school authorities not to punish students like himself who arrived late in school due to this. He joined the RSS shakha while studying in high school after a Brahmin doctor and RSS leader based in Panchgani offered him free accommodation in his garage, and took up a range of odd jobs in the evenings to cover his food and living expenses. He spent a few months in jail during the Emergency on account of his activities with the RSS, but parted ways with the organisation after class 12 when he moved to Bombay to pursue further studies. In the city, he initially lived on the footpath and worked at a *vada pav* stall owned by a progressive Maratha man, who helped him secure admission in Ambedkar College and Siddharth Vihar Hostel. These spaces and the conversations therein introduced him to Ambedkar and his ideas, the fractured state of Ambedkarite politics and rising instances of caste atrocities, especially in rural Maharashtra. He joined Avahan while studying in college in 1980, and took the lead, alongside Vilas Ghogre, in writing songs for the group; the two were also the foremost shahirs in the group. Sambhaji worked for a few years in desk

jobs in offices in Bombay till he found employment as teacher in a government school in the city. He also travelled widely in Maharashtra and other states as part of Avahan, performing and training other groups and activists in theatre and performance. He formed Lok Avahan with other dissident Avahan members in 1994, and continued performing and writing songs and plays in later years, including a proscenium play titled *Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar*. He is a founding member of Kalasangini – a collective that works towards training subaltern caste-class artists and activists across Maharashtra in film, theatre, music and social media communication and fostering ‘democratic consciousness’ among them (Satheesh 2017).

Vilas Ghogre was born into a poor Mahar family in the slums of Pune on June 1, 1946. Brought up by his uncle and aunt after both his parents died when he was less than three years old, he studied in a municipal school till the year of his matriculation but could not appear in the final exam for some reason. He began composing poetry and songs at a young age and by the time he was 10-12 years old, he joined the Abhiruchi Natya Sanstha founded by Lal Bawta Kalapathak member Bal Pataskar, and participated in performances in support of the statehood struggle. After dropping out of school, he took up a range of jobs for sustenance including selling vegetables and assisting a butcher, alongside performing professionally during the Ganpati festival and jayantis in the Ambedkarite calendar. After migrating to Bombay in 1964-65 to eke out a better livelihood, he lived in a slum settlement in Kurla and joined an orchestra where he sang in the voice of acclaimed Bollywood playback singer Mohd. Rafi. He fell in love with and married Kamala, a Chambhar girl who attended his tuitions in singing, despite his family’s opposition, but their marital life was cut short by her death during premature labour. Vilas returned briefly to Pune, remarried and moved back to Bombay with his wife, taking up residence in the Landewadi slums in Mulund. He found employment as a cleaner in the BJP office in Mulund, and supplemented his meagre income by performing in political meetings and programmes, and writing lines for qawwals in jugalbandi (duet) programmes. He also kept up with writing and composing original songs during this period, including songs in support of the namantar movement in 1978, and was well-known as a shahir among working class poets and singers in Mulund who had their own singing troupe.

Sambhaji and other Avahan members first met Vilas in 1981 in his tenement made of bamboo poles and gunny sacks after hearing of his talent from Nrup Shinde and other poets and singers in the Mulund troupe. He joined Avahan following a couple of meetings with its members and

soon became the lead songwriter and performer of the troupe alongside Sambhaji. Activists and friends also helped him to find a steady job as a cleaner in a government school during this period. He is seen in *Bombay: Our City*, Anand Patwardhan's documentary on the struggle for housing rights and dignity in Bombay, leading a protest rally and singing about the pains and rights of the homeless in a searing voice. He stayed on as a key member of the official Avahan after the 1994 split, although the group was rarely active. In 1997, after 16 Dalits protesting the desecration of Ambedkar's statue in Ramabai Nagar were killed in police firing, Vilas hanged himself to death in his tenement, emblazoning a wall with 'Long live Ambedkarite Unity', indicating that he was immensely pained at the disarray in Dalit politics. The official Avahan Natya Manch and the rival Lok Avahan folded up after his death.

KABIR KALA MANCH

Kabir Kala Manch emerged on the scene nearly a decade after the liberalisation reforms of 1991 that opened the gates of the Indian economy to foreign capital and introduced widespread changes in the political economy of Maharashtra and the rest of the country.

For one, the growth of the real estate market in cities such as Bombay and Pune that were important centers of production in earlier periods encouraged the shift of industries from these cities to parts of the Maharashtrian hinterland, where land, labour and resources were cheaper and regulations comparatively lax; newer industries (such as power looms for textiles and manufacture of automobile spares) that emerged on the peripheries of Bombay and Pune and in other small towns such as Bhiwandi and Malegaon employed lesser number of workers and often disincentivized collective bargaining.⁷ This resulted in the weakening of working class movements and trade unions, barring in select pockets.

Meanwhile, rise in incomes and opportunities for the middle class weaned them away from mass movements; and the emerging development sector and the field of social work attracted progressive sections of the class that were interested in combining professional careers with the goal of social upliftment (Kuruvilla 2004). This went hand in hand with the NGO-isation of social movements, which though large in number were often isolated from each other geographically and in terms of their objectives; further, they encompassed only those segments of the population that were negatively affected by globalisation (Kapoor 2013).

⁷ For broad trends, see Balakrishnan 2018; Burange 1999; Nijman 2000.

This period also witnessed the ascendancy of Hindutva as a dominant force in Indian politics, particularly during and after the Ram Janmabhoomi rath yatra that was organised by the Sangh Parivar in 1991-92 (Davis 1996). Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in Bombay and other parts of Maharashtra in the wake of the yatra, which deepened religious polarisation. The 2002 Gujarat pogrom, in which over 2000 Muslims were killed in cold blood by vigilante Hindu mobs allegedly under the watch of the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi, and Modi's soaring popularity as the protector of Hindu 'asmita' (pride) in subsequent months and years heralded the emergence of the BJP as the single largest party in the country.

These developments contributed to the emergence of the Pune-based Kabir Kala Manch, which was established in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots with the objective of spreading the message of secularism, religious harmony and peace.⁸ Its founding members largely comprised students and professors aligned with Left-wing politics; they included senior activists like Lal Nishan Party member Amarnath Chandaliya, Wadia College professor Yogendra Mane, and many young students such as Ramesh Gaichor who were associated with Students Federation of India (SFI henceforth). Several new members from subaltern caste-class backgrounds such as Deepak Dhengle, Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali joined the troupe in subsequent months, and activists performed street plays and songs written and composed by Sambhaji Bhagat, Annabhau Sathe and other progressive poets and writers in and around college campuses and slum settlements in Pune.

The troupe underwent a churn in 2004-05, when senior activists Amarnath Chandaliya and Yogendra Mane left KKM following allegations of them being pro-NGO. Those who remained in the troupe, mostly young activists, drafted and adopted a manifesto; as opposed to its earlier focus, KKM became devoted to fighting for a culture free from 'caste, class and gender slavery'. They wrote, composed and produced their own songs and plays in subsequent years, and performed them across Maharashtra.

Overall, KKM's period of activity can be divided into three broad phases. The first spanned two years after the group's formation, from 2002 to 2004, when it was focused on promoting secularism, peace and harmony, and was led by Amarnath Chandaliya, a 'dogmatic Marxist' in the eyes of younger members. The second phase of KKM, in many ways its most productive,

⁸ Activists who founded KKM or joined it in early months referred to these themes in interviews conducted by the researcher in Pune between 2013 and 2018. Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) also provides a similar picture about KKM's early days.

lasted from 2005 to 2010 when the group was helmed by activists in their twenties who lived in slum settlements in Pune and who produced songs and plays in support of movements against caste atrocities, violence and corporate loot. They also performed in numerous rallies and agitations allied with these movements, which attracted the attention of the state. In 2011, several members of the troupe were arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) 1967 and other draconian charges and the other members went underground, which set off its third phase. Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali broke away from KKM to start their own troupe during this period, whereas those activists who were not jailed struggled against innumerable odds, pressures and threats to keep the group alive and produce new songs and plays.

Like in the case of Avahan, KKM had no formal membership, although activists voted to elect a president from time to time. At any point, one or two troupe members worked as full timers in the troupe – they were paid a monthly stipend⁹ drawn from donations, grants and funds raised through performances and sale of song books and CDs. Further, all members were expected to abide by one rule of thumb: they were to refrain from charging professional fees / selling their art and campaigning for any political party. Unlike Avahan however, KKM did not have any activists from privileged caste-class backgrounds, and nearly half the members who comprised its nucleus were women.

The core group that steered KKM between 2006 and 2021 included:

Ramesh Gaichor was born into a poor Maratha (OBC) family in Pune, where his father worked as a security guard. He was an undergraduate student in Wadia College, Pune, and a member of SFI during the 2002 Gujarat pogrom. Part of the initial group that founded KKM, he was closely involved in drafting the manifesto in 2005-06. He worked part time for KKM while earning an income as a hospital clerk and a lecturer. He also fell in love with and married Jyoti Jagtap while working with her in the group, and was one of its leading writers, composers and performers. He went underground in 2011 and was arrested when he came overground in a satyagraha in 2013. He was released on bail in January 2017 after spending four years in jail, following which he became a full-time member of KKM alongside Sagar Gorkhe. He wrote several new songs, poems and plays in jail and after his release. He was re-arrested in September

⁹ When stipend for full timers was first instituted in KKM in 2005-06, the amount was Rs 8000 per month. A chunk of this money in the initial years came from Samajik Krutagnyata Nidhi – a fund started by Baba Adhav, Nile Phule and Shriram Lagoo to support full timers in various social organisations. Revised a few times in later years, in 2020, full-timers in KKM were paid a monthly stipend of Rs 16,000.

2020 and is currently in jail.

Sheetal Sathe was born into the Aradhi sub-caste within the Matang jati (SC) in the Kasewadi slums of Pune. The family's economic status was much better than other Matang households in their locality as her grandfather worked as a manager in a company. She was also the only girl child in the *basti* to study in Seva Sadan, a private school managed and run by a Socialist, where she learned 'the value of giving' (to those who were poor) and began acting and singing in school plays and programmes. She joined KKM in 2003 while studying in college in Pune, and began singing, and in due course, writing and composing songs and poems. She soon fell in love with and married Sachin after he joined the troupe, and also served as President of KKM for a brief period before activists went underground in 2011. She was arrested when activists came overground in 2013 while she was pregnant, and was granted bail by the SC on humanitarian grounds months later. She rarely performed for the next couple of years till her husband was released in January 2017, after which the duo separated from KKM and founded Navyan Mahajalsa. She and Sachin continue writing and performing in a wide range of programmes and movements.

Sagar Gorkhe was born into a poor, Matang (SC) family in the Kasewadi slums in Pune, whose parents worked at construction sites and as security guards and domestic help. He studied in a government school, and worked as a sweeper and a car cleaner to fund his undergraduate studies in Sociology at the Babasaheb Ambedkar College. He joined KKM in 2003, and soon became one of its leading writers and performers. He also fell in love with and married Rupali after she joined the troupe, went underground with other activists in 2011, and was arrested after they came overground in 2013. He spent four years in jail before being released on bail in January 2017, and thereafter devoted himself full time to KKM alongside Ramesh Gaichor. He was re-arrested in September 2020 and is currently in jail.

Sachin Mali was born into a poor Mali (OBC) family in a village near the Tasgaon town in Maharashtra's Satara district. The family subsisted on his mother's earnings as a farm labourer as his father was a drunkard who spent most of his time drinking with other men from their mixed-caste neighbourhood. Sachin studied in a government school, and began working alongside his mother and other women in the fields when he was in class 7, where he learnt and sang his first folk songs. He worked as a *hamal* (loader) in a cold storage in Tasgaon while studying in the government college, and rarely attended classes. But he came in contact with Baburao Gurav – an

erstwhile member of Lal Bawta Kalapathak whose home in Tasgaon was a hub of Left and Ambedkarite activists from various organisations – and attended study circles conducted by him and others. These forums exposed him to a wide range of perspectives on politics, caste, current affairs etc, as well as the work of eminent shahirs, poets and writers. He joined the SFI at this time and successfully organised fellow hamal workers for a brief period before migrating to Pune to work as a bus conductor in 2003. He sought out a Kabir Kala Manch performance after he was in the city, as they sang songs by Sambhaji and other acclaimed shahirs, and joined the troupe immediately. He also fell in love with and married Sheetal and played a key role in drafting the group's manifesto. He went underground with others in 2011 and came overground in a satyagraha in 2013, when he was arrested and jailed. He spent four years in jail before being released on bail in January 2017, following which he moved to Satara with Sheetal and their son Abhang. The duo founded Navyan Mahajalsa with other activists, and continue writing and performing in a wide range of programmes and movements.

Deepak Dhengle was born to a poor Adivasi (ST) family in the Malin hills near Matheran, where he completed his schooling. He migrated to Pune for higher studies, and lived through difficult circumstances before he found a government job as a mechanic repairing garbage trucks at Pune Municipal Transport. Good at writing lyrics and setting them to popular tunes, he joined KKM in 2005 after learning that the group was looking for singers and songwriters. He was part of the group that drafted the manifesto, and wrote numerous songs and plays and trained many young activists in songwriting and theatre before he was arrested in 2011. He was released on bail in 2013, and played a key role in reviving the group with Jyoti and Rupali for the next few years, when others were in jail. After 2017, when the jailed activists returned to the group following their release on bail, Deepak focused on training and raising other theatre and performance groups among adivasis in the outskirts of Pune. Still in service as a mechanic, he lives with his wife and son in Pune, and performs with KKM on select occasions, focusing mostly on raising other troupes.

Rupali Jadhav was born into a poor Matang (SC) family in the Kasewadi slums of Pune, also home to Sagar and Sheetal who joined KKM in 2003. She detested the gender discrimination in the family and rebelled against their wishes for an early marriage in order to continue studying. She moved out of home to a hostel when in class 10, and took up work with an NGO; while in college, she worked at a call center. She came across a performance by KKM during her final

year of graduation in 2006 while visiting her family in the slums, and joined the troupe. She soon fell in love with and married Sagar despite violent reprisals from their families, and wrote numerous songs and poems in ensuing years alongside working in low paying, temporary jobs in the development sector. She went underground with other activists in 2011, and played a key role in reviving KKM with Deepak and Jyoti after 2013, when other core members were in jail. Rupali became a frontline performer for KKM during this period, while also handling its social media accounts. The only core member still associated with sustaining the troupe on a day-to-day basis after the arrests of Jyoti, Ramesh and Sagar in 2018, she currently earns a living by printing and selling t-shirts with revolutionary slogans and icons.

Jyoti Jagtap was born into a Dalit (SC) family in Belsar, a village near Jejuri in Maharashtra, but grew up unaware about caste as the Dalit neighborhood was located near farms far off from the village and she rarely visited the village. She studied in a government school but experienced gender discrimination at home when she was young; although her father believed that she was no less than a son, her grandmother was conservative and not in favour of her studying further. Jyoti enrolled for an undergraduate degree in Vaghire College in Saswad, where she came in touch with members of Rashtra Seva Dal and was attracted by their ideas on gender equality and secularism. She worked as an activist with the party for about six months till she finished her graduation and moved to Pune to pursue a masters' degree at the university. She chanced upon a KKM performance during this period, and her understanding of caste underwent a fundamental change after she joined the group. She fell in love with and married Ramesh Gaichor, and began writing songs and poems and singing in the chorus in performances. The most highly educated among troupe members, she took the lead in attending seminars and conferences in academic and activist spaces on behalf of the group, and went underground in 2011. She played a key role in reviving KKM with Deepak and Rupali after 2013, when she transitioned into a frontline performer. She was arrested in September 2020 and is currently in jail.

COLLECTIVE CONCEPTION

From the introductions to the published collections of their songs and plays (*Avahan Natya Manch* 1983, 1991, 1994; *Kabir Kala Manch* 2009, 2016), it appears that both *Avahan* and KKM comprised autonomous collectives entirely devoted to cultural work, whose views and perspectives often contradicted the stand of the movements that they were aligned with. This was chiefly

in terms of their understanding of the impact of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies and variants thereof on embodied culture, and their interest in creating a culture of radical egalitarianism free from caste, class and gender exploitation and dominance. Both vouched that such culture could not be created anew, but by combining communitarian tendencies and traditions in the culture of the 'popular classes' (in Gramscian terms) with emancipatory ideologies, chiefly Marxism and Ambedkarism. They also claimed that their aesthetic/cultural interventions such as songs, plays, jalsas, campaigns, melas, tours etc were efforts in this direction.

Passages from these books excerpted below substantiate this view, despite the presence of polemical statements and conceptually inconsistent categorisations. They show that while both troupes tried to grapple with and respond to their particular historical situations, their thrust was on elaborating how ideas 'organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.' (Gramsci 1929-1935; 2009, 377). Several other similarities are also noticed in the perspectives of these troupes.

For one, both appeared strongly influenced by the Marxist idea of class struggle, but made conscious efforts towards pointing out how in the Indian context, this was also a struggle between caste blocs. They traced the evolution of two classes – of workers and owners; of the masses who toiled with their bodies and those that lived off their labour; of caste subalterns and privileged elites – to agriculture and feudalism, and used caste and class interchangeably in several places, attesting to the immanence of caste-class relations. They drew attention to how capitalism and the Indian state secured the ability of the privileged caste-class to rule over and exploit the subaltern masses, and positioned themselves squarely on the side of the latter. Such classification, though simplistic, likely developed because the troupes were in contestation with the official public sphere that disavowed any connections between caste and class; hence there were one-sided distortions in the troupes' positions, the necessary exaggerations of polemic.

It is important to note, however, that for neither troupe did class struggle entail annihilation of the exploiting caste-class. This was remarkable in the case of Avahan Natya Manch because it was affiliated with the AILRC which supported the path of armed revolution. But this is even more noteworthy in the case of Kabir Kala Manch, which the state alleges is a Maoist front organisation and whose activists continue to remain in jail under fabricated cases.

Instead, both troupes represented class struggle as a conflict between two cultures pertaining to two different caste-class blocs – one premised on caste ideology and capitalism that was devised

by the privileged caste-classes, and the other premised on egalitarianism and communitarianism that was nurtured by the subaltern masses – and culture, in their understanding, encompassed not only aesthetic forms but also embodied behaviour. This resonated strongly with the perspective of anti-caste leaders and intellectuals in Maharashtra and elsewhere, particularly BR Ambedkar who represented Indian history as a ‘mortal conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism’ (Ambedkar 2014c, 247), and considered Brahmanism and capitalism to be the twin enemies of lower castes, hindering and blocking their emancipation. Among the two troupes, KKM was clearly more aware and engaged with the history of this conflict and its relevance in contemporary cultural resistance.

Having identified two caste-classes thus, both troupes claimed that the privileged caste-classes used artistic and cultural products, including epic poems such as Ramayana and Mahabharata, to popularise their ideas of caste distinction, hierarchy and patriarchy that hindered collective, emancipatory struggles, and enabled the ruling caste-class to retain its hold over power in society and politics. This resonated with Ambedkar’s analysis of the epic poems and other Brahmanic literature such as the Manu Smriti, the Bhagwad Gita and the Puranas, which in his view comprised the ‘reason or reasons for the decline of Buddhism’ (Ambedkar 2014b, 239).

Further, both troupes fiercely critiqued commoditised, mass culture for not only perpetuating caste codes and individualism, but also and more importantly, furthering the ideology of Hindutva. KKM especially provided clear forewarning, in alarming terms, of the RSS/BJP’s fascist tendencies in its manifesto nearly a decade before the BJP government assumed office at the Centre in 2014, and the subsequent rise in real and symbolic violence against minorities, lower castes and other subaltern groups across the country (Kaul 2017). This understanding of mass culture reprised the Frankfurt School’s critique, particularly in terms of mass culture’s ability to raise conformity and passivity of the individual in modern society and constitute ‘the seedbed of political totalitarianism’ (Jay 1996, 218).

TIME AND TERRAIN OF RESISTANCE

Descriptions provided by Avahan and KKM regarding the troupe bear out key differences in the terrain of resistance and their periods of activity.

Statements about Avahan that appeared on the back cover of the two song books published by the group in 1983 and 1991 attest to the troupe’s affiliation with Marxist-Leninist politics of

this period via its membership of the AILRC. Reproduced below, the statement on the back cover of Avahan's first song book (Avahan Natya Manch 1983) clearly affirmed a) the presence of numerous cultural troupes subscribing to the path of armed revolution in different states, and b) close association and collaboration between different troupes and Avahan through national level forums such as the AILRC:

India is a semi-feudal, semi-imperialist country. We believe that the only way to put an end to exploitation in India is armed revolution in rural areas. And we have joined hands with cultural troupes from other regions that believe similarly to set up a national-level organisation called All India League for Revolutionary Culture. Avahan Natya Manch, Jan Natya Mandali, Viplav Rachaital Sangham (Andhra), Makkal Kalay Mandram (Tamilnadu), West Bengal Writers, Artists and Intellectuals Association are part of it.¹⁰

The brief behind Avahan's second song book (Avahan Natya Manch 1991) provided the names of cultural troupes in 11 states that were part of AILRC. Together, these statements attested to the spread of the Naxal/Maoist movement¹¹ in different states and regions through the 1980s.¹² They also attested to a brief and remarkable period of political freedom in the post-colonial period when parties and affiliated organisations advocating overthrow of the state through armed revolution were able to carry out their activities and organisational work openly; most such parties and groups were banned from the mid-1990s onwards.¹³

Notwithstanding Avahan's support for armed revolution, its emphasis was not on annihilating the exploiting class or capturing state power. Instead, the focus was squarely on developing a new, radical culture. The introduction to the troupe's second song book (Avahan Natya Manch 1991) noted:

Indian society is classist (vargiya) as well as casteist (varniya). This is why

¹⁰ Original statement in Marathi; translation mine.

¹¹ The original CPI(ML), founded by Charu Majumdar in West Bengal in 1969, splintered after his death in 1972. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the Naxal/Maoist movement comprised many political parties spread across several states. In 2004, the CPI(ML)-People's War and the Maoist Communist Centre of India, two of the largest parties merged to form the CPI(Maoist).

¹² For a brief overview on the spread of the Maoist movement and state response to this, see Sahoo 2019.

¹³ Such bans have taken place at the level of individual states as well as the Centre, using state-specific laws such as The Andhra Pradesh Public Security Act, 1992 and central-level legislations such as the UAPA 1967 as well as executive orders.

the country has been enslaved by jati (caste), dharm (religion), and panth (sect) for thousands of years. (ii)

... We are fighting for a new culture – a new democratic culture! A culture where human and democratic rights are not just recorded on paper, but are present in our behaviour; where there is no division of caste and religion, no discrimination between men and women, no exploitation of the old and young. We are fighting for a scientific and democratic culture. (v)¹⁴

In a similar vein, KKM's manifesto drawn up in 2006 clarifies that cultural resistance was its primary objective. Unlike Avahan, KKM did not mention any national-level platform or troupes in other states that it was associated and/or collaborated with, which attests to the absence of such platforms in recent years; one likely reason for this is the weakening of Left parties across the spectrum that steered such federations. A brief about the troupe that appeared at the end of its manifesto – stressing that it was trying to 'convert' cultural resistance into a 'broad-based people's struggle' – conveyed its isolation, the reasons for which are discussed later in this and the subsequent chapters.

Kabir Kala Manch, a cultural organisation, is engaged in destroying imperialist, brahmanic, and patriarchal culture, and instituting in its place a new culture of human liberation. Kabir Kala Manch is the prime mover of the revolutionary cultural movement to convert this struggle into a massive, broadbased people's struggle.¹⁵

ON ART AND LABOUR

Avahan countered hegemonic notions about art that attributed its production and authorship to an individual, often under the influence of divine intervention¹⁶ by stressing that songs, music, literature and all variety of forms considered as art were in the first instance produced by human

¹⁴ Original text in Marathi; translation mine.

¹⁵ Excerpted from KKM's manifesto included in its second song book (Kabir Kala Manch 2016); translation mine.

¹⁶ A lot of Brahmanic literature is attributed to individuals who ascribe authorship to divine sources. Ambedkar (2014a) wrote: 'The Manu Smriti is said to be divine in its origin. It is said to be revealed to man by Manu to whom it was revealed by the Swayambhu (i.e. the Creator). This claim, as will be seen from the reference already made to it, is set out in the Code itself' (270). Such ideas about authorship were likely prevalent in the 1980s too.

beings on earth, and produced communally, by groups of people engaged in productive labour processes. It posited a simplistic class binary and used caste/class interchangeably in places, stressing that while both the privileged caste-classes and the subaltern caste-classes produced art, the values and ideals they signified were different. Subaltern art forms such as *bhallari*, which was sung communally by women while transplanting paddy in Maharashtra, though often dubbed as folk/traditional/craft were socially rooted, simple and could be practised by anybody without formal training. In contrast, classical forms like *thumri*, *khayal*, *kathak* and *bharatnayam*, that were developed and practised by privileged castes, were disengaged from social life, complex and required elaborate training spread over several years.

The introduction to Avahan's second book of songs (Avahan Natya Manch 1991) notes:

How did songs, or for that matter art and literature emerge? Did songs, art and literature fall from the skies? No. They were created right here on earth. The most important quality characterising humans is that in order to live, give birth to their progeny and ensure their survival, they must labour; they must fight with nature. Rhythms [*laya*] and sounds [*dhwani*] emerge from the labour process, and when these rhythms and sounds work in tandem, music is created....

Good songs are characterised by a harmonious coming together of music and words, this is why all over the earth, songs have attracted humans. But as society progressed and humans started agriculture, two classes emerged in society – one that laboured in farms, and one that made them labour. The way in which art, dance, enactment, songs and music was created collectively in communitarian life in the older times remained confined to those who laboured, while among the class of owners, there was no such collective aspect. In India, we can clearly see that the *bhallari* that women sing while transplanting paddy was collective. The songs and dances accompanying momentous life events ceremonies like birth, marriage and death, and festivals and religious occasions like Nag Panchami and Holi were also collective. Whereas the classical music of the upper classes like *thumri*, *khayal*, *tarana* have nothing collective about them. For this class, the discovery of music is a personal and private affair. This is why the con-

tent in songs of the labouring peoples is collective joys and sorrows, and relates more and more with reality Whereas in songs of upper classes or their literature, the import is imaginary, and rarely goes beyond personal joys and sorrows.

That the working castes and the exploiting castes create literature, and its relationship with reality, differently is apparent to us. Their expressions are also entirely different. Art and literature of the upper castes is full of complexities, whereas the art and literature of working classes is simple and straightforward, in easy language. The dances of the peasant castes and adivasis, in their form and content, are easy, whereas venerated dances of the upper castes like Kathak and Bharatnatyam are very complex and difficult. (i-ii)¹⁷

KKM similarly identified the labour process as the progenitor of art. It stressed that the art of subaltern caste-classes was 'real and life-affirming' not only because it aided collective struggles, but also because it was not anthropocentric, and instead concerned with and respectful of the natural world. This was likely a reflection of the proximity of KKM with lower caste agricultural communities that worshipped the earth and used bulls for ploughing.

At the same time, KKM appeared far more forthright in identifying Brahmanism as the fulcrum of elite artistic and cultural productions. Its manifesto included in the troupe's second song book (Kabir Kala Manch 2016) noted:

...No creativity of human is ever fulfilled without labour. This is why art and culture were born of labour. For the past thousands of years, women, Dalits, adivasis and bahujan workers have cared for and kept alive art, literature and culture. This is why they are the real mai-baap of art and culture... The advancement of human society, for several reasons, brought about and sustained the alienation of labour from labourers, which divided art, literature and culture into two distinct, mutually opposed streams. This is why the dalit, labouring peoples' arts and symbols of pride and veneration are different from the arts and symbols of the exploitative brahman-wadis. (6)

¹⁷ Original in Marathi; translation mine.

...The art of working castes and communities is real and life-affirming. This is why all of India's people's arts speak of the fruits of this collective labour, of mother earth, of animals and organisms and bulls, songs of nag Panchami... ovis of various castes that women sing. People's arts have, in this way, aided struggles. On the other hand, the Brahmanwadis, perched on a mountain of privilege and not knowing a thing about labour, believe art emerges from individual creativity and genius. (7)¹⁸

ON 'INDIAN' CULTURE

In the introduction to its second songbook (1991), Avahan characterised Indian society as semi-feudal and semi-imperial; this was in keeping with the position of leading Marxist-Leninist parties of the time. But in a significant departure from this position and resonating with the writings of poets and writers associated with Marxist-Leninist politics in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal during this period,¹⁹ they claimed 'Indian culture' as 'upper caste, upper class and patriarchal' and asserted that art and literature was filled with 'feudal values' that deeply impacted the thought processes and embodied behaviour of the common masses. As examples, the songbook mentioned how people related characters in real life, cinema and literature with mythological characters from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata such as Ram, Sita and Draupadi:

What we call Indian culture today is upper caste, upper class and patriarchal, and the impact of this is evident on Indian masses. Analyses of our country's economy, society and politics shows that India is semi-feudal, semi-imperial; this is why India's art and literature is filled with feudal values. The impact of epic poems like Ramayana and Mahabharata is so massive that whenever people see a hero or heroine in a film, novel or story, they begin seeing in them qualities of Ram, Krishna, Sita, Draupadi and the likes. (Avahan Natya Manch 1991, ii)

The claim that these epic poems reflect 'feudal values' resonates with Phule's views; in *Gulamgiri*, Phule showed that mythology played a key role in sustaining Brahmanic hegemony. It also corresponds well with the analysis of the Sanskrit versions of the epic poems that were

¹⁸ Original in Marathi; translation mine.

¹⁹ Some of their writings were included the literary magazine *Aamukh* (late 1960s-2004) edited by Kanchan Kumar, which published poems, short stories, songs and essays in Hindi translation.

widely available in print form, wherein the protagonists upheld Brahmanical values and codes of behaviour. However, the claim ignores the many oral versions of these epics in different languages across the subcontinent and beyond whose positions on caste and patriarchy are varied.²⁰

Even then, the critique of these epic poems most likely pertained to their mass-produced versions that were aired on state-owned media in the years preceding the publication of the book. The Marathi radio series on Ramayana preceded the Hindi TV series in time, reach and popularity, and the decisions to produce and broadcast them were taken by the Congress governments then in power in the state and Centre. The Pune division of All India Radio aired *Geet Ramayana* in 1955-1956. A collection of 56 Marathi songs describing events from the Ramayana with a live orchestra from the studio, the programme received widespread acclaim and popularity owing to its lyrics, music, and vocals (Pune Cultural Mapping Team 2021). The Hindi television series produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar was broadcast on India's only TV channel at that time – Doordarshan – over the course of 18 months and 78 episodes in 1987 and 1988; many episodes were watched 'by a staggering 80 million to 100 million people, an eighth of the Indian population' (Verma 2019). Subsequently, a 94-episode series on Mahabharata was broadcast on Doordarshan from between October 1988 and June 1990.

Arvind Rajagopal (2004) argues in this regard that the broadcast of the Ramayana on national television gave pre-publicity to the symbols of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement launched by the Sangh Parivar in the late 1980s, and catapulted Hindu nationalism and the BJP to the forefront of Indian politics; shahirs and activists in Maharashtra argue likewise about Geet Ramayana and Maharashtrian politics.

The Ramayana serial, stated Rajagopal, 'served as a kind of flash point or moment of condensation' (278) as 'Hindu nationalism participated in a new currency of images, building on possibilities that arose in the wake of economic liberalization and national television' (272). He wrote:

Choosing to violate a secularist taboo and broadcast a Hindu serial was only one of the Congress's many ineffectual attempts to address its crisis of legitimacy and widen its support-base, identifying itself with the glories of a mythical kingdom. In the event, the BJP was already identified with Hindu symbolism and hence in a much better position to make use of it.

²⁰ For an insightful discussion on the many versions of Ramayana, see Ramanujan 2006.

(278)

Avahan's critique of Ramayana and Mahabharata in its 1991 publication thus indicates that it foresaw what Rajagopal confirmed more than a decade later: that although the Congress sought to capture Hindu votes by airing mythological epics on state-owned media, its real benefits were reaped by the BJP.

Further passages in Avahan's second song book provided incisive critique of mass culture, especially for its role in propagating the 'rotten values' of casteism and capitalism and ensuring conformity:

Counter revolutionary, feudal values hold sway not just in art and literature, but in human behaviour as well. The caste system, women's slavery, children's exploitation, superstition, religious fundamentalism are manifestations of such values. On the other hand, the country's economic system is under the control of imperialists, whose rotten value system is leading us astray. Recent developments in the field of music, like disco, break dance, and pop are examples of this system, and the quest for comforts and mechanistic behaviour in everyday life and living are its social manifestations. India is a semi-feudal, semi-imperialist country, and Indian culture is the confluence of rotten values of both systems – this is the situation of Indian culture today. While attempts are underway to establish a capitalist system, the frighteningly reactionary, feudal import of its structures are apparent.

(Avahan Natya Manch 1991, iii-iv)²¹

Reference to the 'feudal import' of 'structures...of the capitalist system' clearly conveyed that the troupe broke with the orthodox understanding of the base-superstructure relationship in Marxism, which contended that economy comprised the base, whereas social divisions such as caste were part of the superstructure. Much to the contrary, Avahan seemed to suggest that the capitalism in India built on the foundations the caste system; and their ideologies and value systems were embodied – they held 'sway not just in art and literature, but in human behaviour as well'.

The critique of commoditised, mass culture also seems to account for Avahan's choice of street plays as the preferred mode of intervention. The troupe indicated that it did not have the

²¹ Original in Marathi; translation mine.

economic resources to produce TV and radio programmes or broadsheet newspapers; further, since the mass media was largely controlled/owned by the state,²² it was unlikely to allow the propagation of Avahan's anti-state views. The introduction to *Roti ka Khel* (Avahan Natya Manch 1994) noted:

The need to reach maximum number of people using minimum resources attracted us towards street plays. The experience of the past few years that clearly shows that in the struggle against the current exploitative social-political system, street play is the most impactful medium for the labouring masses. Street plays are the medium of sections such as workers, students, teachers and the middle class, who do not use state-owned media like TV, radio, and newspapers to propagate their progressive views. These media are restricted for such sections firstly because they do not have enough money to use these media; secondly, they want radical change, and it is not possible that the state which they want to get rid of will allow them to use its communication media to propagate their views freely. For the rulers, our street plays are revolutionary theatre. (5)²³

Subsequent passages in the introduction critiqued the commodification of street plays, including in state-sponsored competitions, and by NGOs for social awareness campaigns on HIV-AIDS and other issues.

KKM's critique of commoditised art and culture was more trenchant. In a section in its manifesto titled 'Against Socialism and Brahmanic imperialism,' the troupe contended that the 'culture industry' played a key role in converging the hegemonic projects of neoliberalism and Hindutva, perpetuating conformity and passivity among citizens, and seeding fascist tendencies in Indian politics. Passages from this section are remarkable for how they collapse divisions between politics and culture, ideology and praxis, caste, class and gender. For instance:

- 'Brahmanic fascism, in its friendship with imperialism, is imposing its cultural terrorism on people' (9)
- 'How people must behave is being controlled' (8)
- 'A new marker for cultural violence against India's workers, Dalits, Adivasis and women is

²² Private ownership of mass media was only allowed after the liberalisation reforms of 1991.

²³ Original in Hindi; translation mine.

being created' (9)

Minus their polemics and conceptual muddle, passages from KKM's manifesto excerpted below resonate strongly with current circumstances. KKM pointed at the RSS' role in nurturing and developing Hindutva ideology, and stressed the 2002 Gujarat riots provided clear proof of its popularity as well as devastating impact. It forewarned, in excessively alarming terms at times, about the 'cultural violence' awaiting India's workers, Dalits, Muslims, women and other sub-altern groups; rising instances of hate speech, riots, state repression, militarisation of tribal areas and so on over the past eight years attest to its accuracy.²⁴ It also predicted fairly accurately the enhanced role that surveillance and propaganda would play in ensuing years in securing the neo-liberal Hindutva bloc's hold over power:

In today socialist capitalist system, there is unabashed commodification of art. The capitalist system has benefitted immensely from turning art into a means of filling coffers. Fickle, hedonistic, divisive values are being propagated openly. Which are taking away empathy from humans every day and every hour. Hooliganism, machismo, muscle power, rape, murder...and exploitation are part and parcel of this imperialist system, and politics is premised on making these values part of everyday life in a foundational way... How people must behave is being controlled and the values that provide an alternative to the imperialist perspective are being severely repressed.

Under the impact of mass psychology, people's mentality is being distorted such that a new class has been born that refers to this distortion as culture. Whose world revolves around cinema, clubs, shopping malls, burger, pizza, McDonald, car, air conditioning, share market, etc etc. This class is a true supporter of capitalism, casteism and patriarchy. In emulating them, the middle class is being wasted...Imperialist culture is spreading fast through multiple media like TV, cinema, FM radio, newspapers, momentous occasions and sports...

This imperialist cultural tsunami is not stopping at this. Instead, in alliance

²⁴ The fifth chapter of the thesis titled 'Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken' discusses these instances in detail.

with established Brahmanic culture and using the 'Hindu' name, as Brahmanic fascism, it is preparing to blow the trumpet of destruction across the entire country. That their efforts bore dividends in Gujarat is evident to us. Numerous casteist organisations initiated by RSS are spreading the venom of violence among people. Like a mad dog, it is thirsting for blood. Distortion of History, brahmanisation of education, intensification of Manu, intensification of jati-sati tradition – many such things are being done under the influence of Brahmanic hegemony and its values. This brahmanic fascism, in its friendship with imperialism, is imposing its cultural terrorism on people. A new marker for cultural violence against India's workers, Dalits, Adivasis and women is being created. (Kabir Kala Manch 2016, 8-9)

KKM's attempt to create 'a new culture of human liberation' in such circumstances included 'studying and acquiring a deep understanding of' what it termed as 'folk arts.' But passages in the manifesto preceding the enlistment of this objective also indicate that the troupe was rather interested in critically engaging with past instances of cultural resistance against Brahmanism; of direct relevance was the resistance in Maharashtra of the Warkari saint poets and the non-Brahmin movement led by Phule. The section of the manifesto titled 'Directions for the struggle against Brahmanism' noted:

"Somebody explain to me the meaning of Vedas / Vedas are a pain in the head."²⁵

Such was the revolutionary voice of Sant Tukaram in which he attacked Brahmanic culture and its principles. That is how he became an icon of working castes and communities. Whereas Krantisurya Jyotirao Phule took this tradition ahead and made it into a revolutionary alternative; in his book titled Gulamgiri, he foregrounded Baliraja as the first martyr in the struggle against Brahmanism, thus reinforcing Indian history as a cultural struggle. On this basis, a new cultural perspective to end the exploitation of caste, class and gender emerged and progressed. (Kabir Kala Manch 2016, 7)²⁶

²⁵ No further details about the abhang are provided in the manifesto.

²⁶ Original in Marathi; translation mine.

Further passages enlisted instances of cultural resistance from across the subcontinent, such as Buddhism, Sikhism, Nath-panthis and Sufis, though no clarification was offered regarding how they could help counter the politics of neoliberal Hindutva:

We are legatees of a revolutionary tradition

An important feature of Indian history is that in every era, there were forces from the revolutionary tradition that rejected contemporaneous brahmanic culture, waged resistance and took ahead the cultural struggle of the exploited. This tradition, through philosophy, literature, art, and mass struggles on the ground, has dreamed about and stressed on egalitarianism. It includes movements of the Lokayats, Buddhists, Mahanubhavs, Lingayats, Sikhs, Nath-panthis, Sufis, the warkari sect, Satyashodak jalsas, Lal Bawta Kalapathak, Dalit literature, non-brahmin literature, Adivasi literature, feminist literature etc, and Kabir Kala Manch follows the lead of, and considers as its own, all cultural movements that are part of this revolutionary stream. As legatees of this tradition, we are putting in all efforts to take this movement ahead. (Kabir Kala Manch 2016, 9).²⁷

Taken together, these manifesto and statements clarify that while both troupes conceived of ideology as ‘mental frameworks’ à la Gramsci and Hall. KKM built on Avahan’s perspectives regarding ideological struggle against caste, class and gender exploitation and domination, and sought to align this struggle with the histories of resistance against Brahmanism across the subcontinent.

This indicates, among other things, that activists in the two troupes placed their everyday behaviour under the lens as they tried to bridge the gap between their professed ideological position and their practice. It also indicates that group activity – wherein activists from different socio-economic locations and ideological positions met and produced art together – was a key terrain of ideological struggle and that the collective comprised a nascent counter-hegemonic community, within which members negotiated their differences and struggles, and cared for and supported each other. The following segment teases this out by referring closely to the activities and interventions of first Avahan and then Kabir Kala Manch.

²⁷ Original in Marathi; translation mine.

PART II: GROUP DYNAMICS

AVAHAN NATYA MANCH

Interviews with core members of Avahan indicate that the troupe's activity could be broken down into three distinct phases, with corresponding shifts in its ideological position. The first phase encompassed the initial 18-20 months after January 1979, when Avahan comprised a loose collective of working class student-activists coalesced around progressive (upper) middle class students such as Sanober and Ashwin, which devised plays through workshops. The collective functioned as an extension of VPS during this period, and overemphasised, often mechanically, on class struggle without considering the caste question seriously. The entry of Dalit activists such as Sambhaji and Vilas in 1980-81 heralded the second phase, wherein Avahan catalysed into a specialised cultural troupe steered by privileged and subaltern caste-class activists. Interactions between activists from diverse caste-class positions alerted the collective to the ideological simplifications of the earlier period and exposed members to how embodied behaviour reflects and perpetuates caste distinctions, while association with VPS demarcated the troupe as an autonomous entity especially in terms of its position on caste and culture. The third phase exposed the limits of such autonomy, as members who raised questions about the proximity of some VPS members with NGOs and figures such as Swami Agnivesh (who were widely criticised for upholding the politics of Hindutva in ensuing years), leading to their expulsion from the troupe.

OVEREMPHASIS ON CLASS

The St Xavier's and the Elphinstone colleges in Bombay were established in the nineteenth century. Located in the posh southern enclaves of the city, both colleges largely drew students from upper caste-class backgrounds, and counted among their alumni several illustrious leaders and intellectuals.

In the post-Emergency period, these colleges emerged as important centres of student activism with far Left leanings.

Most of the students who co-founded the VPS in 1978 and comprised its early members and sympathisers were students in these two colleges. Among them was Sanober Keshwar, a student of Elphinstone College and founding member of Avahan, whose account of events and circumstances that led to the formation of the troupe captures the restive environment of the time.

Excerpted below, Sanober's account is noteworthy as it shows that Avahan emerged organically out of efforts by VPS activists to reach out to students and the general public. However, the initial steps in this direction were tentative and in the early weeks, there was no well-formed group but only a cluster of workshops known as Avahan Theatre Workshop:

It was just after Emergency. That is when I went for my first *morcha* [rally].

So we belong to that era...our college was a terrific college. I mean, Mao Tse Tung died in 1976, so we had somebody called Lone Zaccharai from the University who came and lectured us on the relevance of Mao Tse Tung. And when Mao died, we observed two minutes silence in our Political Science class. So it was something out of the ordinary for....

...That is the time when you had agitations, like you had in Xavier's...They were agitating for more democratic functioning and the Principal called Lancy Perreira was a bit of a dictatorial kind. Two students we knew who were leading the Xavieran Union²⁸ – Sanjay Singhvi and Ravi Hazari – were refused admission for their last academic year. To protest this, they went on a hunger strike which lasted 9 days before the authorities agreed to take them back.

While they were on hunger strike, we mobilized some 150 students from Elphinstone College to march in a *morcha* in their support to St. Xavier's. All I did was stand in the college canteen and appeal to fellow Elphinstonians to support the just demand of the students of St. Xavier's. And so many students responded! It was just amazing...it was the magic of that time, one can't imagine such an overwhelming spontaneous response of this kind in today's situation....

Even before that, Gurbir Singh was thrown out of Xavier's and then he came to Elphinstone...He was thrown out in first year, inter arts. He came to Elphinstone in junior BA. So he was already very active. And all the students' unions were active. Like we had SFI – it was active; AISF was somewhat active in some places; ABVP was there but not in such a way—it was in central Bombay colleges...

²⁸ An independent students' body fighting for democracy in the college.

When VPS was formed, it was a group of very inspired young people. When I joined them, they said to me, why don't you do some theatre which is meaningful and all that. and I said, haan okay, we'll do something. And there was nobody to write songs and all. So I used to think of old hymn...type...the more militant hymn, and to those tunes I would put some...(tries to recall by singing)

Vidyarthion ki takat mahan, usko pehchano...ladenge hum, jeetegne hum, ab humko pehchano [Power of students is immense, recognise that... We will fight, we will win, now recognise us].

Then, because I had so much interest in theatre, people suggested why don't you start a theatre group. So I said we should do workshops and train. That was my idea at the time. They had thought of Avahan as the name for a magazine earlier (published as *Kalam*), which means call or challenge. So I said, let's call it Avahan. The first thing I formed was Avahan Theatre Workshop, with the encouragement of all these comrades of mine.²⁹

Although there were others in the initial lot of VPS/Avahan activists such as Ashwin who had some interest and exposure to theatre, Sanober was especially qualified to conduct these initial workshops, whose objective was to train amateur students in theatre.

One reason for this was her wide exposure to various performing arts since her childhood:

I was very interested in theatre and music since my school days. I learned the piano up to 8th grade, and I was a singer. We used to compete in choirs and inter-collegiate competitions and got many prizes in that. So basically, I had interest in the performing arts. Serious interest...after that, I went to Elphinstone College, and there also I used to take part in every damn drama competition or any chance to put up a play.

She also acted professionally in commercial, proscenium plays for a brief period during her last months in college, when she worked alongside several reputed thespians. Her directors included Anmol Vellani, Naseeruddin Shah and Adi Murzban, and the likes of Amita Kagal, Soni Razdan and Roger Ferreira were her co-actors.

²⁹ Interviewed by me on December 24, 2018 in Pune, originally in English. The same applies for all of Sanober's quotes in the chapter.

Additionally, her membership of the USIS library exposed her to the latest literature and perspectives on political theatre from across the world; this included the work of Richard Schechner, venerated as the founder of Performance Studies; material on the Cultural Revolution in China; and the acclaimed magazine on theatre *The Drama Review*. The novelty of perusing audio-visual recordings in the library is unmissable in her account excerpted below:

There used to be this USIS library. Membership was free. So I became a member of that. Because I was so interested in theatre, and my father told me that if you are interested in theatre, pursue it. Pursue it as a career if you want. Acting, teaching, directing, writing, that was his...he really was like that, a free man with me. Whatever you want to do, but he said, you do it properly. Don't do it like...don't dabble in things. So then I used to go there, and there.

I mean just now it's so regular, but then it was not regular. You had to wait in queue if you want to see a cassette. So I used to see this Richard Schechner. I remember his name also. He had seen Ram Leela and he had seen these processions in India and he had tried to theorise about that.

About how you can have mass theatre, and stuff like that.

Then, I had seen these Chinese performers during the Cultural Revolution, where lots of ballads were done, where they performed for huge audiences and all that. So theatre as a spectacle, as a political spectacle, I was interested in. So that's how I saw all this.

So I started reading. Then that person saw I was interested and said, you know there is this *The Drama Review*, TDR, which is a very famous thing. So she showed me the section. After that, I used to go and read. About Latin American theatre and this and that...protest theatre across the world. So there were issues on various things. So that was an interesting...view of the world like that.

The account of Salim Saboowala, who joined Avahan when the initial round of workshops was underway, is noteworthy on several counts. It shows that from its very early days, Avahan was characterised by openness – this enabled a rookie like him who had no experience in theatre or politics to become part of the group and indulge his passion for acting. He mentions being

politicised by films like *Naya Daur*, which were representative of Indian new wave cinema that was ‘connected to a concern with aesthetics, to a seriousness of intent, and to a representation of social issues with a drive towards an understanding of reality in all its complexities’ (Bhaskar 2013, 19).

Salim confirms that the collective was marshalled by Sanober, who conducted workshops and directed plays; and that she and Ashwin were inspired by Badal Sircar’s ‘third theatre’,³⁰ had prior experience of acting on stage, and used to watch a lot of plays, which enhanced their knowledge about theatre and posited them as experts within the collective. He also indicates that in the initial months, ‘100 percent’ of Avahan activists were associated with VPS, and the group, for all practical purposes, was an extension of the students’ union:

My consciousness of exploitation and agitation came from the movies. I was fortunate in that I was able to see many good movies, like *Naya Daur* and *Leader*. They gave me a picture of exploitation, agitation, fighting for freedom, which was not theoretical. So when I joined VPS in January (1978), I came across people I did not meet before. They were very good in interacting with others and all...

When Avahan Natya Manch was formed, it was 1979. It started as Avahan Workshop, then it became Avahan Natya Manch. They were rehearsing in Elphinstone college. Sanober was directing a play, so I asked her if I could join, because I always liked acting. I was a movie buff, so I used to see lots of movies. My favourite was Dilip Kumar. I really liked his acting... So rehearsal for a street play was on. They must have fallen short of people. I asked Sanober if I could also act and she said yes.

Most of the other people were from VPS only. The people active in Avahan were not a specialised cultural people. There was no separate Avahan as such. Hundred percent of the people were from VPS. For example, myself, Sanober, Ashwin and many others. They were all from VPS.

The initial people who were there in Avahan was mostly Sanober, Ashwin.

One person who was not directly involved but would contribute to our

³⁰ The fourth chapter of the thesis titled *Collective Art Production* discusses the impact of ‘third theatre’ on Avahan’s work in detail.

work quite a lot was Sunil Shanbag. I don't know about Sunil, but Sanober and all – they were very much influenced by Badal Sircar and his way of street play. They used to do street plays on a truck and they used to have a *bonga* [mobile loudspeaker]. They would open all the three sides of the truck and they used to shout. And people used to gather around the truck for the street play. They (Ashwin and Sanober) were inspired by that. I did not know of Badal Sircar before joining Avahan. Even now, I have not read his play...I have not studied street play or any cultural form theoretically. For me it was (about) engagement.

...So Avahan was a spontaneous thing, going to Avahan. When I joined Avahan, Sanober and Ashwin were functioning. They used to go see lots of plays and learn from them. As it is, they were very interested in plays before. They themselves were actors, and acted in plays and all. I used to watch movies. Whereas they were very interested in seeing plays. I think they used to see more plays than movies. That's how it was. Since they were also good readers, they read quite a lot. They knew many things about plays.³¹

Avahan's first play, which emerged out of the initial round of workshops and included Salim as an actor, was a proscenium production on state repression. Both Salim and Sanober's account of how it came to be shows that from the early days, Avahan activists maintained close contact with civil society groups such as CPDR, and devised plays responding to their needs and requirements, often drawing on archival material including reports in progressive journals and magazines such as *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW). Sanober said:

The first play we did was for CPDR. They were having some meeting on repression of Naxals in Telangana...and we were asked to do a play on repression, both in the countryside, and in industry in the city. So we did that...we took up few stories about what happens from EPW, and I set...I blocked and people volunteered and we did a small play.

Salim provided details regarding the form, venue, and audience numbers:

³¹ Interviewed by me on December 23, 2018 in Mumbai, originally in English. The same applies for all of Salim's quotes in the chapter.

The first thing was, the play was not dialogue-based; it was a mime.³² We were miming everything. If the police came, we'd be marching. If a money lender or landlord is exploiting the peasant, we'd show it all in action. There were no dialogues.

CPDR had a very good place at that time. In the hall where we performed, the balcony as well as the ground floor, both sections were full.

Sanober drew attention to the collective efforts that went into the play and the songs that were a central part of it. She provided insights regarding its scale and reception, and mentioned that the idea of producing and performing street plays – which comprised Avahan's forte in subsequent years – emerged from conversations following this first proscenium production:

Then we had one chap called Jayprakash with us. He was a good singer and put together a nice song. It was something like...very nice songs and I picturised those songs. Now, most of this, I was putting it together, but everybody was helping with ideas...things like that...like somehow it was well received and all. And so many people acting! It was huge cast of 15, and there was music and real, actual scenes, and it was well rehearsed. That time, I remember, they told me I should think of street theatre. There was some group from Chandigarh which had come. I didn't see their play...means I was told about it, but I didn't see it. But I started reading, thinking, okay, we can perform on the street.

Avahan's push towards street theatre was realised through *Shiksha ka Circus* (The Circus of Education), which demanded a rollback of the fee hike announced by the Bombay University in 1978-79.³³ Activists performed this and the two subsequent plays (which urged audiences to boycott elections to the Lok Sabha and the Maharashtra assembly respectively) in street corners, college campuses, railway station premises and other public spaces; all three plays were devised through workshops.

Salim mentioned that all these street plays (like the first proscenium play) were produced in

³² Mime is a form of performance that involves acting or communicating using only movements, gestures, and facial expressions. A person performing mime is also called a mime.

³³ Student protests erupted in 1978 after the Bombay University proposed a 33 percent fee rise. Although the hike was withdrawn in the face of massive sit-ins, rail blockades and a capture of the university by students, it was re-announced in 1979.

support of larger campaigns, and clarified that that throughout its first phase, Avahan was very much a unit of VPS, and produced propagandist plays in support of its positions. Further, that there was no policy of expanding Avahan, and its primary task comprised strengthening and mobilising people behind the parent organisation. Excerpted below, his account indicates that the VPS leadership prioritised organisational work over cultural work such as putting up plays and did not mind assigning organisational work to activists whose primary interest lay in theatre and performance. Salim's lament over not being part of Avahan's first street play is especially noteworthy here, and signposts the lack of choice and agency on the part of ordinary activists within the VPS/Avahan collective, which changed fundamentally after Avahan emerged as a distinct 'specialised cultural troupe' following the entry of Dalit activists:

See, when I joined Avahan, most of our activities were linked with VPS or CPDR. Whatever issues CPDR or VPS used to take up, we used to make street plays for them. For example, for CPDR, it was just a one-day programme. There was some draconian law...

When VPS used to take up an issue, we used to perform a lot. Like when the fee rise was announced [for the first time], we took over university and did a very long agitation, following which the fee rise was scrapped. But it was announced again. This time, we made a street play as well. It was named Shiksha ka Circus.

I was not there in that street play, because a very specialised cultural troupe took shape much later. [At that point] People were in VPS and Avahan; since many people who performed were from south Bombay, and there were very less people organising in central area,³⁴ in my zone, I was not there in the play.

That must be the only big play in which I was not there. Otherwise, in every big campaign that took place later, I was there.

We agitated quite a lot [at the time of the second fee rise]. We had formed a front at that time – SAFAC. There was a very brutal lathi charge...It was near the TV tower...it was very brutal. After that also, we had a college

³⁴ The central area comprised largely of the Girangaon textile mill district and other working class neighbourhoods.

bandh and a street play campaign, but we couldn't get the fee rise scrapped. But VPS grew [during this process]. At that time, the policy was to expand VPS, not Avahan. We never had a policy of expanding Avahan.

During this early phase, Avahan as such existed intermittently. It came together as and when allied organisations such as VPS and NBS required a play on some issue, and the play would be devised through workshops spread over several days, conducted by Sanober and Ashwin. Every fresh formation had some new members, some dropouts, and some older ones like Salim, Sanober and Ashwin. The distribution of rich and poor activists within the group throughout was nearly equal; that the difference between these segments was not only economic but also cultural is evidenced in Sanober's account of group composition during this period:

It's all students from this kind of thoda upper class Bombay type of colleges, and some vernaculars also from those colleges – you know we used to say vernaculars for people who were from Hindi background. From Burhani and Ambedkar colleges and all. So there were also lower middle class, working class types with us. Like it was 50-50.

In terms of ideological position, this loose collective overemphasised on class without any paying any serious attention to caste. This is evidenced in Salim's recollection of study classes that Avahan/VPS activists underwent at this time. He lists a number of texts discussed in study classes such as Mao's *Little Red Book*, Lenin's *State and Revolution*, Emile Burns' *What is Marxism*, and literature on the Naxalbari movement and the Chinese revolution, which were standard fare for Marxist-Leninist groups in India. But he does not list any texts by Ambedkar or Phule:

When we were in VPS, we used to have some classes. Like, we used to study *Mao's Little Red Book*. We used to discuss on Communists, Communism. Then Lenin, of course, the favourite book was *State and Revolution*. Then, *What is Marxism* by Emile Burns. Lots of books on Naxalbari. There used to be two types of reading: in classes and personal reading. We used to read personally also.

I remember *What is Marxism* by Burns. Then, the *Frontier* anthology on Naxalbari and after, I remember. Then, *Mao's Little Red Book*. Much later, I read books like *Red Star Over China*, *China Shakes the World*...then, Sumanta

Banerjee's book.³⁵

The collective's overemphasis on class is also evidenced in Sanober's discussion of how upper caste-class Avahan/VPS activists like herself, Ashwin and Sanjay Singhvi were invested in the idea of declassing; that is, leaving behind the comforts, habits and privileges owing to one's rich, upper (middle) class background and living simply like/ with the working class, which was a key motto of 'Communist self-fashioning' in India (Dasgupta 2014). Sanober mentioned this while recollecting a conversation with a senior comrade, which exposed her 'infantile' understanding of class and declassing. Excerpted below, her account shows that among activists, the idea extended to the realm of culture, and influenced what art, literature and music they engaged with, and what they rejected:

I was very fond of western classical music and my (VPS) comrades used to tell me...you see, you just see the class problem here. All the others who didn't know said this is very bourgeoisie, and you should give it up. So I had a lot of tapes and all – I just gave them away, I said I don't listen to this. He had heard about all this.

Once, when I had gone to his home, he put on Beethoven's fifth symphony. Surprised, I asked him – How come you are listening to this kind of music?

He said why not! I said, it is so bourgeois...I said we should be like proletarians. He said who told you this rubbish; then he told the history of Beethoven, which I knew. And said that what's so bourgeoisie about him...He is a radical of his time. He revolutionised music. How can you talk like that, just listen to this. I said yes, you don't have to tell me. This music moves me to tears.

He said, who told you these things, who said you can't enjoy this music? This is beautiful music. It's revolutionary music. Then I said I gave all my tapes away. I remember telling him that. He said don't do like this. In retrospect, I was affected with what we call an 'early infantile disorder'.

Given its overemphasis on class, VPS' push towards establishing a presence in colleges that had a sizeable working class student population was not surprising. Sanober's account of colleges

³⁵ Salim is referring to Banerjee's *In the Wake of Naxalbari* (1980).

in Bombay being divided into different zones and separate teams being constituted to organise students therein, attested to this push and drew attention to the class segregation in colleges in the city:

We used to go to colleges where working class people come. Because if we are interested in Marxism and we want to reach the working class, we can't be in this sort of colleges [Elphinstone, Xavier's and other south Bombay colleges]. In VPS, we had different zones; south zone was all this Xavier's, Elphinstone, Wilson; and south central was Burhani and all, Maharashtra College; north east was Jhunjhunwala, Somaiya...there were people from those colleges. Ambedkar was central Bombay, central zone – two people went to Ambedkar College and we used to perform at the college gate.

As is apparent in Sanober's account, the push towards working class colleges included attempts to establish presence in colleges where Dalit students predominated, such as Ambedkar College, and the VPS leadership specifically deputed activists to mobilise students from these colleges. Salim's account of the push excerpted below corroborates this, and indicates that the push towards Dalit colleges was fuelled partly by the VPS leadership's desire to attract 'the only section that was in agitation always' (as Salim put it); the early 1980s witnessed a spate of Dalit mobilisations across India over the Mandal Commission report, and in Maharashtra over demands to rename Marathwada University.

Yet, his account also shows that the push alerted activists to the immanence of caste and class relations. Salim speaks about being inspired by the Dalit Panthers and realising that the land question could be represented in either caste or class terms, and neither was incorrect. He also attests to the large influx of Dalit migrants to Bombay in the 1970s, fleeing severe droughts and natural calamities in Marathwada and other regions of Maharashtra:

...We felt that the most exploited section of society comprises Dalits and tribals. Of course, in a city like Bombay, you may not find many tribals. But during that time, there were waves of Dalit students from rural areas coming to Bombay for education. Because many of the districts did not have higher education, they did not even have colleges, so they used to come to Bombay or other cities in Maharashtra for their graduation. Since the Dalit movement was very big in Maharashtra, and since it started

in Bombay, we got inspiration from there. Dalit Panthers started in Bombay, and it was a moving issue. The tussle over renaming Marathwada University was also going on. So that was the only section that was in agitation always, for issues. For dignity, for self-determination; it was there. So we took a decision that if we work in those colleges, we might get students who will work dedicatedly, and who will be more agitational since they have been exploited for so long, if we join them in their programme... We did not make any programme for them. They already had their programme. The point was to join them. And when they came to know that whatever we were doing was very similar to their... We supported reservation, which hardly anyone did. No one took up Dalit issues as Dalit issues, which we did. If there was repression of Dalits, we took it up as a Dalit issue, not mechanically...even though the same issue was also a landless peasant issue. Of course, we took it as a landless peasant issue, but we also took it as a Dalit issue, who were separated from the rest of the society. The first good entry we got was in Siddharth and Ambedkar colleges. The latter more so because it had a hostel. So people who were studying there were staying in the hostel. So we could meet them after college.

The 'good entry' in Ambedkar College and hostel was crucial, as it linked up Avahan/VPS activists with Dalit students like Sambhaji and forced them to confront the caste question.

COMING TO TERMS WITH CASTE

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the Siddharth Vihar hostel in Bombay's Wadala neighbourhood and the Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics remained strongholds of the Dalit movement. Both were closely associated with the emergence of Dalit Panthers in 1972, which drew hundreds of students from lower caste-class backgrounds into radical politics by introducing caste annihilation as a key objective alongside freedom from class exploitation. By the early 1980s, when the Panthers had fractured, these spaces became important centres of the nantar movement.

The decision to work in these spaces reshaped Avahan in two crucial ways. Firstly, it facilitated the entry of Dalit student-activists like Sambhaji Bhagat, Bapu Kamble and Bhagwan Nile

who were well-versed with popular performative traditions into the group, and this facilitated its development into a specialised cultural troupe. Secondly, their entry catalysed a deep engagement with the caste question among troupe members. Although they were aware of caste earlier and produced a play titled *Jatiwad Ka Virodh* (July 1979, 15 shows), activists' knowledge and understanding of what caste *meant* in lived experience and everyday life underwent a fundamental shift when Dalits and non-Dalit activists became friends and comrades, visited each other's houses, participated in festivals and family programmes, and travelled far and wide together on performance tours, spending days and nights in each other's company. Intra-group interactions also altered them to the overlaps between caste and class, and the ways in which they were fundamentally yoked.

Some aspects of what caste meant in everyday life and how it was different from class became apparent to Avahan/VPS activists soon after they entered Dalit colleges and hostels. Salim, whose class position was nearly the same as that of Dalit students, mentioned being struck by two aspects of Dalit life: the high degree of violence and precarity that Dalits endured, and their immense knowledge and experience of popular performative forms and genres.

Salim's account of the encounter, excerpted below, conveys his shock at this new learning; it also draws attention to two other key differences between activists who were part of Avahan till then and the new Dalit members; the former resided in Bombay and did not know Marathi (their first language was Hindi or English) whereas the latter were mostly migrants from rural areas whose native language was Marathi:

There [Siddharth Vihar hostel] it was always...The namantar issue was always there. There was lot of exploitation in districts of Maharashtra.

People were always discussing these, that so and so people have been killed in such and such places, and they were always agitated. And preparation of namantar issues, taking rallies etc was always there. Because that was the *killa* [fortress] of the Dalit movement. Maya Nagar, BDD chawl, Siddharth Vihar [neighbourhoods in Bombay] —all these were the killas of the Dalit movement.

...The Dalit students whom I met, you could make out that they were coming from a rural background. At that time, phones were a luxury, and there not many public phones. They hardly knew how to speak on phones.

They could not put many things forward.

But many of them knew their cultural thing very well. In the sense, they knew how to play instruments, sing songs... all the popular Marathi songs, bhajans, ovis etc....they used to sing quite well. So that was definitely a difference in these colleges. Definitely there was a difference, because language itself [was different]...because we never had dominantly Marathi speaking people. We were all either Hindi or English speakers. So that was a difference.

Although Sambhaji was from the formerly untouchable Chamar jati and as poor as other Dalit students, he was equally if not more shocked than his future Avahan peers after he secured admission in Ambedkar College and moved into Siddharth Vihar Hostel in 1980. In his interview with me, he referred to living in Siddharth Vihar as the turning point in his life. Excerpted below, his account shows that one key reason for this was his background in the RSS; he also indicates that he was unaware of caste atrocities before moving to the hostel, most likely because such incidents were rare in and around Panchgani, where he spent childhood and adolescence:

I secured admission in Siddharth Vihar hostel after entering college. That was the turning point of my life. I was inspired by RSS, and Siddharth Vihar was completely anti-RSS. Then all my doubts started coming out! ...The Dalit Panthers movement was on its decline then, but there was graffiti from all across the walls of the hostel. Inspired by the RSS, I wanted to do something for the country. But I was unaware of the Ambedkarite version of this. In RSS, we were told that Ambedkar was a *dharm-drohi*. [In the hostel] There were conversations everyday among students about caste atrocities occurring in different parts of Maharashtra. I wrote to my friends in RSS—that you taught me so and so, but the condition of the country is such and such, what is the reason for this; why have you kept alive the chatur-varna Hindu religion? They had no replies; they merely said Hindu religion is not like this; we work for the country; later, they neglected me. I understood, they did not have answers to my questions. But the Ambedkarites did not seem like an alternative either, because neither

they had any answers.³⁶

The account signposts how spaces such as Siddharth Vihar weaned away Dalits from the RSS despite the fracture and disarray in the Ambedkarite movement. Sambhaji provides further details on both these aspects in his autobiography *Kaatla Khaalcha Pani* (Water Under the Rock) (Bhagat 1999), which is evidenced in the excerpt below. Several aspects in the passages that follow are noteworthy.

Firstly, they attest that like in the early twentieth century, Dalit life in Bombay was precarious at the end of the century as well, especially in terms of housing and employment. Sambhaji talks of the overcrowding in Siddharth Vihar hostel, and the presence of many ‘illegal’ occupants who did odd jobs in the city. He mentions applying for multiple jobs but failing to crack interviews (while in college) as they were conducted in English; and finally managing to find a job in a transport company that took up the entire day, leaving only a couple of hours in the morning for college.

Secondly, the passages draw attention to the frustration among politicised Dalit youth especially after the fracture of the Dalit Panthers movement, and the absence of any parties or organisations that could seriously address their concerns. Sambhaji speaks of the cultural violence, the discrimination and derision that Dalits faced in offices in the city, which appeared as another version of the physical violence that they had endured in villages; he also points at deep divisions within Dalits that were reflected in the company that they kept at the hostel, and their strong religiosity. He talks of several parties and formations including Ambedkarite groups and highly sectarian Communist groups that were ‘all talk and no action’; he also talks of the race among hostel inmates to catch up with and make place for themselves in the Dalit middle class.

Thirdly, the passages illustrate how Dalits had a natural flair for performance³⁷ and used utilitarian objects ingeniously to fashion musical instruments and props and hold impromptu singing sessions. The boisterous gatherings in Sambhaji’s room, which he shared with several other legal and illegal occupants including a *qawwal*, and their sessions of music and singing that extended late into the night, provide glimpses of the immense cultural capital of Dalits, who could play a

³⁶ Interviewed by me on July 1, 2017 in Navi Mumbai; the interview was conducted in Hindi and translations are mine. The same applies for all quotes of Sambhaji included in the chapter.

³⁷ This would apply to those Dalits whose traditional occupation was performance, but also to others like Sambhaji (born into a Chambhar family) who were well exposed to performative traditions including warkari abhangs and bhajans.

number of instruments and sing ‘all the popular Marathi songs, bhajans, ovis, etc...quite well’, in Salim’s words.

Fourthly, the passages show that although conversations in Siddharth Vihar weaned Sambhaji away from the RSS and spurred many questions in him, college textbooks (in addition to hostel mates) failed to provide any answers as they were all in English and Sambhaji did not understand a word of them. In his search for answers, he turned to the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sangrahalay, a public library located in Dadar that stocked Marathi books and allowed visitors free access to the reading room. He visited the place every Sunday, his day off from work, and sought out books by BR Ambedkar. He was especially moved by *Who were the Sudras*, most likely because it provided a completely opposite understanding of history to that propagated by the RSS. Occasionally, he also sought refuge from thinking by writing poetry that he considered ‘tripe’.

Sambhaji wrote:

I used to really like this hostel and more than that I liked my roommates. My room in the hostel was a three-seater meant for three persons. However, there were always three to four more boys staying there. In the language of the rector, this was “illegal”. The important thing was that all of these boys were active in the Panther movement of the Vidarbha region. When the movement broke out there, they came down to Bombay. Some were doing law, some were doing jobs, and some were frustrated due to the fractured movement. Therefore, many discussions used to take place every evening. They all were staunch Ambedkarites. Initially, I used to just listen to these discussions. The office-going boys used to share their stories about a Dalit man isolated in office or how people use to make faces and comments because they had landed jobs in the reserved quota. During the discussion, they used to curse and abuse the Brahmins. If someone showed the Brahmin his place then he would be appreciated, or there would be a discussion on how to teach them (Brahmins) a lesson. Similarly, these boys used to abuse Dalit leaders holding them responsible for the situation of the Dalit movement.

My roommates were Pramod Themaskar, a student leader in his college days and Dayanand Gaikwad, a qawwal with a powerful voice. Then there

was Gajbhiye from Nagpur, and the remaining three or four used to come and go.

My life started improving after coming to the hostel. I used to go to college every morning and go off to work by 10 o'clock. When I returned at night, there were always lively discussions going on in the room. In addition, since our Gaikwad was a qawwal, sometimes in the evening he used to sing if he was in the mood for it or if Pramod buttered him to sing and then he used to start in full swing. He would take out his suitcase from below his cot, hold it like a harmonium box, tie a handkerchief around his head like a qawwal, and belt out qawwalis. If someone had given him an opportunity, then he would have been another Pralhad Shinde or Aziz Naza. The boys from the lower floors used to come to the third floor to listen to the qawwalis of Gaikwad. I too used to sing but my voice was trash in comparison to his voice. Our room was famous because it housed this qawwal and politically active people. All of us had jobs. Gaikwad was in the Postal Department, Gajbhiye in the bank and Pramod Themaskar at Mantralaya. I was the only person working in transport. We used to meet only at night. However, on Sundays, we used to contribute money and bring mutton or chicken, cook it in the room and eat it.

After some days, I told them that I was in the RSS. They were very surprised, and started asking me more about the RSS. These boys considered the RSS to be the number one enemy of Dalits. Although I was not in agreement with the RSS, I was bred in Hindu culture. My culture was not Ambedkarite like theirs so I was scared to participate in the discussions. I was not well read at all, and I didn't even have the time to read. The base of my understanding was... whatever knowledge I had, I gleaned from those discussions. These people used to discuss politics so much but they were not members or tied to any party or organization. After the disintegration of the Panther movement, they used to think that no movement would bring any change in this country, so Babasaheb had created reserved quota to uplift the Dalits, therefore they always used to think about how to get

jobs for as many Dalits as possible.

Till I came to the hostel, I knew almost nothing about Babasaheb. I was ashamed that Babasaheb had fought for the rights of not only the Mahars but for all castes, and even though he had won them, I did not know anything about him. Within the framework of Hinduism, my caste was low down on the ladder, and there was no history of rebellion in that caste. This made me feel that my caste was backward. A small spark of hatred for Hinduism was lit in my mind.

Even though I got some text books from college, I couldn't understand a single line of that book, what was the point in reading it? So opening a book felt like opening a gutter, thus on Sundays I started visiting the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sangrahalaya to read. At least four or five boys from the hostel used to sit there every day. I used to ask for Babasaheb's books.

I would sit there all day reading and come to the room lost in thought. Despite reading I didn't understand much. But when I read 'Who were the Shudras?' I learnt that my ancestors had been warriors and rulers. While I was in Panchgani I had read books propagating Hindutva. Now I understood how Ambedkar and Hindutvadis (right-wingers) stood diametrically opposed to each other.

Some lecturers of Siddharth College and Ambedkar College used to come to our room often. They had been in college with Pramod and had recently become lecturers. At that time, I got to know many professors closely.

When they were talking to each other, I used to be a keen listener. I used to be amazed by their obsession with reading and realized how little I knew.

All of them were graduates from Nagpur University and Marathwada University, but they never spoke in English. This made me doubt whether they ever spoke in English to their students in class at all!

... There used to be a paper called Employment News. My roommate would keep pushing me to apply for jobs. I submitted many such applications. I would sit for the written exams, pass the test successfully but inevitably fail in the oral exam. No one asked anything in Marathi in the

interview, and answering in English was a nightmare for me.

There used to be Chamar, Mang and Adivasi boys in the hostel. However, they kept to their own caste groups. In their rooms, the images of Ganapati-Saraswati, Khandoba were displayed. At that time, there was a schism between the Buddhist boys who rose up against the Hindu Gods and the boys who considered the Hindu God as superior. This I found out after spending eight to ten months in the hostel. Although I was a Chamar, I was always with Buddhist boys and this was a matter of great surprise to them. As I started reading and discussing, I started moving away from Hinduism. ...During the discussions in the hostel room the boys used to abuse and insult all the parties and organisations. They were all ardent followers of Babasaheb but they were not interested in really getting down to action. We must get settled first and then we can become active in the social struggles was the main idea which echoed throughout the discussion. I couldn't see anyone of them getting down to concrete action. The hostel was full of boys who were members of Mass Movement, Dalit Panthers, Yuvak Kranti Dal, Communists meaning Russian Communists and Albanian Communists and other insignificant organizations. It was "All talk and no action". The rest of the boys were like normal apolitical people who were committed to the limited agendas of work and education. As for me, I just kept reading and thinking more and more day-by-day which resulted in me starting to write poetry that was tripe. (Bhagat 1999, 154-158)³⁸

Somewhere around this time, Sambhaji writes in his autobiography, he encountered a show of Avahan's boycott election street play outside Churchgate station. He was touched ('I felt they were saying something sensible') as well as intrigued, as he believed theatre was only possible on stage, using sets, lights, curtains, make-up and costumes. He wanted to speak to the actors, to find out more about them and their group, but a police raid disrupted the show and sent everyone fleeing. Sometime later, however, Sambhaji spotted a girl 'who looked more like a social worker' – a VPS activist who was part of the organisation's Dalit push, adequately declassed – distributing pamphlets in front of Ambedkar College. Within minutes of initiating a conversation, he realised

³⁸ Original in Marathi, all translations from the book included in the chapter are by Rashmi Divekar.

that she was from the same group as the actors outside Churchgate station, and asked to meet them.

Sambhaji's account in *Kaatla Khaalcha Pani* of his first two meetings with Avahan/VPS activists, excerpted below, shows that the encounters impressed as well as surprised both sides. Sambhaji's cynicism about Avahan activists and the larger VPS group is palpable; although he was convinced about their knowledge of university affairs courtesy their leaflet, it didn't move him much as he was disinterested in academics. His 'main interest' instead was on understanding the group's stand on social issues. Given his exposure to numerous organisations that were 'all talk and no action', this was not surprising. Yet, it is also evident that he was impressed with their humility, simplicity (evidently owing to declassing) and diversity (he identified Punjabi, Madrasi, Muslim among those present in these meetings), and the interactions forced him to confront his patriarchal bias that assumed that girls were not intelligent. He was especially delighted to learn that Bhagwan Nile, a Dalit writer who had earned a name with his fiery poetry and whose work Sambhaji read with immense interest alongside Namdeo Dhasal and others, was associated with VPS/ Avahan.

Further, the excerpt below shows that the interaction between Sambhaji and Avahan activists was marked by honesty, affection and openness, and both parties expressed themselves freely before each other irrespective of their caste, class and gender. Avahan activists' incessant questions to him about their play and about himself offer proof of unabashed expression, as does Sambhaji's 'feeling good' in their company and sharing with them the first poems that he had written. Bhagwan's measured response to his poems ('they are okay, you continue writing, don't stop') as opposed to outright dismissal or unworthy praise, shows that activists encouraged as much as criticised each other. The bonhomie between Bhagwan, Sambhaji and Ashwin evidenced towards the end of the excerpt reaffirms the presence of free expression and appreciation across caste-class lines; it shows that upper caste-class Avahan activists like Ashwin who till then comprised the collective's nucleus were curious about and appreciative of Sambhaji's deep knowledge of popular cultural forms such as bharud,³⁹ lejim,⁴⁰ powada and so on. Sambhaji wrote:

³⁹ Bharud is a form of singing used by Eknath and other Warakri sant kavis to spread their philosophy. It can be classified into two broad types – bhajani bharuds that deal with religion/spirituality and songi bharuds that often feature men dressed as women and are more popular.

⁴⁰ Lejim or lezim is a folk dance form involving vigorous movements and exercise, and is widely performed in Maharashtra during the Ganapati festival. The dance takes its name from the wooden idiophone fixed with jingling cymbals, also called lezim, that dancers use during performance.

During my afternoon break [in office], I read the leaflet she [VPS activist] had given me [in front of Ambedkar College earlier that morning]. From the vice-chancellor of the university to the registrar, and from the marks' scandal to the mismanagement of degrees, all the affairs of the university were very well written about. I didn't give these issues so much importance though. Because even though I was going to college, I had nothing to do with the university.

My main interest in them was to understand what exactly they were doing on social issues. Therefore, I kept the leaflet with me. In the evening, I went to Dadar in search of their office.

They had a small office in a corner of Madhavwadi chawl in Dadar [inside the Bluestar union office]. I found my way to the office and I saw that girl there. I felt a little better and introduced myself to all the boys sitting in that tiny room. Everyone was studying in different colleges. In my first year in college, I saw many students, but they weren't like them. I mean, no one's clothes were fashionable. Everyone and everything seemed simple. Among them someone was a Punjabi, someone was a Madrasi and someone was Muslim. I just kept looking at everyone.

"He liked our election boycott play," Sushma⁴¹ told them, and they started questioning me curiously.

Where did you see it? What did you like about it? I explained again, what I had told her in the morning. Then they questioned me more. Where did I live? What do I do? What does my father do? I answered everything without fear. Then they took me to the hotel for tea. They talked very humbly and were very affectionate. I felt good. While sipping tea they started talking among themselves and someone said, 'I will be going to Bhagwan Nile tomorrow morning. Give me all the matter of the magazine, I'm going to the press.'

The word Bhagwan Nile stuck in my mind for a while because I had read

⁴¹ Fictitious name; Sambhaji's autobiography does not mention any of his Avahan peers by their real name.

his *Dalit Brahmin* poem in a Marathi magazine of BAMCEF.⁴² I liked it very much. If I found poems of Bhagwan Nile, Prakash Jadhav and Namdeo Dhasal, they would not be left unread. I had memorised some of the poems in *Golpitha* [book of poems by Namdeo Dhasal] and, as a result, more than half of my poems were full of slang.

When I heard Bhagwan Nile's name, I asked one of them, "Is Bhagwan Nile also a member of your organisation?" he replied, "Bhagyaa, right? Yes, he is in our organisation! He is the co-editor of Kalam [VPS journal]." I asked hesitantly "Can I meet him?" He said, "He will come to the office tomorrow evening. You come too, I will let him know." (Bhagat 1999, 166-167)

...I was very happy since I met these new people. Seeing the intelligence and sharpness of that girl, my earlier opinion that women are immature started to change. When I met her the next day, she gave old issues of Kalam to read and told me that Bhagwan would see me at the office at five o'clock in the evening.

...In the evening I left work and came to the organisation's office, a very thin tall boy [Bhagwan] had just arrived. He asked me "Are you Sambhaji Bhagat?" I nodded. Opening the office, we sat inside and enquired about each other. I hadn't forgotten to take my poems that day. I told him where and how I read his poems and I asked him about it. He shared, "I live in the Maya Nagar slum of Worli. My father runs the house by selling ice cream. I am a Dalit by caste." Due to these two things, Dalit caste and living in a slum, the line of strangeness between the two of us was erased automatically and there was ease when we started talking.

I did not let him speak in this meeting. I kept talking and he was listening quietly. When I showed him my poems, he said, "They are okay, you keep writing, don't stop writing." While we were talking, the other boys started coming. Then those who came yesterday met today. There were some new

⁴² The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, abbreviated as BAMCEF, is an organisation for employees of oppressed communities that was established in 1971 by Kanshi Ram and others.

ones, I was introduced to them. I met them because of the play so they introduced me to Avinash Kamat [reference to Ashwin].

Avinash Kamat and I both had tea. Avinash Kamat, I found him to be one of the liveliest persons among the people I had met so far. It seemed like there was not an ounce of meat present on his body. He was wearing a loose shirt, murky pant, a dirty jhola⁴³ on his shoulder and broken eyeglasses. By looking at his face, one could guess that this man was very smart and intelligent. I enjoyed talking to him. As soon as he found out that I knew about folk art, he made me speak even more by asking questions about different art forms in the village i.e., kirtan, tamasha, bharud, bhajan, lezim etc. Bhagwan, he and I sat in the hotel talking for a long time that day. We left by saying goodbye and in the hope of seeing each other again. (Bhagat 1999, 166-168)

Despite the ease and honesty marking their initial interactions, Sambhaji did not join Avahan/VPS immediately; two crucial reasons for this comprised the lack of a definitive stand on the namantar issue and the absence of Dalits in the VPS leadership. But Ashwin, clearly impressed with his knowledge of folk forms and his elementary skills in writing poetry, reached out to him and asked him to write a powada about Peddi Shankar, an activist from the forested area of Chandrapur in Maharashtra who was killed in a false encounter by the police. Although he had never written a powada earlier, Sambhaji agreed to try, and wrote the ballad over the next few evenings. At this point, his hostel mates, sensing his increasing closeness with VPS, urged him to find a government job and/or teased him by referring to him as ‘Communist’.

Sambhaji’s recollection in his autobiography of his first public performance in January 1981 – in Bombay’s Dhuru Hall when he sang the first powada on Peddi Shankar – shows that he fumbled with the sheets on which the lyrics were written, and had to halt many times to pull out the correct sheet. But he also mentions being overwhelmed by the applause he received from the audience, and their praise for narrating Peddi Shankar’s story beautifully and realistically in song. This once again reveals that like in the case of Salim, the collective aided the transition of workers and students into artists, performing an ‘organising function’, as demanded by Benjamin.

⁴³ A simple khadi shoulder bag, typically carried by left wing activists.

SPECIALISED, AUTONOMOUS CULTURAL TROUPE

The entry of Dalit activists – especially Sambhaji, followed by Vilas in early 1981 – contributed to Avahan’s transition into a specialised cultural troupe separate from VPS, most likely because the cross-caste demography facilitated the synthesis of distinct perspectives and practices vis-à-vis performance. As pointed out earlier, subaltern caste-class activists like Sambhaji possessed immense knowledge about popular folk forms and performative traditions, whereas privileged caste-class activists like Sanober and Ashwin were exposed to and experienced in theatre and classical arts, and cued in to the latest developments in fields like performance studies and political theatre. Each side, it appears, filled out the shortcomings and blind spots of the other, such that as a collective, Avahan had command over an entire spectrum of performative traditions and forms, spanning binaries like traditional-modern, indigenous-western and subaltern-elite.

The synthesis came about through contestations and deliberations. Sambhaji’s feedback about the boycott election play – about it being too pacy, influenced by European theatre and distanced from the everyday life of Dalits and other subaltern groups – set forth discussions within Avahan about what constituted people’s forms, and what forms were most suited for audiences in Bombay and Maharashtra. Salim drew attention to how Vilas’ entry enriched this process because he was already an experienced poet and performer who could play several instruments. Excerpted below, his account also shows that the collective was now able to produce songs whose popularity exceeded their topicality; additionally, their rehearsals became more disciplined:

When Vilas came...He was a professional singer. He used to sing qawwalis. He knew the instruments in and out—the peti [harmonium], daffi, khanjiri [small percussion instrument], everything, he used to play. Sambhaji also knew instruments very well. He used to play the dholki well. Both were very knowledgeable about the folk tunes of Maharashtra. So they used to take the folk tunes and put our songs into the tune.

The two most popular songs which were written at that time...one was during the girni [textile mill] strikes from 1981. The first strike was in January ’81, I think...the second strike started in January 1982 or so.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Salim is referring here to the build-up of the historic, 18-month long strike by mill workers in Bombay in 1982–83. The conflict between mill workers and the owners began over the issue of bonuses, and soon encompassed other demands such as ad hoc increase of wages per month, additional entitlements, making *badli* (temporary) workers permanent, and non-recognition of Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh as the representative

So Vilas wrote a song *Sampa retaycha hai, maghe gheyaycha nhai* [Proceed with the strike, Don't pull it back]. That song became so popular, people used to just write the song themselves; they used to xerox [photocopy] the things in thousands or maybe even lakhs, and they used to distribute among the workers at that time.

The *namantar* issue was also going on. So Vilas wrote a song *Jaltoy Marathwada* [Marathwada is Burning]. Even now, that song is very popular; people sing it now also. Because in that song, the exploitation of Dalits is there. When Dalits become educated, they do not organise people, they should. So these two songs became very popular.

And rehearsals became more disciplined. Because we had lots of talented people. Vilas and Sambhaji were both very good. There were many other people also...one Namdeo, Bapu Kamble, both stayed in Maya Nagar [a slum].

The entry of Dalit activists in Avahan impacted the collective in another major way: it exposed members to the embodied element of caste. This is especially apparent in Sanobar's recollection of a workshop she helped organise for Avahan, wherein Bhagwan Nile and another Dalit activist imitated the authoritative demeanour of the Brahmin director who was conducting the sessions. Sanobar mentions having worked through her contacts to reach and persuade Jaydev Hattangadi to take a workshop; she mentions questioning Bhagwan and others about how they'd dared to ridicule Hattangadi following their enactment and telling them that his demeanour derived from his being a director. In turn, Bhagwan and others accused her of being casteist for failing to see how his demeanour reflected that Hattangadi was Brahmin, and told her, 'He deserved a slap, which he was given.' That she could say little after this, and the peals of laughter that accompanied her description of the incident during the interview, make it abundantly clear that even when reputations and social circles were at stake, critiquing each other across lines of caste, class and gender was normal in Avahan:

I knew that Jaydev Hattangadi used to conduct theatre workshops for aspiring actors. He had been trained at the NSD [National School of Drama]

union. Mill owners were able to put down the strike by colluding with the state machinery and the Rashtriya Mill Mazdoor Sangh. (Mhaskar 2022)

in Delhi. That's where he met his future wife, the famous actress Rohini Hattangadi. They used to live in a place in Wadala then. So I went and asked him, why don't you do this for us. He gave us a concession and charged us very little for the workshop which lasted 9 turns, like every Sunday for three hours or so.

We collected the money. There must have been about 15-16 participants, and most of them were working class people. His workshop really worked out well for us. In the sense that he understood what we wanted, and then he gave us ideas...like how to act, how to portray a character. It's not like a play where you have a script, on the street. So that helped us. It helped me. Jaydev used to divide the participants into groups and give a topic and a form in which each group had to evolve a play. At one point, when we were asked to put a mime, these three chaps, Bhagwan, Namdeo and the third guy whose name I can't remember, they did a take-off on him. See when he was directing us, he used to shout and scream at us...like a typical director, he'd throw his weight around. And he was Hattangadi, a Brahmin...These three guys, they imitated him... over-imitated him. He watched the skit quietly but it angered him immensely. He came to me and said, 'I don't feel like coming for the workshop anymore. This is the biggest insult I have received.' I said don't take it to heart and all, it's very bad of them to do that. And I fired them. Then they said, *tu kiti casteist ahe. Tyala dyeachas hota thappad, asah dila* [You are so casteist. He deserved a slap, which is what we gave]. I couldn't say anything to them at that time... But I was terribly embarrassed and offended...here I was, doing my best to get experts in theatre to train our members, and this is how they were humiliating them!

Alongside these developments, Badal Sircar's visit to Bombay with his troupe Satabdi in the latter half of 1981 influenced Avahan in a big way. Given Sanober and Ashwin's interest and expertise in theatre, they took the lead in attending all shows of Satabdi in Bombay and interviewed Sircar for VPS' Marathi-English bilingual journal *Kalam*. Excerpted below, Sanober's account of Sircar's visit indicates that the emphasis in third theatre on the ingenious use of the body and

performance in open spaces without a stage or props boosted Avahan's confidence to produce street plays:

That was the time when Badal Sircar came to Bombay with some 6 plays. So I went and saw all the 6 plays and took extensive photographs. Ashwin came with me and took photographs. I even did an interview with Badal Sircar, which came out in Kalam. So with Badal Sircar, the contribution that he made is that... this use of the body and then his...the talk about maidan [open ground] theatre...that he would perform regularly in the Maidan [in Kolkata] every Saturday evening or whatever. So people knew that there was a performance, and that really gave the confidence that you can perform on the street and places like that.

All these experiences, deliberations, and incidents added many layers to Avahan's repertoire, and by the latter half of 1981, its productions were marked by a new performatic⁴⁵ language. As opposed to the pacy, highly propagandist nature of its earlier plays that resonated only with those who were already politically inclined, the new performatic language was deeply enmeshed with popular myths and embodied practices of subaltern groups in Bombay and Maharashtra; the speed and movements in plays were also altered to suit the sensibilities of local audiences.

The following section teases out these changes in Avahan's performatic language by discussing two of the group's productions – one from the first phase when it was a loose collective that overemphasised class, and the other from the second phase when it thrived as a specialised cultural troupe that was deeply conscious of caste, which demarcated it from VPS and seeded confrontations with its political mentors.

NEW PERFORMATIC LANGUAGE

Avahan/VPS performed over 100 shows of its boycott election plays in busy street corners and public spaces in Bombay in 1979-80. Several of them were staged outside prominent suburban railway stations during the evenings, when crowds of people returning from their offices could afford to spare a few minutes. And so it was with Sambhaji, who came across a show outside

⁴⁵ I use the word 'performatic' here after Diana Taylor (2013), who uses it to refer to the non-discursive realm of performance that is not reducible to writing.

Churchgate station one evening quite by chance while returning from work.

From his account of this encounter in his autobiography, it is apparent that Sambhaji was instantly and intensely hooked to the show for two key reasons. The first derived from typical ideas regarding theatre, which held that it could not be performed without a dais, adequate lights, props, costumes, make-up and so on. Thus, the moment he heard slogans of '*aao re aao natak dekho*' (Come hey come, watch the drama) from the gathering in front of the station, he was awed, and keen to witness how theatre could be done on the street. Secondly, though politics interested him greatly, he knew that most parties and leaders preferred 'all talk no action'. So he was receptive to the play's theme critiquing electoral politics, but remained suspicious of the intent of the actors and their political position, evident in his attempts at guessing which party they represented.

Excerpted below, Sambhaji's account provides a scene-by-scene narration of the action that unfolded outside Churchgate station that evening and the thoughts and questions it spurred in his mind. This makes for rich insights into the performatic language that characterised Avahan's productions during the first phase.

The account shows that the play unfolded in an open space, with the audience gathered all around a circle formed by close to 20 actors and activists, all dressed similarly. Actors breached the performative arena initially by falling at the feet of audience members asking for their votes, which startled many. Scenes of two kinds were depicted alternately thereafter – one, where most actors froze in their positions in the circle while one actor reprised the promises/achievements of a specific party or ideological formation; and another, where other actors took turns to enact sequences busting these claims and exposing the respective political party and leader as power-hungry and corrupt. The mannerisms and dialogue delivery of actors, if not their appearance, resembled the politicians they enacted; they also used their bodies to fashion a range of objects and props. Scenes unfolded in quick succession, leaving the audience guessing, allowing them little time to take in what was being portrayed and its import.

Yet, his account also makes it clear that anyone who did not have prior interest in politics would find little to relate to in the play. Perhaps, this was not necessary, as the primary objective of the play appears to have been to agitate the views of those who were invested in electoral politics, and show them how the Parliament and those who were elected into it did little to improve the lives of labouring masses and common citizens; further, to show them that this was the case

irrespective of the background and credentials of leaders, and even those like George Fernandes, once a firebrand trade union leader, did little for their concerns and interests after being voted into power.

The play, as such, sought to expressly propagate VPS' stand and urge the public to boycott elections. The absence of references to popular myths or ritualistic practices of subaltern caste-classes is noteworthy, and remarkably different from Avahan's later work, produced after Sambhaji, Vilas and other Dalit activists joined the core team.

Sambhaji wrote:

...That day I sat there [garden of the Mumbai University campus in Fort] until 5 o'clock and once people from offices started leaving I too left for home. It seemed like everyone was running towards Churchgate station. I too automatically became a part of that crowd.

At the entrance of the station, I saw ten or twelve young boys along with five or six young girls standing in a circle and shouting. Since it was election time, I thought they must be campaigning. But the boys started clapping and shouting and people started gathering around them.

"Come and watch, Come and watch the drama!

Watch the drama of Parliament,
Watch the drama of Congress!"

I could not believe that drama could be done on street. I said to myself, this city is so weird! No one can predict what the people here will or will not do. I said to myself, 'Let's see what they have to say. You're also in a no hurry to go anywhere.' I wondered whether this was one more ploy to make a fool of us. They stopped clapping and then a tall boy from among them stepped forward and started talking.

"Brothers, this is not a *madari ka khel* [street performance involving a monkey and its handler], or a party campaign, or a campaign for votes. We are not asking for your vote. We just have to tell you what this Parliamentary election is. Who are those that get elected, and who are these people in reality? Just listen carefully, watch carefully." That's how he started the play.

Turning their back towards the people, they formed a circle and started shouting, Elections are here! Elections are here! Then they turned to the people who had collected around them and literally grabbed them one by one, saying, "Give me your vote, give me your vote!"

They then started touching people's feet, begging for votes. One of them also touched my feet. I was taken aback but continued watching them.

Then an Indira Gandhi came. Although she did not look like Indira Gandhi, but her voice was very similar to Indira Gandhi's. She began her speech. In her speech, she said, "How much progress the country had made in my reign and how the Janata Party government ruined it." And she froze like a statue while a scene of how there was a strict dictatorship in her reign was played out. Thereafter she resumed her speech. Saying how I uplifted the Dalits and minorities... Then once more she froze like a statue while another scene played out portraying the gouging out of the eyes of Dalits, the raping of Dalit women, the illegal grabbing of their lands, the burning of their huts. They portrayed how all this was done by the zamindars of the Congress and how Indira Gandhi was the leader of such people. They showed all this so simply and starkly that I was captivated and smiled to myself.

Then they started enacting a scene on the Janata Party. The chaos they created in Parliament, their obsession for power but, at the same time, how they projected themselves as devotees of democracy and how Indira Gandhi was the number one enemy of the country. They explained to the viewers how the Janata Party regime treated the people and oppressed them just as badly as the Congress. After this they portrayed how the Dalit parties capitalized on their caste and became sycophants of the rich and their representatives. And in this process, they did not spare Jagjeevan Ram or the newer crop of Dalit leaders. I agreed with what they portrayed but I felt bad at the same time.

I concluded that these people do not belong to the Congress, nor to the Janata Party, and they do not belong to any Dalit Party either. Then I felt

that these people definitely belonged to the Hindutva party, but as I continued watching, they started mocking and jesting at all the Hindutva leaders from RSS to Atal Bihari Vajpayee to the 'newly born' leaders, so much so that I laughed so much that it tired me. Then I was convinced that these people must be Communists. But that too did not seem correct. After that, they showed the great betrayal of Dange 'Maharaj,' who while chanting revolution like a Red Sadhu, demanded votes and betrayed the working people of this country for the interest of wealthy people... and then bubbles of my delusion burst. I became deeply engrossed in watching the play. Nevertheless, what is the end? What was these people's opinion on Parliament? To find this out, I just stood there watching curiously.

In one of the last scenes, they told the audience, "Parliament cannot be the guardian of the poor. Parliament is a machine that produces only misery, injustice, oppression for the poor and power, wealth, dignity for the rich. The problems of the poor cannot be solved in Parliament". On the contrary, how even the honest people who have gone to the Parliament get corrupted and how they are shown their place. To explain this they showed how George Fernandes, who used to project himself as the messiah of the workers outside Parliament, betrayed the workers when he went to Parliament. "People should boycott the elections and fight for their rights on their own. This river of sorrow will continue to flow until the state is overthrown".

After saying this, they ended the play and ran away from there in the blink of an eye. Within a minute, a police jeep arrived with a siren sound. Seeing the police, I also ran away. In fact, I very much wanted to talk to them in detail. I felt as if they had captured the whole chaos in my mind. However, what was to be done? I caught the train and came back to the hostel. The unresolved knot of chaos in my mind felt loosened up.

...That day I had made a new discovery. A play could be done by putting curtains on the stage, decorating the stage, using lights, painting the faces of the artists, and dressing them up; this belief of mine got shattered. These

people had no costumes, no stage, no sets, just...The hut was made by arranging the actors' bodies in the shape of a hut, so also it was with the Parliament, and even the minister's car was made by actors bending their bodies. This performance which was put up by creatively using human bodies to portray almost everything broke open the doors of my closed mind. What knowledge I could not gain by reading ten books, this play had given me in half an hour. (Bhagat 1999, 160-163)

Sambhaji's amazement at witnessing a street play is evident in the account, and clearly indicates that he was completely unfamiliar with the form and its techniques, especially the use of bodies by the actors to fashion props and objects. His entry into Avahan, in such circumstances, exposed him to these techniques, and his mastery over the same is evidenced in the fact that weeks after joining Avahan, he began writing out a large part of the script for its street plays.

Yet, the learning within the group was not a one-way process, as the entry of Sambhaji, Vilas and other Dalit activists exposed privileged caste-class activists to a wide range of popular forms from Maharashtra that they were not familiar with. In addition, activists like Sambhaji had also spent a considerable part of their lives in the countryside and in Bombay, and were aware of popular myths and ritualistic practices that were part of the everyday lives of subaltern groups spread over a large geographical area.

All of this contributed in a major way to Avahan's referencing popular embodied practices, myths and rituals in later productions, making way for a new performatic language that was close to the ways of thinking and living of subaltern caste-classes. The contours of this language are clearly evidenced in a play titled *Gulamicha Chautiswa Wad-divas* (34th Birthday of Slavery), produced shortly after Sambhaji joined Avahan.

The premise of the play, staged on 34 occasions around the country's 34th Independence Day, was similar to that of the boycott election plays, as it involved a critique of electoral politics.⁴⁶ But this critique was two-pronged. On the one hand, it focussed on a wide variety of political parties and leaders that made tall claims before the poor, labouring masses prior to elections, promising to protect their needs and interests once elected. On the other hand, it focussed on the masses who naively believed these promises and voted for these parties and leaders, only to

⁴⁶ The summary of the play provided here is based on my interviews with Sambhaji and Sanober in 2012. The interviews were conducted for a series of news features on cultural resistance in Maharashtra. See Bhattacharya 2013a; 2013b; 2013c.

be abandoned and left for the worse. Further, the critique was intertwined with a popular myth in Maharashtra, whereby people attributed sickness to being possessed by gods or goddesses (*ang mein devi ana*, in colloquial parlance) and sought the intervention of godmen and traditional healers to ward off such possession.

The play featured as protagonist a child named Azad who was born into a poor family on the midnight of August 15, 1947, when India gained independence. Although his name meant freedom, Azad fell very sick at a young age, and was consigned to the whims and fancies of godmen and dubious healers whom his parents sought out hoping to find a magic cure for their child. But these were no ordinary godmen; instead, each represented a political party or a lobby group. When Azad's mother asked each godman what would heal her child, he pointed her to a poll booth, telling her: 'Once you cast your vote in favour of our party's symbol, your child's health will improve.' But after 34 years and several rounds of elections which placed different godmen in power, each of whom was equipped to take necessary steps to improve Azad's health, no efforts had been made in that direction and the young man's sickness had worsened. Left with little option, the mother took Azad to a professional doctor – a Datta Samant-style trade unionist who had built a career negotiating with managements for agitating workers. The doctor, Azad's mother hoped, would not ask for her vote, and was pleased when he gave Azad a 'pill of economics' (*arthwad ki goli*). But eventually, even the doctor redirected the mother to a polling booth. Exasperated and broken, she turned to the audience, asking: 'Do you have any ideas on how we can save Azad?' In returning the question of what had to be done to improve Azad's health back to the people, *Gulamicha Chautiswa Wad-divas* indicated that the latter would have to assert their agency as political actors in order to improve their and the country's fortunes.

Overall, although the premise of the play was similar to Avahan's boycott election plays, its treatment was distinctly different. It involved a negative use of the 'ang mein devi aana' myth, which implicitly privileged the modern/scientific and stereotyped traditional knowledge regarding disease and healing; but this use appeared highly suited to the context, wherein Avahan was using it to point at how religion and politics together played a key role in subjugating and exploiting the common masses.

The pace and action marking earlier productions was replaced by a certain lyricality; the narrative was enmeshed with a myth that enabled audiences to carry home thoughts and suggestions regarding how they ought to lead their lives.

The ailing Azad whose health deteriorated as he grew up served a metaphor for the independent country, which was beset with worsening poverty and inequality. His parents stood in for the common masses and the dubious healers they approached for his treatment were in fact agents of various political parties in the garb of religious authority. The behaviour and choices of the parents regarding what would heal their child and their blind faith in godmen reprised the behaviour of the masses who blindly voted for political parties based on their promises every election, unaware that they represented the ruling class including religious authorities. The narrative was amenable to multi-layered interpretations: that politics was suffused with religiosity and suppliance; that in their everyday life, the masses resorted to superstitious practices that derived from and upheld religious orthodoxy; and that to be political was to be critical, rational, and scientific in every aspect of life.

Further, since the play invoked a popular ritualistic practice – of seeking cure for disease from traditional healers and godmen with dubious antecedents, often resulting in the patient’s deterioration or death – it was likely that members of the audience would recall the play when indulging in or witnessing something similar. As such, it provided the audience something related to their own behaviour, that would likely stay with them beyond the ephemerality of a live performance and the topicality of its critique.

DEMOCRACY AND DISSENT

All core members of Avahan⁴⁷ concurred that during this second phase, the group had no leader; neither was there any hierarchy among members on the basis of their differential caste, class and gender locations or religion. Instead, interactions between them were marked with ease, frankness and empathy.

This is reflected clearly in Sanober’s recollection of a conversation between her and Vilas that appears like a reflection on their different class backgrounds and skin tones (Sanober is fair and Vilas was dark). The duo were then sitting in Vilas’ shanty in Mulund, most likely discussing some campaign that they were part of, when Vilas told her something like ‘even if you labour in the sun for years together, anybody can look at you and tell which class you’re from.’⁴⁸

However, such differences and distinctions did not seem to negatively impact group activities.

⁴⁷ This was barring Vilas, who committed suicide in 1997.

⁴⁸ Personal communication with Sanober.

In the introduction to its book of plays, Avahan explained that having a director for its plays whose ‘decisions regarding scenes were taken as final’ was the only hierarchical practice the collective acceded to, if only to avoid anarchy:

Learning from experience, and to escape anarchy, we adopted only one regressive practice – that one of us will be the director, and his/her decision regarding scenes will be final. We got to know that we cannot advocate for an egalitarian system on one hand and adopt hierarchical behaviour in our work at the same time. (Avahan Natya Manch 1994, 7)

That Sanober, the only woman in the core team who also had the widest exposure and experience in political theatre, was also the director of a majority of the troupe’s plays in the initial years attests that the collective defied established social hierarchies. She did mention having to sort out ego clashes at times between Sambhaji and Vilas, the two frontline shahirs in the troupe; she also recalled that male activists often made sexist remarks, though not directed at her. But neither she nor any of the other core members reported any major altercations pertaining to her role as director.

The defiance of established hierarchies was also evident in workshops conducted by senior Avahan members for new and relatively inexperienced activists. During the first phase, workshops were mostly conducted by Sanober with assistance from Ashwin, wherein participants were trained in theatre; whereas during the second phase, they were mostly conducted jointly by Sanober and Sambhaji, and participants were trained in theatre as well as song-writing and singing.

Debates were common within the troupe, but activists said that they were resolved through discussion and decisions were taken collaboratively. For instance, following the entry of Sambhaji and Vilas, one of the early debates among members pertained to whether they could set revolutionary songs to the tune of popular Bollywood music. Reprising the major positions in this debate, Sanober said:

We used to have one debate: whether we can use Bollywood songs...and put our revolutionary content into them? Just as these guys were using folk forms. People argued that though the folk may belong to the countryside and have feudal roots, folk is the music of working people. It's a toiling person's identification, while filmi music is not really. It doesn't come out

of labour. Folk is like people's music, people's tales. Bollywood is really not that. We used to avoid using Bollywood tunes in any of our songs. You see, other people still used but we didn't, because we didn't want to be associated with that kind of culture. That's a decision we took early on...we had a debate and took that decision.

Further, all core members of Avahan concurred that collective learning was one of the things that the group emphasised on. They mentioned study circles where activists took turns to present their understanding of key topical issues or texts as examples of collective learning. But they stressed that the 'Go to the Village' campaigns that Avahan (in conjunction with VPS and NBS members) undertook to rural areas in Maharashtra almost every year between 1982 and the early 1990s played a far more definitive role, not only in shaping the attitudes and understanding of activists but also in restructuring the group.

Those who participated in these campaigns said that they were planned mostly during summer and winter vacations to enable Vilas, who worked as a cleaner in a government school, to join the team. The area that a tour would cover was decided based on suggestions from VPS and NBS leaders and other progressive activists and contact with local resource persons cum hosts who helped the team navigate neighbouring villages. In most cases, activists did not know beforehand the exact itinerary of the tour barring that it would last a week to ten days. On the pre-decided date, the team travelled from Bombay by train (always ticketless, a normative practice among people going for political demonstrations and mobilisations) to a railway station nearest to their campaign area, and covered the remaining distance to the host's village by state transport buses, bullock carts, and on foot. For the next few days, they staged a 2-3 hour show comprising plays and songs in a new village every day. Outside of that (including at night), they split up into twos and threes and stayed with different families, learning their ways of living and speaking, the expressions they used, the songs they sang, their eating practices, and so on. They preferred living in Dalit bastis, which likely derived from Avahan's claim of representing the 'labouring castes and classes'; it could also be that activists did not want to stay in dominant caste neighbourhoods as they rejected the latter's culture, along the same lines that they rejected Bollywood culture. They travelled from one village to another by whatever transport was available if not on foot, ate whatever their hosts offered and slept wherever they made space.

Accounts of campaign participants provide rich insights into how these trips challenged their

pre-conceived notions and deepened their understanding of politics and culture, particularly relating to the caste question. They also attest to the generous hospitality of hosts, the conviviality of conversations between them and the visiting team, and the hardships and frugality that activists endured when they were in the field.

Salim's account, for instance, clearly shows that although he had endured poverty in Bombay, the poverty he came across during these trips surprised and affected him deeply. He talks of the strict discipline team members abided by, which included not smoking before elders, talking softly with each other, sitting 'properly' in the presence of villagers so that their sensibilities were not offended, being respectful and polite even if the other side was abusive, and not asking for more food. He also talks of the struggles of finding transport, travels on foot and the directions provided by villagers and hosts to get to their next destination. All of these point at the immense hardship and labour that these trips involved, aside from the performances that activists had to put in at least once every day:

We got a picture of rural India during these trips. Like, we saw huts being built with grass, or some material other than bricks; use of cow dung. We saw food as a treasure. At that time, people used to sleep by 8 or so. By 6, it used to be dark; they used to have lanterns. Their main possession was bhakri [flat bread made of the flour of millets], they used to make bhakris and tie it on the ceiling, so there was always bhakri at home. Whoever came to their house, they used to feed them. Whoever's house we went to, bhakri was always there, for anyone who came. We spent our time mostly in Dalit areas.

Obviously, if you are from a big city like Bombay, you will get affected ... if you go many times, even once in a year ... our attitude changed.

Mostly, we used to go house to house, talk to people; what is their income, source of income, what is the exploitation ... We never used to say exploitation directly. We asked if they owned land or worked for someone else. Seeing the size of the house, you can make out... Those were questions we asked.

We had some strict disciplinary norms. Like when if we are sitting in a meeting with villagers, we will not smoke in front of them. We sit in a

proper way, so they are not offended. Since we were very young, even talking with each other... we should talk softly. If elders are there, even if they talk loudly, we should listen. Even if they are abusive, we must give respect to them. While eating, we should not ask for anything more. Whatever they give, we will eat; if they don't give, we will not eat. It was a concept of depending on the masses ... all those concepts we tried to inculcate. Many a time, it was one day, one village. Even if we reached there in the day time, we used to stay there; late in the evening, we used to perform. Then late at night or early morning, we used to move out. It was mostly by road, like one single bus would come at 5 or 6 in the morning, they would tell us where the bus would take us ... sometimes, we would walk also.

Meanwhile, Sambhaji stressed that while these campaigns undoubtedly transformed upper caste-class activists who lived in Bombay, even those like him who had prior experience of rural life learned a lot, particularly about the 'real situation' and the language, songs and ways of expression of people in different parts of the state. This, Sambhaji indicated in his interview with me, helped the troupe understand how they could politicise the masses better:

Upper and middle class activists in our group underwent qualitative changes after visiting these areas. They got an understanding of ground reality that could not be found in books or government statistics and reports. People like me who were familiar with rural life also explained some things to them, but we also learned a lot. The trips gave us an understanding of the real situation of the rural masses—unless we knew their situation deeply, how could we politicise them? We needed to know their language, songs and ways of expression to be able to explain things to them better [through songs, plays, and so on].

The 'Go to the Village' campaigns also brought to the fore the limited understanding of caste in the rural context, even among Dalit activists in the group who had little or no exposure to rural life. Sanober, for instance, narrated how the group landed in a tight spot over its choice of performance space in a village during one of the campaign tours in the early years. Although several Dalit activists from Bombay were travelling with the group, activists like Vilas and Sambhaji who had an understanding of the rural context were not with the group on that occasion:

When we reached one of the villages, we chose a performance space that we thought was conveniently located and easily approachable. We went around the village in a group, chanting “aao re aao, natak dekho”, gathering a group of people who trailed us. When we reached the designated space and began performing, the upper castes were livid and left in a huff. While we continued with the performance, Dalits in the village later told us that the upper castes were upset because we performed in front of the Dalitwada.

‘The upper castes will never participate in something that happens in the Dalit-wada. That is why you should always perform in the upper caste area of a village. Dalits will go there if you tell them, if they know that it has something to do with their lives and interests, but upper castes will never come to our side of the village,’ they told us.

We continued with our travel, and when Vilas joined us a day later at a different place, we came to know that news of our mis-step had travelled far and wide – he had heard of an uppity woman and some other cheeky youngsters from Bombay upsetting caste equations in a village with their performance. He teased us so much throughout that tour regarding how clueless we were about caste equations in the rural setting – particularly me, since I was the senior most in the group.⁴⁹

While the anecdote reveals how village tours demonstrated for activists the spatial nature of caste and their poor understanding of the same, it also shows that upper castes and Dalits in the group shared a frank, equal relationship, such that the latter could tease the former over their caste-blindness.

Such experiences also sensitised privileged caste-class activists to the importance of speaking about caste and siding with their lower caste comrades in debates with their political mentors in VPS and allied organisations. Sanober recalled how on one occasion when the troupe was working on producing a cassette of its songs, their mentors were of the firm opinion that Sambhaji’s song on Ambedkar (*Bhim Baba*) should not be included as there was no point in eulogising Am-

⁴⁹ The transcript of the anecdote was prepared by me from memory based on a phone conversation with Sanober in 2020, and subsequently endorsed by her.

bedkar. But instead of acceding to their stand, members discussed the issue threadbare and put it to a vote – a standard practice in cases of dispute within the group. Those in favour of retaining the song (including Sanober) vastly outnumbered those against, thus paving the way for its inclusion in the cassette; it went on to become quite popular and is still performed by many kalapathaks in Maharashtra including KKM.

RUPTURE

It is difficult to provide an objective account of the last phase of Avahan beyond stating that it split into two in 1994 following the intervention of political mentors. Only Vilas from the core team remained in the official troupe, whereas three other core members – Sanober, Sambhaji and Salim – were in the rebel group that called itself Lok Avahan. Both groups disbanded after Vilas' suicide in 1997.

A major impediment to any serious analysis of this phase is the absence of material on the stand of the official troupe and its members. This is primarily because those who were closely associated with the official Avahan from 1994 to 1997 have either died or are currently serving jail terms, and their accounts of what brought about the split and the reservations that they had against those in the opposing group are not available.

Hence the discussion here is based on the accounts of core members who were in the rebel group. These indicate that in 1994, Avahan's political mentors intervened through AILRC to take control of the troupe and expelled the rebel group, who were also forbidden from using the name 'Avahan'.

Excerpted below, Avahan's founding member Sanober's brief account of the split betrays the pain that she and others endured. Attesting to her role as the mentors' emissary in Avahan, she stressed that the troupe never took instructions; instead, everything including its participation in broader campaigns was based on consensus among members:

There was big lafda [ruckus] with AILRC. They descended on us in 1994, when all of us were asked to go. And we continued as Avahan Natya Manch...whatever was there, with Sambhaji and all. And they came and told us, you can't use this name. So, I said, how can we not use...They said because it is a banner a certain political organisation has given. I said my foot. I formed this thing and I didn't even know there was any political or-

ganisation behind anything at that time. So you can't give me this bullshit. I chose the name finally and I formed it. I said you can ask anybody...And I was not given any direction. People used to come and discuss with me...when boycott election [campaign] was done, I had to be convinced about it. Then I would convince the troupe, and then we would do it.

Questions to rebel group members regarding what may have caused the split elicited a few likely reasons.

The first pertained to Avahan's confrontation with senior comrades over the inclusion of Sambhaji's song in its audio cassette. Among other things, this incident indicated that the political leadership was trying to rein in the troupe, but when the attempt failed, it antagonised relations between the two sides.

Secondly, the participation of Swami Agnivesh in a programme seeking to restore communal harmony after the 1991-92 Bombay riots seems to have soured relations between Avahan and its mentors. The latter were among the organisers of the said programme, and the invitation extended to Swami Agnivesh seemed justified due to his vocal criticism of communalism and intolerance, and his participation in civil society efforts to promote communal harmony. For instance, in 1989, Agnivesh led a multi-religious march from Delhi to Meerut to protest against communal violence that had claimed the lives of 45 Muslim youth. Some Avahan members, however, took umbrage over Agnivesh's participation as they felt that he was pro-Hindutva. His antecedents, particularly as founder of the Arya Sabha, a political party based on the principles of Arya Samaj, indicate that this was probable; his participation in the 2011 anti-corruption movement in Delhi that was backed by the RSS confirmed this was indeed the case. But the political mentors sidestepped Avahan's objection and Agnivesh went on to participate in the communal harmony programme.

Thirdly, the alleged association of some senior comrades with foreign-funded NGOs also seems to have driven a wedge between Avahan members and their mentors.

Fourthly, a fracas over a professional Marathi singer named Anand Shinde copying Vilas' song *Sun meri Fatima didi* likely exacerbated these pre-existing fault lines and provided the immediate context for the rupture. Shinde replaced Fatima in Vilas' song with Amina, made nominal changes in lyrics, retained Vilas' tune, and released the song as his own. This mass-produced version of the song became immensely popular, and the singer received numerous invitations

for live shows. But Vilas reportedly felt slighted and began a dharna demanding that legal action be initiated against the errant singer; the least he wanted was acknowledgement as the author, if not a share of the monetary benefits reaped by Shinde. But making any such claim in legal terms was dicey. Though Avahan had performed *Sun meri Fatima didi* on numerous occasions, the song had neither been recorded nor published by Avahan or under Vilas' name. Hence, although other core members agreed with him in principle, they did not join the dharna. This likely drove a wedge between him and the rest of the troupe and he refrained from participating in performances and activities thereafter, till his return as a member of the official Avahan in 1994.

KABIR KALA MANCH

Interviews with core members of KKM indicated that the troupe's activity could be broken down into three distinct phases. The first phase encompassed its inception in 2002 till late 2004, when it comprised a loose collective of students and youth coalesced around Amarnath Chandaliya, a full-time member of Lal Nishan Party. The troupe functioned out of a small room in Shramik Bhavan, the party office in Pune, and performed street plays and songs promoting secularism, communal harmony and gender equality. During this period, it was not concerned with the caste question. The entry of new members, especially Sachin who was well-exposed to the writings of Marx, Phule, Ambedkar and experienced in organising workers, sharpened differences within the collective and occasioned much debate and discussion among activists. Chandaliya and Yogendra Mane, another senior member, exited KKM in 2004-05 subsequent to the troupe's participation in the controversial fourth session of the World Social Forum in Mumbai, and this heralded its second phase.

Between 2005 and 2010, KKM thrived as an autonomous collective: it drafted and adopted a manifesto pledging to fight against 'caste, class, women's slavery,' produced a large number of original plays, songs and poems and performed freely and widely in Pune as well as other parts of Maharashtra, in support of various movements. But the biggest marker of its radical character was the presence of four romantic couples, including three inter-caste ones, among core members. Accusations of KKM being a Maoist front organisation were first levelled by senior ministers in the state government in 2006, after it carried out a campaign in Pune demanding justice for victims and punishment for perpetrators in the Khairlanji caste atrocity case. Such accusations were repeated time and again by political leaders and in media reports in subsequent

years, coinciding with the troupe's participation in various movements including the long-drawn anti-Lavasa struggle. The arrest of Deepak by the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) under UAPA charges in May 2011 heralded KKM's third phase, when the very existence of the collective and the freedom of its members was severely threatened and compromised primarily by state repression, but also due to propaganda, ostracism, employment and housing crises, lack of meeting and rehearsal space, etc.

2002-2004: ROOTS IN ORTHODOX LEFT, LACK OF DEMOCRACY

Kabir Kala Manch's first phase spanned its inception in 2002 till 2004, when Amarnath Chandaliya and Yogendra Mane exited the group. Information on group activities and dynamics during this phase is sketchy as Chandaliya and others who saw the troupe closely in the initial months refused to be interviewed, whereas those who were part of the troupe were guarded in their responses.

These refusals and fears derived from KKM's implication in multiple legal cases, including one initiated by the Maharashtra ATS alleging that activists underwent arms training in the jungles of Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra during this period.⁵⁰ Several activists (Deepak, Siddharth, Sachin, Sheetal, Sagar and Ramesh) were also imprisoned for prolonged periods 2011 onwards.

Nevertheless, from the accounts of Deepak, Sheetal, Sachin and Ramesh who were part of the troupe during this initial phase, it appears that the collective included several activists who were already politicised before they founded/joined KKM. For example, Chandaliya was a long-time member of the Lal Nishan Party, a Socialist outfit; Yogendra Mane, President of KKM for most of this phase, was Left-leaning; whereas Ramesh Gaichor and Sachin Mali were associated with the CPI(M)-affiliated students' union SFI. But there were also many activists who had no understanding of politics and hoped that they would be able to further their creative interests and pursuits through the troupe. They included Sheetal, who joined KKM in 2003 hoping she would become a singer, and became aware of its politics months later. She said:

It took me 2-3 months to understand KKM. It wasn't as if I entered and understood everything. I had joined the group merely because of my inter-

⁵⁰ Chargesheets to this effect were filed by the ATS, and the same was reported widely in the media. See Shantha 2013.

est in singing, because I would get to sing in KKM. After joining them, I got to know what they think and do...I felt it was all very good.⁵¹

Along similar lines, Deepak who joined KKM in 2004 hoped that the troupe would enable him to use his skills in writing lyrics to the tune of Bollywood songs to ‘a good social cause’. He said:

When I learned that KKM was looking for singers and musicians, I fancied my chances. I had been writing lyrics and setting them to the tune of popular Bollywood songs for many years before I joined KKM, and I thought I would be able to put that ability to use for a good social cause.⁵²

For much of this phase, KKM worked out of the premises of the Lal Nishan Party’s office Shramik Bhavan in Pune, which served as the venue for group meetings and rehearsals. It performed street plays and songs in and around college campuses and slums in Pune promoting communal harmony, secularism and gender equality – themes that were common to Left-wing cultural interventions in India following the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.⁵³

The likelihood that KKM did not grapple with caste is indicated by the absence of portraits of anti-caste leaders such as Ambedkar and Phule in the Lal Nishan Party office. Sheetal’s description of the premises, excerpted below, bears this out. Her surprise on encountering portraits of Marx, Lenin and other Communist icons is striking; it attests to her and others’ lack of political exposure and shows that working class Dalits in Pune were cut off from class politics:

There, they had photos of several social engineers. Marx, Lenin, Mao, Engels. I had seen photos of several important people and intellectuals in school, but I had never seen the photos of these people. So I asked, who are they? They said, they are social scientists or social engineers; their names were written beneath the photos.

Deepak drew attention to the strict hierarchy within the collective during this phase without providing much details; Chandaliya appeared at its head, marshalling young activists who apparently knew much less about politics:

⁵¹ Interviewed by me on February 20, 2018 in Satara; translation from the Hindi original by me. The same applies for all of Sheetal’s quotes in the chapter.

⁵² Interviewed by me on December 10, 2014 in Pune; the interview was conducted in Hindi and translation is mine.

⁵³ For examples and an overview, see Kumar 2022.

Earlier, within the group, Amarnath knew the most. So he would decide everything about the group, though he used to consult others.

Echoing and elaborating on Deepak, Sachin described Chandaliya as a ‘dogmatic Marxist’ who disregarded the caste question and was intolerant of questions and criticism. Excerpted below, Sachin’s account indicates that most young activists who were part of the troupe at the time that he joined it in 2004 were not familiar with any political literature and did not question Chandaliya’s decisions. Sachin’s claim of being the most well-read in the troupe appears justified in light of his college years in Tasgaon, when he participated in study circles and discussions organised by former CPI member Baburao Gurav and other activists. These forums introduced him to varied perspectives on caste and class courtesy the writings by Ambedkar, Marx, Phule and Bhagat Singh among others, and formed the basis of his later altercations with Chandaliya. Additionally, his efforts to unionise his colleagues while working in a cold storage during this period made him the only KKM member – other than Chandaliya – who had experience in organisational work.

Despite talking about the hierarchy within the group, Sachin also attested to the presence of other dissenting figures like Sanjeevan, who were subdued and reserved:

When I entered KKM, I saw Sheetal, Sagar and others were all blank. They had not done any ideological reading. Amarnath was the founder, and only he had some understanding of ideology. He was a full timer with Lal Nishan Party for 10 years, so he was a dogmatic Marxist to the core. There was another person in KKM called Sanjeevan from Kerala. He played very good violin but hardly spoke. In Kerala, he was part of a struggle against dogmatism. Sanjeevan was critical of Amarnath; he was not bold, so he did not say anything. But I was bold. I had read a lot of texts and Tasgaon was a centre of debate; we would work less and debate more. So I started debating about things in KKM. That is how the struggle began, against dogmatism. Amarnath and I had a lot of tussles; and sometimes, it felt as if things were personal.⁵⁴

Signs of contradiction between Chandaliya, Mane and younger activists was clearly evidenced in January 2004, around the time of Sachin’s entry, when a controversy broke out over

⁵⁴ Interviewed by me on February 20, 2018 in Satara; translation from the Hindi original by me.

KKM's participation in the fourth meeting of the World Social Forum in Mumbai.

The Forum was floated in the late 1990s as a gathering of social movements and activists from across the world in order to counter the World Economic Forum and its policy of globalisation. But by the time of its fourth meeting, allegations were rife that it was supported by the same economic forces that controlled the World Economic Forum. The presence of Joseph Stiglitz – a former head of the World Bank – among the key speakers at the meeting fuelled such allegations further, and many organisations and groups associated with social movements who had been scheduled to participate in the meeting pulled out and organised Mumbai Resistance, a parallel meet in the city.

Young KKM members felt that the group too should boycott the Forum and attend Mumbai Resistance, but they were strongly overruled by Mane, and to some extent Chandaliya. Sachin's entry during around this time likely encouraged other dissenting members to raise questions and facilitated the emergence of a collective understanding. Deepak said:

After Sachin joined, questions started being raised, and many of us started speaking about our views much more openly. Everyone started understanding. This took the group ahead.

The exit of senior activists like Amarnath Chandaliya and Yogendra Mane over the next few months was a culmination of this process. KKM now comprised a crop of young, subaltern caste-class activists whose average age was less than 20 years, and many of whom were students.

2005-2010: AUTONOMOUS COLLECTIVE

The phase that followed, from 2005 to 2010, was in many ways KKM's best and most productive. Resonating with the second cluster in Damodaran's schema, the troupe thrived as an autonomous collective during this period: it drafted and adopted a manifesto pledging to fight against 'caste, class, women's slavery', produced a large number of original plays, songs and poems and performed freely and widely in Pune as well as other parts of Maharashtra, in support of various movements.

The troupe's strength during this phase ranged from 15 to 20, which included many activists who joined in for short periods of time. It had no specific leader or well-defined hierarchy, and was steered by a core team of 8-10 activists; they included Sachin, Sheetal, Sagar, Deepak, Ramesh and Siddharth who joined KKM during the first phase, and activists like Jyoti, Anuradha

and Rupali, who joined KKM after 2005. Although all these core members were from subaltern caste-class backgrounds, the distribution of men and women was nearly equal and there was immense variation among them in terms of their caste and class locations, exposure to politics, and the regions of Maharashtra that they came from.

For instance, Sachin was from a poor, landless family from the Mali jati (classified as OBC) from Tasgaon in Satara district of Maharashtra who migrated to Pune to work as a bus conductor and was associated with SFI. Deepak was from a poor, Adivasi (classified as ST) family from the Malin plateau region who worked in Pune as a motor mechanic and had no interest in politics. Jyoti was from a fairly well-off Dalit family from Belsar village near Saswad who was associated with the Rashtra Seva Dal before moving to Pune for higher studies. Anuradha, also a Dalit, was a cultural activist during her student days in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra before moving to Pune for higher studies.

Sheetal, Sagar and Rupali, on the other hand, were from the Kasewadi, one of Pune's largest slum settlements. All three were from the Matang jati, whose economic and social status is lower than most other castes among SCs. Sheetal's family was relatively progressive and well-off⁵⁵ and enrolled her in a private school, after which she studied in a government college. Rupali was from a poor, conservative family who rebelled her way through school and college by taking up odd jobs to fund her studies and requirements. None of them had any exposure to or interest in politics.

Accounts of KKM members indicate that group activities and interactions impacted activists in three key ways – it made them deeply conscious of caste in addition to class and gender and the interconnections between these; it helped them blossom into acclaimed writers, artistes and shahirs; and it enabled their participation in various movements.

FROM AMATEUR ACTIVISTS TO ARTISTES

It is important to note that none of the activists who comprised KKM's core had any formal training in theatre, music or writing before joining the troupe; although some of them did attest to writing poems or composing and singing songs earlier on, they thought such work was childish/imitative. It appears that the troupe began producing original plays and songs after attending a week-long workshop by Sambhaji and other artists in 2005, where activists were trained in

⁵⁵ Sheetal's grandfather had a job as a manager in a factory.

writing songs, scripts, acting, singing and so on. Given his background in Avahan Natya Manch, his stature as a popular shahir and his experience in scripting plays, Sambhaji was well placed to train the young KKM activists. Moreover, the group used to perform songs written by him from its early days.

Sachin was the first among group members to write a song, closely followed by Deepak and Sheetal; Deepak also wrote scripts for street plays and set the music for songs. In due course, other members began contributing in these departments, and all lyrics, scripts and productions were finalised after discussion within the group. Activists trained by Sambhaji and others also took the lead in devising a workshop to train new members who joined KKM in subsequent months. Deepak conducted most of these workshops till 2007-08, whereas others like Ramesh, Sachin and Sagar took over later. Typically, the workshops were spread over 2-4 days, and participants were put through a series of sessions in acting, singing and writing geared towards making them a) aware of how Brahmanic and capitalist values subsumed their thoughts and practices including their ideas about beauty, aesthetics and art; and b) demonstrating through hands-on exercises that everyone, irrespective of their background, vocabulary, training or exposure, could write songs, poems and plays and excel at the same by practicing.

From the accounts of those who participated in these workshops (discussed in the chapter titled *Collective Art Production*), it is apparent that they played a key role in equipping activists with the skills and confidence to produce original songs and plays responding to the needs of specific situations.

CASTE AND LOVE

Meanwhile, interactions among group members exposed them to new experiences and alerted them to the myriad ways in which caste ideology affected thoughts and embodied behaviour, including their own.

Jyoti's account excerpted below bears this out. Her shock upon seeing the slums in Pune was understandable. Since she was from a village and economically better off than the team members she was visiting, it is likely that she was used to clean, spacious environments and had never seen the crushing poverty and cramped, squalid environs of slums in large metropolitan cities. That her caste location was same or similar to her friends likely moved her deeply, as she mentioned having a hard time accepting that people actually lived in such conditions.

Jyoti clarifies with examples how writings by BR Ambedkar played a foundational role in conscientising her and exposing her casteist ideas and practices. Her prior understanding of Ambedkar as a leader of only Mahars signposts her difference with him in jati terms. But more importantly, it attests to the fierce, competitive identity politics among lower caste groups in recent decades. She talks of knowing Ambedkar as the writer of the Constitution while in school but of never encountering his ideas on caste, not even when she was associated with the Rashtra Seva Dal in Saswad. This attests to the absence of Ambedkar from most school and college syllabi in India, and the disregard of the caste question by most Communist parties across the country in India despite their valorising Ambedkar. Jyoti's initial lack of high regard for Ambedkar and her reluctance in accepting him provides evidence of the impact of these trends on her thinking.

At the same time, she speaks of engaging with Ambedkar's writings and learning his perspectives on caste and politics after joining KKM, which foregrounds the collective's role in politicising individual activists, especially regarding caste. Jyoti said:

Sheetal, Sagar and other friends in KKM used to stay in Pune's slums.

When I started going there...in the village, there are no slums, so I saw slums for the first time in Pune. To accept all this...it was a very big difference...A world that many people have not even seen. They don't know that in our own country, people stay like this! When I saw all this, it is then that I started taking things seriously.

I did not even hold Babasaheb in high regard then. Till I was in school, till class 12, I only knew of him as the one who wrote the constitution, and nothing else. And like (most common people) I knew that he was a leader of Mahars, and that he had only worked for them.

...They (Rashtra Seva Dal) never went into the depth and understood Ambedkar. It is only after coming to KKM that I got to know; I did not accept him so easily. I thought I will read and see. I read his 'State and Minorities'. It is then that I understood that he did not work for one caste; that his conception of the country was very different; his understanding of caste was also different.

It is after reading that book that I was impressed with him...I read it in Marathi. After that, I started really liking him...I knew that he was a great

man, and I should learn from his practice; read his theoretical writings, and work with them in my life.⁵⁶

The thrust in KKM on working with Ambedkar's ideas led to novel interventions. This included a campaign titled 'Love and Revolution' that was premised on his advocacy of inter-caste marriage as one of the ways of annihilating caste. Following Ambedkar, it was common for various progressive parties and groups to organise mass marriages for inter-caste couples in Pune and other parts of Maharashtra. But KKM related the idea of inter-caste marriage to students' and youngsters' choice to fall in love with whoever they wished irrespective of caste and creed.

Jyoti's account provides rich insights into how activists reimagined love by drawing on Ambedkar for this campaign and their own lives. That it pertained to romantic, inter-caste relationships and provided theoretical backing for activists' choice of partners from another caste is apparent. Jyoti mentions spending two years in tension over her relationship with Ramesh (Jyoti was a Dalit, Ramesh a Maratha) before reading *Annihilation of Caste*, indicating there was strong resistance to it among her family members and relatives. She stresses that the book showed her that women's liberation was a key part of caste annihilation, and that neither could be achieved if women like her were not able to choose their partners freely. But she also clarifies that love did not only denote romantic feelings between heterosexual partners; instead, it included 'love for another jati, another person, for all living beings at an equal level,' which resonates with the idea of love in bhakti traditions⁵⁷ as well as Ambedkar's conceptualisation of fraternity based on *maitri* or loving kindness in the Preamble (as argued in Rathore 2020).

When Jyoti stresses that KKM spoke about these ideas of love – as inter-caste marriage, as women's right to choose a partner irrespective of caste, and as fraternity – *openly*, this seems to indicate that such occasions were rare and hence attracted many students and youngsters. She also points out that the campaign scandalised many senior progressive activists in Pune. She said:

When we were in college, I used to think that love is bad. Because in the culture we come from, at home we were taught that love is bad, especially love between boys and girls, that is the worst. That was my mindset. But

⁵⁶ Interviewed by me on December 27, 2018 in Pune. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translations are mine. The same applies for all of Jyoti's quotes in the chapter.

⁵⁷ Personal communication with subaltern practitioners of various versions of bhakti in Maharashtra. Beyond Maharashtra, Prahlad Singh Tippaniya and Shabnam Virmani and many others talk about such an idea of love in Kabir's compositions. The baul tradition in Bengal is seen as having a similar understanding.

when I was in FYBA (BA first year), we (KKM) had taken a programme on love and revolution; actually, love with revolution. Otherwise what happens is, there is a perception that social activists, or people with good thoughts don't do bad things, like love....

We had taken that programme on love with revolution openly. It was not only to attract college students, so they would feel there was space to talk about love. Instead, the broad understanding was that according to Babasaheb, if casteism has to end, women's liberation is important, meaning a woman must be able to choose her own life partner; if that happens, the kinship system will be challenged. Although in practice, that does not happen so much, but among the ways that Babasaheb suggested, there was inter-caste marriage.

My problem is that whatever I like, I need some ideological or philosophical backing. I wanted to have an inter-caste marriage, so I was in a lot of tension. How do I tell my family? Everyone will say – 'such a shameful act'. So, after falling in love, I was in tension for two years. How to tell this to anyone! Later, when I read in Babasaheb's writing that inter-caste marriage is important for annihilation of caste, I had confidence that I was doing something good.

So what I had in mind, that love and choosing your own partner is bad, for that, in our programmes, we used to ask 'should caste be annihilated?' and people raised their hands; but when we asked 'will you marry your daughters into another caste?', almost no one raised their hand; we asked what they would do if their son was in love. Babasaheb was anti-caste; to get power through politics or become a big officer by studying hard, or be devoted to Gautam Buddha – that is not what he stood for...But Babasaheb's ideas about gender equality, or the equality of all human beings, those perspectives people don't bring out. They only talk about him as a political leader, as devoted to Buddha, as a big officer wearing suit and boot; that's how they see Babasaheb. But the rest of the values also have to be modified, and love is a big part of that. That there must be love for

another jati, another person, for all living beings at an equal level – that plays a very important role. And we feel that love, its expression should come from men and women, and we give a lot of freedom in our group for that, and we also tell people how to see it.

Jyoti's reference to the 'freedom in our group' for activists to express love explains the presence of four 'love marriages' in the core team, three of them inter-caste – i.e., Jyoti and Ramesh (Dalit-Maratha), Sheetal and Sachin (Matang-Mali), Anuradha and Siddharth (Dalit-Maratha), and Rupali and Sagar (Matang-Matang), – which was in many ways the biggest marker of the collective's radical character. All these activists reported threats, abuse, and violence from family members and relatives on account of their choice, but the circumstances that Rupali and Sagar faced were especially dire and life-threatening.

As Rupali surmises below, this was likely because both her and Sagar's family were poor, uneducated Dalits, whereas in all the other instances, at least one side comprised Maratha/Mali, whose socio-economic status was relatively better and therefore more amenable to being progressive. In any case, she clarifies that casteist ideas and attitudes prevailed not only among poor, uneducated Dalits but across social strata and in the state apparatus; it was the collective that stood by and cared for its members during crises, and connected them with a larger, progressive community that offered them support and assistance.

In her account excerpted below, she and Sagar first appear as rebellious lovers who are inspired by the troupe's performances and decide to tell their families about their wish to get married. The duo then transform into heretics and helpless, naïve victims, surrounded by a frenzied mob that abuses, shoves and parades them from the slum to the police station. Not a soul objects to this violent parade – not even the police, who they hope will understand their problem and help them. The duo had not been able to contact the collective initially; but once the troupe members arrive, Rupali and Sagar transition into resolute, conscientious rebels. They get married twice – first according to Buddhist rites, then according to Satayshodhak rites – to fob off their families' criticism and celebrate the occasion with 'people from the movement'. What seems to have lingered thereafter for both Rupali and Sagar was the pain of separation from their families, even though their relations were restored a couple of years later. Rupali said:

Since he was from the same basti, we started going and coming together.

We started liking each other. And thought why should we not get married?

There was a little bit of love also that was flowering between us, so we thought, we should do it. So we decided to get married. But we decided that we would not tell at home. My family wanted to get me married along with my sister, in the same mandap!

Gradually, I started feeling that...we say on stage that Hindu dharm is bad; nothing should be done through the hands of the Brahmin; Savitribai Phule is our ideal...I liked that thinking. We tried to persuade our families for a court marriage or a satyashodhak marriage. My household is very feudal. The more uneducated they are, the more feudal. When we said this, there was big fracas, in his house and mine. Some 50-odd people turned up at Sagar's house and there was a big fight. They wanted to scare us, so they said, let's take them to the police station. We thought these guys will anyway not understand what we have to say; at least the police will. We agreed to go the police station.

It was like a juloos [parade], and they took us to the police station, beating me all along the way. In keeping with gender discrimination, they did not hit Sagar so much, but they beat me up a lot. Who was hitting me, I had no idea. Anyone would, saying we were polluting the Hindu religion...this way, they took us to the police station. His and my family members and neighbours, they were all there.

All this, I could not tell the others. Had the group been there, this problem would not have occurred. But I did not have my phone with me...My family is Congress-leaning...So the police were threatening us. They said if we did not listen to them, we would be beaten up badly. Even then, I was thinking of my family. Now, this is filmy, but let me tell you.

While I was at the police station, a stone thrown from outside came and hit me. I was shocked...that I was thinking about them, about convincing them, and they are so mad. And once a mob becomes angry...they were shouting, burn them, cut them, they are polluting Hindu religion...They might have cut us up! Doing so will help them in the short term, I figured there itself, and insisted that we should leave from there.

We were taken to a bigger police chowky [outpost]. The, the rest of the people (from KKM) came. The police figured that we were all educated, and aware. So then they scared away our family members using guns...While we were saying don't spend much, or that we will get married after studying a bit, where did they understand!

So these people [group members] had come to the police station, and we got out and sat in a car. We went and stayed at Vilas Wagh's house that night. The next day, we got married according to Buddhist rites. Getting married was very important, lest they would keep thinking that a young girl has gone away etc. So we got married immediately.

Sagar took up a job to earn some money. Wagh Sir had a hostel for sex workers' kids. I stayed there for a month and worked there and earned some money. Then, we had a Satyshodhak marriage at the SM Joshi Foundation⁵⁸ once again, so people from the movement could attend. Sambhaji (Bhagat), Anand (Patwardhan), Raosaheb Kasbe (retired judge), they were all present. We called some respected people, and our photos appeared in the press. That's how people in the basti got to know that Rupali and Sagar got married.

For one whole year, we did not go home at all. We could not even think of what our family members had done. Neither Sagar nor I went home.⁵⁹

MOVEMENTS AND REPRISALS

In September 2006, roughly around the time that love was sparking revolutions in the lives of KKM activists, four members of a Mahar family were brutally murdered in a small village called Khairlanji in Bhandara district over a dispute with Kunbi Marathas (classified as OBC since 2001) in the village, who wanted to construct a road cutting through the Mahars' farm land. Though Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange managed to save himself from being lynched by hiding behind a bush, he saw his wife and daughter being sexually assaulted and murdered along with his two

⁵⁸ Named after the acclaimed Socialist leader Shreedhar Mahadev Joshi (1904-1989), the SM Joshi Socialist Foundation in Pune is a hub of progressive activists

⁵⁹ Interviewed by me on December 10, 2014 in Pune; the interview was conducted in Hindi and translation is mine.

sons; from the limited record of events, it can be inferred that the murderous mob was constituted of Kunbi men, and other adult males watched and cheered the mobsters. Police, though informed of the crime in real time, failed to carry out the necessary examinations on the bodies of Surekha and Priyanka Bhotmange to ascertain rape and the investigation was marred by lapses (Teltumbde 2007).

Although such incidents of caste atrocity and sexual violence were common in rural Maharashtra and similarly marked by botched police investigations, the Khairlanji massacre was momentous for mobilising Dalits in large numbers (although in a fragmented fashion) behind a call for justice. One likely reason for this was Khairlanji's proximity to Nagpur, which enabled progressive organisations, activists and journalists to visit the spot and bring out reports. It is also likely that the Dalit middle class in Maharashtra that mainly comprised Mahars participated in the protests and increased its visibility in the media. Mass protests were organised across major urban centres in Maharashtra, and some mobilisations turned unruly and violent. At least one person was killed in police firing on protestors during this period, which provided further impetus for mobilisation and demands for justice.

The restive atmosphere and accusations of a cover-up in the name of police investigation spurred KKM into action. Activists hit the ground in and around Pune with pamphlets and performances demanding punishment for the murderers and the policemen accused of killing a protestor.

In the excerpt below, Jyoti mentions campaigning in slums and colleges in Pune, which shows that KKM tried to reach a cross-section of society instead of targeting only Dalits. She suggests that a movement demanding justice in the Khairlanji case was gaining momentum, and alleges that the state government wanted to suppress the matter. Both claims appear well-founded. By November, a wide range of organisations including the National Alliance of People's Movements (a national level federation of mass movements from across the country) extended their support to the protests, and several acclaimed intellectuals, retired judges and activists participated in rallies and meetings demanding justice and strict punishment for the perpetrators. Further, fact-finding reports highlighted the anti-Dalit dimension of the violence in Khairlanji and the attempts by the police and local administration to dismiss the mob's motives as an interpersonal quarrel and/or an illicit love affair. Reports also mentioned police harassing, intimidating and assaulting protestors in various places (Ananth 2021; EPW Editorial 2006). Jyoti said:

Our only demand then was that justice should be dispensed in Khairlanji... we went to different colleges and jhuggis of Pune. We took out pamphlets and were asking for justice in the matter; we demanded that charges be framed against the police officer who killed the protestor. An environment was developing, it was going towards a peak...which the government was not being able to control. And the government wanted to suppress the issue. And for that, there was one way...

The 'only way' Jyoti referred to became apparent in subsequent weeks, when senior ministers of the Congress-NCP government in Maharashtra, including influential Maratha leader and home minister RR Patil, issued media statements claiming that the Khairlanji protests were fomented by the banned CPI(Maoist) and that the organisations involved in the protests were Maoist fronts.⁶⁰ This diverted attention from the real issue and ruptured the emerging solidarity. Jyoti contended that the government adopted a similar ploy to counter protests over other incidents of caste violence during this period:

...They raised the bogey of Naxalism. So people stopped talking about the real issue... The government did this for the first time after Khairlanji—they said Maoists are behind the protests. So people stopped paying attention to Khairlanji. They did the same thing after Javkheda.⁶¹

Notwithstanding the reprisal for its participation in the Khairlanji protests, KKM produced numerous songs and plays on movements affecting subaltern caste-classes across Maharashtra. The list includes movements against SEZs, expressways, freight corridors, slum demolitions, displacement, exploitation of workers, farm distress, caste atrocities, infringement of forest and environmental rights, and so on. Additionally, it staged performances in support of many of these movements at different venues; sometimes, the troupe travelled to the area where a movement was centered and performed in mobilisations attended by thousands of people.

In 2010-11, KKM plunged headlong into a movement opposing the Lavasa township situated on the outskirts of Pune. Touted as India's first hill city, the project was reportedly backed by NCP founder and then minister in the state government Sharad Pawar, and his relatives were

⁶⁰ The state government is said to have released a list of 36 organisations it claimed were Maoist fronts; this included well-known forums such as NAPM as well as KKM.

⁶¹ On October 21, 2014, three members of a Dalit family were murdered allegedly by influential Marathas in the village and their mutilated body parts were dispersed on a farm in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district.

part owners in the company developing it in the initial years. Construction work commenced in the mid-2000s, but many residents and land owners in the project area were opposed to the development. They claimed massive environmental violations in project implementation, alleged that their land was taken away forcibly and/or fraudulently, and began a long-drawn movement which was supported by NAPM. Meetings and rallies in support of the Lavasa struggle were organised in Pune by NAPM and other groups, and KKM performed on many of these occasions.⁶²

In addition, the troupe also travelled to Lavasa several times; Jyoti claims that this was at the behest of NAPM figurehead Medha Patkar, who especially appreciated how KKM performances acted as an 'energy booster' for audiences. The importance of this boost in the context of movements that are long-drawn and involve court battles is noteworthy, because those in leadership positions attest that it is difficult to maintain the morale of affected people and enlist their participation in mass mobilisations year after year.⁶³ Jyoti acknowledges Medha Patkar for standing by KKM all throughout, which also seems to indicate that there were many who did not do so:

In the Lavasa issue, we campaigned among people there. Our cultural work...was a sort of energy booster. And like Babasaheb had said, one song is equal to ten speeches. Songs are easily understood, and they also give energy...they touch our feelings, much more than speeches do. Specially Medha Patkar would often call us for demonstrations. She would want us to go there again and again and sing, and maintain people's energy. We went there, to the villages, several times. I was not there then so much, but the others had gone. So Medha Patkar understood us at that time. She understood the power of culture and stayed with us all through.

Deepak, who travelled to Lavasa a few times with other troupe members, recalled walking at the head of a serpentine rally in one instance, mike in hand, singing lines that were repeated by the crowd behind in chorus. NAPM activists like Suniti Sulbha Raghunath and Prasad Bagwe who organised such rallies reported being delighted, especially with how songs by KKM infused life into protestors and provided them the conviction to carry on demanding accountability and protection of their rights. They also felt that KKM's subsequent implication in legal cases were

⁶² This summary of the anti-Lavasa struggle is based on several reporting trips I made to the area between 2013 and 2017 and my conversations with project-affected people and key organisers of the movement during this period.

⁶³ Personal communication with activists in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh between 2013 and 2020.

reprisals for their participation in the anti-Lavasa and other struggles.⁶⁴

Similar views regarding state reprisals against KKM were advanced by a wide variety of activists in Maharashtra. This included well-known intellectuals and activists such as Raosaheb Kasbe, Sumedh Jadhav, Maruti Bhapkar, Manav Kamble, and Milind Bhawar, retired justices BG Kolse Patil and PB Sawant, and shahirs Sambhaji Bhagat and Vira Sathidar, who spoke about this openly in meetings and forums, as well as others who admitted the same privately but held back from voicing their opinion in public fearing state reprisal. Thus, it appears that KKM's continued participation in various struggles after it was marked as a 'Maoist front' in 2006 – including its involvement in the Lavasa movement – antagonised its relations with the state, and in large measure provoked the repression that followed soon after.

2011-2021: SURVIVAL AND REGENERATION

The arrest of Deepak in May 2011 set off KKM's third phase, when its very survival has been seriously threatened by state repression including but not limited to the implication of activists in multiple legal cases, their repeated imprisonment for prolonged periods and relentless surveillance on members outside jail. Sachin and Sheetal also separated from the troupe during this period.

A brief timeline of events during the past decade is necessary to understand how the repression affected the collective. The brazen arrest of Deepak – he was abducted at gunpoint from his workplace by police personnel in civil clothes, kept under illegal detention and tortured severely in custody – sent shockwaves through the troupe. The Maharashtra ATS claimed that Deepak was part of a training camp organised by the CPI(Maoist) in Pune's Khed taluka in which some other KKM members were also present, and booked him under UAPA, 1967. All core members of KKM were forced to go into hiding thereafter fearing they could be similarly arrested, tortured and implicated in the case.

A Kabir Kala Manch Defence Committee was constituted comprising documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan (whose 2011 film *Jai Bhim Comrade* on the Dalit movement in Maharashtra featured performances and interviews with KKM activists), actor Ratna Pathak Shah, thespian Ramoo Ramanathan and other eminent citizens, which parleyed with the government 'to stop the police from branding functionaries of the Pune-based Kabir Kala Manch as Naxals'

⁶⁴ Personal communication with Suniti SR and Prasad Bagwe in Pune/ Lavasa in 2016-17.

and arresting other activists of the troupe (Kabir Kala Manch Defence Committee 2012).

Activists came out of hiding in two batches in 2013 after the Bombay High Court granted bail to Deepak. They did this by staging a 'satyagraha' outside the state assembly, saying that their appearance should not be seen as a surrender as they were innocent. Nevertheless, Sheetal, Sachin, Sagar and Ramesh were duly arrested from the spot and remanded in judicial custody. Rupali and Jyoti, who were not arrested, took on the mantle of rebuilding KKM from scratch with Deepak, who had just been released on bail. Among those in prison, Sheetal was granted bail months later on 'humanitarian grounds' due to her pregnancy. She kept aloof from KKM activities, in part because she was busy with bringing up her son Abhang. Meanwhile, the trial at the sessions court in Bombay proceeded at a snail's pace and often, police failed to produce either witnesses or the accused, leading to further delays. Sagar, Ramesh and Sachin spent almost four years in prison till January 2017, when they were released after securing bail from the Supreme Court.

Sheetal and Sachin formally parted ways with KKM after this by launching their own troupe Navyan Mahajalsa. The rest of KKM's core team reunited, and its activities and performances acquired a fresh lease of life. Over the next three and a half years, the troupe published a book of poems and songs written by its members during their time in jail; it also produced numerous songs that critiqued the politics of Hindutva and the authoritarian character of the Modi-led BJP regime.

On December 31, 2017, KKM performed at the Elgar Parishad, a programme organised by a coalition of 260 organisations at Pune's Shaniwar Wada fort to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon. Although historical records do not provide a clear picture of this battle, it is well-established that a small Mahar regiment of the British army fended off a much larger Peshwa force near the Koregaon village on the banks of river Bheema (Kumbhojkar 2012).

One of the songs KKM performed before the 35,000-strong audience at Shaniwar Wada was titled *Udwa Thikrya Rai Rai Re*, which represented the BJP government (in power in Maharashtra and at the Centre) as the 'new Peshwai'. Though polemical, the claim appeared well-founded: the Peshwa regime in Maharashtra ruled in strict adherence with Brahmanical codes and was associated great cruelty and oppression towards Dalits and other lower caste groups; similarly, the BJP government furthered Hindutva ideology through executive orders and diktats

and turned a blind eye to hate speech and mob lynchings in the name of religion, and its decisions such as reduction in scholarships for students from marginalised groups and withholding of funds for research centres on social exclusion adversely affected lower caste groups. Weeks later, a legal case was registered against the organisers of the Parishad, claiming that speeches and performances at the gathering incited Dalits to participate in riots in Bhima Koregaon the following day.⁶⁵ As proof, the complainant mentioned *Udwa Thikrya*, claiming the song defamed the government and prompted Dalits to attack government property.

The Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case assumed gigantic proportions in subsequent months and years. Pune Police, which initially investigated the case, claimed the Elgar Parishad was part of a well-planned Maoist plot to foment unrest and violence, and arrested nine well-known activists from across the country in 2018.⁶⁶ Police officials also gave statements to the media claiming that they had proof of the accused plotting to kill Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In January 2020, the case was transferred to the National Investigation Agency (NIA henceforth).

Months later, in September 2020, the NIA arrested Sagar, Ramesh and Jyoti from KKM in connection with the Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case. The mantle to keep KKM alive now largely fell on Rupali, as other core members were either in jail or had shifted focus to raise new troupes.

The mass media's role in presenting a biased picture of KKM throughout this period is noteworthy. After Deepak's arrest in 2011, when the rest of the troupe was underground, reports appeared in Marathi and English newspapers every other day reproducing the ATS' version: that KKM was indoctrinated by and functioning under the instructions of alleged top Maoist leaders Angela Sontakke and Milind Teltumbde. Only in very rare cases did reports quote KKM Defence Committee members or others who provided KKM's side of the story rejecting these claims. The 'surrender' and arrest of KKM activists in 2013 occasioned another deluge of reports that advanced the state's version prominently, whereas the release of Deepak from jail around the same time was hardly covered. Reports in subsequent months and years, though reduced in frequency, often quoted ministers in the state government – irrespective of party affiliation –

⁶⁵ Media reports state that Hindutva groups armed with deadly weapons attacked Dalits in Bhima Koregaon; Dalits also went on the rampage in retaliation in some places, destroying government property.

⁶⁶ Those arrested in 2018 included Sudhir Dhawale, Surendra Gadling, Mahesh Raut, Shoma Sen, Rona Wilson, Arun Ferreira, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao and Vernon Gonsalves. Those arrested after the NIA took over the case include Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Navlakha, Hanybabu Tarayil, Sagar Gorkhe, Ramesh Gaichor, Jyoti Jagtap and Stan Swamy. For an insightful discussion of the case, see Giri 2022.

claiming that KKM was part of a network of ‘urban Naxals.’ At other times, reports quoted anonymous sources in the ATS and state police, claiming that more evidence had been found linking KKM with the banned party. When KKM activists secured bail from the Supreme Court in January 2017, the development was hardly reported, but their arrest in the Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case was covered widely and prominently by the leading media outlets. Some new media outlets like *The Wire* and *Article 14* have bucked this trend and published stories about repression on the troupe, interviews with KKM members, profiles of activists and so on; but the number of such reports and reach of these outlets compared to traditional mass media is limited.

These developments had a huge impact on KKM collectively as well as individually, for all core members of the troupe. The challenges it encountered and endured could be classified into two broad categories, though in real life they were often inseparable: challenges facing activists in prison, and challenges facing activists who were not in jail.

BEHIND BARS

After Sagar and Ramesh were released from jail in January 2017, Javed Iqbal interviewed them regarding their jail experiences. Deepak, who was jailed between 2011 and 2013, was also around and gave his inputs during the interview, which provides rich insights into the challenges that KKM activists faced while in jail.

The first challenge they encountered, it appears, derived from living completely under the jail management’s authority. Excerpted below, Ramesh’s account draws attention to the intense internal struggle this involved. He mentions hoping that they would be granted bail soon just like the other accused in the case (Deepak and Siddharth), which indicates he and Sagar had been mentally prepared to go to jail when they came overground in 2013. Yet, the terms he uses to speak of this initial phase – war on your ideas and circumstances, assault of negativism, entrapment, suffocation – convey the magnitude of what it entailed to live completely under the inhumane jail management’s control. Ramesh (in Iqbal 2017) said:

When we are outside we actually say with bravado that we will go to jail, we will struggle but when you actually you go to jail, there’s an assault on your mind, there’s a war on your ideas and on your circumstances.

In the beginning, to adjust it was difficult and we were a little stable because of the way our case was functioning, as how others were released,

how the case was falling apart. But still, once we entered jail, there was a negativism that assaults you quickly. Once you enter this, you're trapped. For look at this room and how it is suffocating us, and we want to leave this room but you can't leave it, someone else will come and take you out. There's nothing in your hand. You're under someone's authority and you need to deal with that control. And you can't go outside of this. When we are outside, that's not there, there's freedom of choice, I can go there, I can't eat in that hotel, I won't be friends with this person, I won't sleep here, I won't eat this. This is not there.

And the kind of people who control you, they have no humility, they don't look at you like you're a human being. They look at you as a prisoner. That you're not even an animal, they're better with cats and dogs. There is no concern, nothing, in the beginning, you may know your own people but no one has any *lena-dena* [association] with you. We used to speak about jail, but once you go into jail, it felt more dangerous. And now we are here, and we have to fight, and we have to live here.

Aside from the struggle against negativity, there were other practical problems that activists had to face in prison, especially in initial weeks when they did not know the basics like 'where to sit, how to stand, when to eat' (Iqbal 2017). Ramesh and Sagar, who were shifted to Taloja Jail in Navi Mumbai after they spent a few weeks in Arthur Road Jail, spoke of overcrowding, lack of space, very bad quality of food, nexus between drug dealers and underworld dons in prison and the jail administration, and so on. They mentioned singing a lot to themselves, *as if* singing was a form of meditation that helped them understand and endure imprisonment.

Despite these early challenges and their magnitude, once activists settled in and conversations ensued between them and other inmates, they became thick friends. Two qualities seem to have endeared KKM activists to fellow prisoners – that they were educated and that they could sing. The first meant that they could peruse the case details of other inmates and write applications for relief or request provision of various legally mandated services in jail. The results sometimes appeared miraculous under the circumstances. Sagar's recollection of how his intervention helped free Mangiya, who was remanded for stealing rails, captured this:

When he found out we were educated, he asked for help. When I studied

his case, I realised the actual punishment for his crime was for six months but he was in jail for nine months. So I planned to write an application for him to admit his guilt to finish the case. Other people around him said don't do that but he agreed with me and finally the judge let him out as he had already served the duration of his punishment. As he was leaving he was thanking me openly, and then every one would come and ask us for help in their case! (Iqbal 2017)

In addition to writing applications for others, the activists made life miserable for jail officials by filing RTIs that exposed how the state was flouting its own laws when it came to provision of reading material, food and other services to inmates.

The second quality, that of singing, endeared them to a lot more inmates. Sagar and Ramesh's recollection of musical gatherings in Talaja jail excerpted below attest to the diversity of the audience, that likely included drug addicts, underworld bosses and religious Hindu inmates. Especially noteworthy in their account is the reception of this audience, which seemingly had little interest in emancipatory struggles, to their 'movement-wala gaana' (songs of movements). They mention weekly gatherings of 50-100 people in jail singing 'andolan songs' (songs of struggle) together for a large duration of the programme, which attests to the popularity of such songs and indicates that they resonated deeply even with apolitical audiences:

Ramesh: Once in Talaja, after eating we were all sitting, and all the *dum maro dum wale* [marijuana smokers] sat down and started their songs, their bhajans, *mehfil bhatt raha tha* [a lively musical programme was on]. Then slowly they realised we also started to sing, they would hear us, in the shower, or here and there. Then one day they asked us to come ahead and sing, and we said we don't sing all this Bollywood music, we have songs from the *movement-wala gaana*. They said 'no problem, sing', so I opened my book, and I asked this musician, to play a tune. It was a song about Arthur Road Jail, the first song in jail, a song we entered jail singing. And we sang it in Marathi, and it would become very popular. *Arre salla apna hi gaana gaye hai, kya bhaari gaana hai* [Hey, they're singing our song, what a solid song] they would respond. Like this, some 10 songs went into the mehfil.

Sagar: Till 3 am it went on like that.

Ramesh: They then knew we were political prisoners but *acha bhaari gaana bhi gaate hai* [they sing good, solid songs]. And songs are effective no? Slowly we started to get a lot of good response. On Sunday if we were in different barracks the *bhai-log* used to call us but they used to sit us down and get us to sing andolan songs for 50-100 people, sometimes jail songs, sometimes Bollywood songs, sometimes andolan songs.

The above account attests that activists started writing songs from their early days in prison. Many of these songs pertained to contemporaneous socio-political issues, about which they read in newspapers available in jail, and reading material such as journals, magazines and books passed on by friends and sympathisers during court hearings. Many songs also involved the use of Urdu and tapori Bumbaiyya Hindi words, which activists picked up in jail.⁶⁷

Court hearings, several of which I attended, also provided occasion for jailed activists to pass on song lyrics to group members who were outside. At times, they tried to record melodies on mobile phones or sing them out to other group members, but this was rarely successfully due to the presence of policemen around. The group members who were outside then finalised the melody, set the music and performed the songs in demonstrations and rallies in support of various movements.

OUTSIDE

The first shock that Rupali, Jyoti and Deepak had to endure after they came overground/were released from jail in 2013 was the ostracisation by friends, acquaintances, and even progressive activists and organisations. A key reason for this was the propaganda about KKM being a Maoist front repeated ad nauseam on mass media, which made people in general wary of interacting with members of the troupe and fearful that they may be similarly thrown in jail. Additionally, since KKM was booked under the UAPA whose provisions allowed establishment of ‘guilt by association’ (Bhatia 2018), it likely prompted progressive organisations to dissociate from them professionally though activists continued to maintain personal relations with troupe members.

Jyoti’s brief account of this period excerpted below bears out how this affected KKM and

⁶⁷ For instance, Sagar wrote *Tab tab ladein hum* (The times when we fought) when he was in Taloja jail. The song uses a lot of Urdu words, and the page where the earliest version of the song is penned contains a key of the meanings of important words in the lyric.

individual activists in multiple ways. Bereft of opportunities and spaces for conversation among themselves and with others, activists were likely forced to self-rationalize for two long years why people kept turning away:

We lost access to the earlier office because of repression. People would not call us for programmes either. Friends would not talk to us, or answer calls. We were not angry, because we knew that they are like victims of the state. After 2013, for two years, people did not talk to us. If we met them in public spaces, they would turn away and go. It was so bad.

Then, there were livelihood and housing issues they had to deal with. Deepak stopped receiving his monthly salary from Pune Municipal Transport after he was arrested, but could not take up any job after being released on bail as employment conditions did not permit so. Consequently, his family of four had to survive on the meagre earnings of casual labour that he managed to find once in a while and the *dabba* (packed meals) service run by his wife till 2018, when half of his salary was restored. Additionally, he had to change houses several times as owners were likely scared off by police or they raised objections with his rehearsing at home or other issues. Similarly, Rupali struggled to find a job in the development sector as many prospective employers were reportedly scared off by calls from police, and the assignments she took on were mostly short-term. She also had to change hostels a few times. Jyoti's circumstances were slightly better as she worked part time with a Marathi publication and stayed as a paying guest. But even then, KKM did not have access to any space where activists could meet and talk amongst themselves, or even rehearse and produce new songs.

Alongside these disruptions, activists outside jail also had to consult and follow up with lawyers regarding developments in the case on a routine basis. This was because the troupe had decided not to involve their families in legal hassles beforehand; also because in most cases, their families were uneducated and would understand little of legal processes. Additionally, between 2013 and January 2017, Rupali and Jyoti travelled to Bombay every 15-20 days to meet their partners when they were produced in court.

As Jyoti mentions below, all of this left little time for members who were not in jail to even meet, forget produce new work.⁶⁸ She refers to a conversation we had a few months earlier,

⁶⁸ Although this is not an argument that can be developed here in any great detail, stemming the flow of the work may well have been one of the intended effects of the arrests as well as of the long-drawn legal proceedings.

when the activists were talking about how their relations with friends, in some cases family members, and even progressive activists were strained even after the passage of 6-7 years since Deepak's arrest; and concurs that it was not only state repression, but repression by something like Gramsci's 'integral state' that they had to endure. The integral state, explains Green (2002), includes political society and civil society:

Political society, in this instance, comprises the elements of the limited notion of the state or the idea of a juridical-administrative state: government, the military, the police, the judiciary, and so on... Civil society, on the other hand, constitutes the voluntary organizations within society, "that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private,'" such as trade unions, churches, cultural clubs, newspapers, publishers, political parties, and the like (Notebook 12, §1; 1971, 12).

...Gramsci insists that political society and civil society are not two separate spheres: they comprise an organic unity... They are two aspects of one social organization. (6)

As if describing the workings of the integral state, Jyoti said:

What is happening now is most of our energy and time goes by in pursuing police cases. First Sagar and Ramesh were in jail for four years. Coordinating with lawyers, going to court ...a lot of time went by in that. Also, in preparing ourselves for what we were facing. Like you had said the last time, state repression is also repression by society, family. So you have to tolerate and go through all that. Then, whenever we would do something, there would be police surveillance—whenever, wherever we met, they would be there. So we stopped meeting altogether for a while.

Consequently, KKM existed as a collective between 2013 and 2017 primarily through its stage performances, which too had dwindled compared to pre-repression years. But even this posed a problem. Though core members could sing and lead shows, it was not possible for them to stage 2-3 hour jalsas alone, which required dedicated musicians to play the harmonium, table, and other instruments; invitees too demanded this. But KKM struggled to find new members despite people being interested in joining them, said Jyoti, surmising that the Maoist/Naxal tag dissuaded them. Additionally, professional musicians who agreed to participate in their stage

shows for a fraction of their usual fee rarely stuck around for long. Consequently, in many stage shows during this period, activists often made arrangements and reached the venue hours in advance in order to rehearse songs that they would then perform with musicians who joined them only for that show.

Jyoti drew attention to how all this meant that KKM had to forget about one its key objectives, that of raising 100 such troupes:

Our limitation is that the Naxalite stamp means people don't want to associate with us. Many people from outside have wanted to be associated with us, but don't do so because of repression. We are also facing a limitation in spreading widely because of repression. Otherwise all of us wanted to create a national network; our motive was to create 100 KKM, but we could not even do that. Because of state repression.

The collective acquired a fresh lease of life after Sagar and Ramesh's release from jail on bail in January 2017. Following their return to the group, they worked with Jyoti, Rupali and other newer members to strengthen KKM. At that point, Deepak and Ramdas, two activists who steadied the group in the absence of Sagar and Ramesh, shifted focus to training and raising new cultural troupes in the outskirts of Pune and Nashik respectively. But they continued collaborating with KKM to produce new songs and plays, and joined the group during important performances, suggesting that activists shared a close understanding even when they divided responsibilities.

Between early 2017 and mid-2020, KKM produced many new songs on popular movements across the country, including the movement for justice for Rohit Vemula, a Dalit PhD scholar from the Hyderabad Central University who committed suicide following pressure from university authorities. The most important contribution of the group during this period, however, was their participation in the Bhima Koregaon movement. As mentioned earlier, the movement was centered around centenary celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the battle of Bhima Koregaon on January 1, 2018, but preparations for it began around a year before the date. Small meetings and programmes were organised by numerous organisations in the Ambedkarite movement and Maratha groups in different parts of Maharashtra, focused on raising awareness among subaltern groups about how the BJP-led government in the state was cutting back on entitlements and scholarships for SCs, STs and OBCs. Through the course of these programmes involving

many local cultural troupes, the *Udwa Thikrya Rai Rai* song written and produced by KKM gained wide traction and led to the trajectory of events discussed earlier.

After the arrest of Sagar, Ramesh and Jyoti in September 2020, they were denied bail several times. Sagar and Ramesh are currently lodged in Taloja jail in Navi Mumbai, and Jyoti in the Byculla Women's jail in Mumbai. These circumstances meant that after 2020, Rupali alone from the original core team has remained majorly engaged in keeping KKM afloat. In addition to challenges on employment and housing and social/political isolation (discussed earlier), constant surveillance – by police and intelligence officials in person as well as online⁶⁹ – and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 severely compromised her ability to sustain the troupe. Consequently, like during its earlier revival in 2013, the collective materialises mainly through performances that it stages every once in a while; its existence today is even more threatened by the operations of the 'integral (Hindutva) state.'

Even this limited existence of KKM as an artistic collective seems an achievement under the given circumstances. But there is clearly more here than just the occasional performances. Since resistance is part and parcel of existence for the collective, members in jail and those outside join forces in myriad ways to expose the workings of the 'integral (Hindutva) state'. They produce new songs offering a critical take on contemporary events, and mount performances that provide a 'spiritual' boost to subaltern caste-class audiences. The fifth chapter of the thesis titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken* discusses these aspects in detail, showing how cultural resistance thrives despite a stridently fascist, authoritarian state.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion provides clear evidence that when a set of individuals from different backgrounds decide to work together in a politically-oriented cultural troupe such as Avahan and KKM, it spurs the emergence of a cohesive, autonomous collective whose ideas and practices regarding culture and cultural work reprise the second cluster of positionings in Damodaran's schema about Left-wing cultural practice.

While performance is the forte of such troupes, the collective space is especially receptive to the expressions of subaltern caste activists, who are well-versed with various performative tra-

⁶⁹ Rupali was one among several activists, journalists etc whose phones were found infected with the Pegasus software.

ditions and whose 'cultural capital' is seen as sustaining the collective's productions (discussed in the next chapter *Collective Art Production*). The collective is not 'rule-bound, or limited in terms of expression or form,' 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 organisation/ movements the collective is aligned with are taken consensually.

The discussion also brings out what this cluster's positioning and practices ought to be with regard to the caste question. That the presence of activists from different caste-class backgrounds in the core team fosters collective understanding of the influence of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies (and variants thereof) on embodied culture, including in the activists themselves, is evident in the case of both troupes. Avahan's example foregrounds how the inclusion of Dalits alongside privileged caste-class activists in the core team alerted the collective to connections and differences between caste and class, and how they affected the behaviours of a wide range of social groups. KKM's example foregrounds how the presence of subaltern caste-class activists placed variously in the index of graded inequality in the core team and equal representation of women therein, alerts the collective to the strong grip of caste and capitalist ideologies on the subaltern masses, including their very own families.

Collectives in such instances remain acutely alert to the evolving mechanisms and operations of Brahmanic ideology, including its neoliberal Hindutva avatar. They occasion the materialisation of a microcosmic counter-hegemonic community premised on radical egalitarianism and fraternity where members work together acknowledging and enhancing each other's skills, strengths and differences and mature into fine artists, while remaining critical of their blind spots and weaknesses. The thrust of this community is on re-creating the terrain of ideas 'on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc' (Gramsci 1929-1935; 2009, 377), so as to advance the struggle against dominance and exploitation.

CHAPTER 4
COLLECTIVE ART PRODUCTION
AUTHORSHIP, QUALITY, CULTURAL CAPITAL

Two key factors bear out the necessity of elaborating on the processes of art production followed by troupes engaged in cultural resistance in Maharashtra. The first of these pertains to troupes not commodifying their artistic productions, chiefly songs and plays or theatrical acts. Barring odd exceptions, troupes as well as individual members do not take on commercial assignments to produce art work; they do not release their songs under commercial record labels or ticket their live shows; they also price their own audio cassettes/CDs/publications of lyrics and scripts at bare minimum so as to just cover production costs. This attests to their efforts to counter capitalist relations of production irrespective of whether they officially align themselves with a Marxist ideology or not. Yet, following concerns raised by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay “The Author as Producer” (Benjamin 1986; reprinted in Duncombe 2012, 67-81), it is pertinent to probe if their radical stand was only in attitude, or if they tried to revolutionise the process of art production – as must the artist as producer. A second major trend noticed among troupes engaged in cultural resistance in Maharashtra is the thrust on *collective* production of new songs, theatrical acts and other forms of performative interventions. While this appears in consonance with practices in other parts of the country, it also raises questions about the rationale and implications of such collective production as well as how individual talent and authorship are negotiated within the artistic collective.

This chapter teases out the answers to these questions by elaborating on the processes that Avahan and KKM followed to produce new, original songs and theatrical acts. The exposition is based primarily on interviews of troupe members, analysis of their views, publications of their songs and plays and field observations. Secondary literature is referenced to point at similarities and differences between the practices of these troupes and their counterparts engaged in cultural resistance in other parts of the country.

The following section provides a brief summary of some questions and concerns regarding collective art production, including in the Indian context. Thereafter, *Forms of Intervention* 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. *Collective Production and Authorship* traces the process that they followed to produce new songs and theatrical pieces, including the act of ‘writing’ scripts and lyrics and the picky question of who owned the songs and plays. *Cultural Training* discusses efforts taken by the collectives to train new members and develop their ideas regarding art, literature and quality, as well as the role of the cultural capital of lower castes

in sustaining collective production. The chapter does not cover the production of books, cassettes/CDs brought out by Avahan and KKM, which contained only a fraction of their overall corpus of songs and plays; it also does not address the question of dissemination of songs, plays, etc unless such questions are directly relevant to their production.

COLLECTIVE ART PRODUCTION: KEY CONCERNS

In *The Author as Producer*, Walter Benjamin reprised two demands made of the author under capitalism that resonate with demands made of cultural activists and troupes in Maharashtra – that their work display the correct political tendency and be of good literary quality; these two demands were/are generally seen as mutually opposed and relate to the form-content binary (Benjamin 1986; reprinted in Duncombe 2012, 69).

Striking a discordant note, Benjamin asserted that form and content were dialectically related. He contended that weighing too much on either side was counter-revolutionary, because mere formal innovations in radical art could easily be co-opted, whereas overemphasis on politics could easily lead to propagandist work. Therefore, authors who identified with the masses not in attitude but as a producer were required to revolutionise the process of art production. Discarding established genres such as the novel, book and short story, they were required to consider which artistic forms were most suited to the widest circulation of their political message; they were required to go beyond their specialisation by learning photography, music, etc and create art that could be inserted ‘into the living social context’ (69). Thus, for Benjamin, the artistic tendency of a work – i.e., its proneness to being considered as art among audiences and their thinking that they too could create something similar – ‘which is contained in its political tendency...alone constitutes the quality of the work’ (69).

Besides urging artists to strive in these directions, Benjamin outlined another major requirement of the revamped process of production – it had to induce consumers of art to turn into producers. He wrote:

An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. What matters therefore is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, readers or spectators into collaborators. (78;

emphasis in original)

Although Benjamin advanced these thoughts in relation to the individual author, his propositions apply equally for collectives like Avahan and KKM.

Damodaran (2017) provides another set of key insights into collective art production in her study on music in the IPTA tradition, which are important to bear in mind while discussing Avahan and KKM's process of art production. She mentioned that songs based on folk forms – i.e., traditional forms of collective singing that involved a great degree of reciprocity and responses – comprised a distinct genre in IPTA music, alongside songs based on Western classical and Indian classical forms. Songs in this genre could be further classified into three types – first, where folk forms were as is, without any alteration; second, where little other than the tune was retained from the original form, and 'direct protest themes' were inserted into them; and the third, where folk songs were part of a 'composite performance where singing and dancing, or singing, dancing, storytelling and theatre, go together' (153).

Folk forms, argued Damodaran, were well-suited to represent new solidarities involving lower castes at two levels – firstly in the artistic collective producing new songs based on these forms, and secondly in the wider social collective envisioned through the song and realised through performances and other interventions (186). Additionally, their use in the radical cultural movement invoked 'the cognitive mode of generating collectivities' (187). She wrote:

...often the collectivities originally represented in the traditional forms and those that the latter were deployed in were totally removed from each other. Yet, the codes that signified meaning in the former would often be used in the latter, making the job of conveying the message simpler. The modes of rendering and the communicable nature of the forms could be used to invert meanings and subvert structures, making such ritual-collective forms powerful aesthetic devices in articulating the radical collective (184-85).

Damodaran also drew attention to how collective art production rendered the relationship between the artistic collective and individual members tenuous on two key grounds. The first pertained to the authorship of lyrics as well as of entire musical compositions, wherein individual talent played a key role. The second pertained to performances, wherein those highly skilled and knowledgeable about such forms excelled in communicating the content far more effectively

than their peers. Yet, the 'underplaying of individual talent did not undermine the prominence of the composers and singers; in fact, they [ideas of collective art production] made authorship wonderfully ambiguous and unleashed tremendous creativity' (189).

Propensities similar to those advanced by Benjamin and Damodaran are seen in Avahan and KKM's process of art production. Accounts of troupe members who were deeply involved in producing new songs and plays also complement and complicate Damodaran's picture of collective art production in several ways, including on the question of caste.

As will be evident in subsequent discussions, the processes that Avahan and KKM followed to produce new artistic work was in continuation with the collective production of songs in the IPTA tradition in the 1930s-50s; they also resonated with practices of Left-wing cultural troupes across the country in more recent decades.

Analogous to Benjamin's demands, both troupes valued artistic tendency over all other measures of quality and creatively used a variety of forms in circulation among the 'popular classes' (in Gramscian terms) to create artistic interventions that were most suited to their 'living social context'. They also took persistent efforts to provide cultural training to new members and other troupes through workshops, which transformed participants' ideas about art and quality, and helped them blossom into critical artists.

In the case of both troupes, 'writing' of lyrics and scripts appeared secondary to performance, whether for activists enacting to themselves or those acting before the troupe, and texts were finalised after collective discussion and review. Even then, words, phrases and situations in the written or published text were changed freely during performances, including by other troupes, and ideas for songs and acts often emerged from audiences. This rendered authorship ambiguous and at times, problematic. But it also 'unleashed tremendous creativity' within the collective, leading to the production of songs and plays whose popularity exceed their time and space. Songs and theatrical acts based on lower caste performative forms such as lavni, powada and tamasha predominated in the repertoires of both troupes. This appears justified, given that such forms have historically served as grounds for political and cultural struggles in Maharashtra. They are also well suited to represent the artistic collective and the target audience mostly comprising subaltern caste-classes.

Significantly, the 'cultural capital' of Dalits and other lower caste activists who imbibed subaltern performative traditions is seen as sustaining and enriching the productions of both troupes.

Cultural capital, explained Bourdieu (1986), was different from social capital. The latter referred to ‘a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ that derived from ‘membership in a group’ (21); whereas cultural capital could exist in three forms – the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalised state. In the embodied state, cultural capital could be acquired via ‘a labour of inculcation and assimilation’ or even ‘in the absence of any deliberate inculcation’; but it ‘could not be done at second hand’, neither ‘transmitted instantaneously... by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange’ (18). In the objectified state, cultural capital could exist in the form of ‘material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc.’ (19); its properties could be ‘defined only in the relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form’ (19), and it could be appropriated both materially and symbolically (20). ‘Institutional recognition on the cultural capital possessed by any given agent’ (21), such as academic qualifications, comprised the third form of cultural capital; it referred to ‘a certificate of cultural competence’ that had ‘relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time’ (20).

While connections between the first and second forms of cultural capital as outlined by Bourdieu are evidenced in the examples discussed in this chapter, it is clear that the process of art production followed by Avahan and KKM effectively certified the ‘cultural competence’ of Dalits and subaltern activists, who imbibed folk traditions and forms consciously as well as unconsciously and who reinterpreted these in various ways to produce art suited to their context and requirements. It is not surprising, therefore, that the revelation about why and how folk forms were highly suited for cultural resistance came from subaltern caste shahirs, whereas activists not exposed to such traditions struggled to articulate the same. Shahirs explained with examples from their own lived experience how songs based on folk forms functioned like tools for critical self-reflection, whose layers of meaning opened up slowly upon repeated hearing over time; this enabled audiences to embody a radical politics even before they were aware of it, thus initiating the process of politicisation.

Such an understanding of the protest song as a tool for critical reflection is strikingly similar to notions in various bhakti, sufi and other performative traditions, where the performance and reception of songs are seen as aids to meditation and self-realisation; this raises questions about if and how the work of Avahan, KKM and similar troupes is spiritual, which is discussed in the

subsequent chapter.

FORMS OF INTERVENTION

The primary mode of intervention for both Avahan and KKM was performance. Avahan mostly performed street plays in Bumbaiyya Hindi (a mishmash of Hindi with words from Marathi, English and other languages) in addition to a few jalsas. For KKM, it was the other way round; state reprisals and shrinkages in space and scope for dissent in urban areas contributed to KKM's withdrawal from street theatre post 2010, and the troupe largely performed jalsas. That KKM was based in Pune, which was more connected with Marathi culture than the cosmopolitan Bombay, also explained the difference, especially in the relative degree of use of jalsas.

Both troupes produced a number of original songs and plays to feed into their shows, but it is difficult to categorise their work into genres. This is largely because – as examples in this segment show – scenes sometimes morphed into entire plays; songs encompassed theatre, storytelling and commentary; and street plays turned into stage shows. Notwithstanding this caveat, the aesthetic forms that Avahan and KKM made use of to create new songs and plays were drawn from two key pools – folk forms such as tamasha, lavni and powada, and contemporary forms like street theatre, pop, rock and rap.

Interventions based on folk forms predominated in the repertoires of both troupes especially when it came to songs, whereas interventions drawing on contemporary musical forms that were popular among subaltern caste-classes in Maharashtra courtesy the mass media (and new media) were minimal. Activists from KKM were clearly aware that this restricted their access to people who listened to such music. But their efforts to engage with contemporary forms and produce songs whose technical finesse matched products from the film and music industries were severely curtailed due to shortage of funds and lack of access to musical instruments, rehearsal space, professional artistes to play instruments, recording studios, and collaborators. This appears as a major problem, and exposes the failure of progressive sections of society in Maharashtra and India in supporting such troupes.

Nevertheless, the expertise of activists in both troupes in introducing radical innovations in form and content is evidenced aplenty in the examples that they share. Equally evident is the deep understanding of activists who imbibed subaltern performative traditions in their childhood regarding the potential of folk forms to politicise apolitical, ordinary people.

FOLK FORMS

Folk forms such as *lavni*, *powada*, *bhallari*, *bharud*, *gondhal*, *ovi* and *tamasha* that historically emerged as part of the cultural repertoire of lower caste groups in Maharashtra (Naregal 2008; Rege 2002) comprised a key part of Avahan and KKM's repertoire. Though Avahan drew on the latest ideas and practices in political theatre to produce street plays (as discussed in detail in the subsequent section), their plays often contained songs based on folk forms and at times, the plays themselves also drew on folk theatre traditions. Similarly, most of KKM's songs were based on folk forms, and as mentioned earlier, its primary mode of intervention was the *jalsa*, a political reappropriation of a folk form – *tamasha* – that incorporated songs, acts, storytelling and commentary. As Damodaran (2017) observed in her study on IPTA's music tradition, these forms were well-suited to represent: a) the artistic collective (i.e., Avahan and KKM) as they included activists from subaltern caste backgrounds who had imbibed these forms; and b) the wider social collectivity envisioned through songs, plays and other interventions, which largely comprised subaltern caste-classes.

Scholarship on folk traditions in Maharashtra provides additional reasons justifying Avahan and KKM's extensive use of folk forms. Rege (2002, 1038-1047) shows that 'caste-based forms of cultural labour such as the *lavani* and the *powada*' (1038) constituted the ground for major political and cultural struggles since the seventeenth century. She states that during the Peshwai period, *lavis* 'composed in the voice of the lower caste whore' (1041) comprised an 'important mode of constructing them as adulterous' (1042), and provided 'ideological justification' (1042) for the enslavement of lower caste women. Similarly, *powadas*, were composed 'in praise of the 'brahminical rule' of the peshwas' (1042). But during the second half of the nineteenth century, *powadas* emerged as a key 'vehicle of group identity' (1042) when they began to be used in overtly political and contradictory ways. In the hands of Phule and other anti-caste poets and *shahirs*, *powadas* became 'representative of the popular *sudra* tradition', whereas for the elite caste, *powadas* were 'representative of a pan-Indian, brahminical Hindu tradition' (1042).

Hindu nationalists and proponents of the non-Brahmin movement also used other folk forms extensively for political purposes during this period (Rege 2000). *Satyashodhak jalsas*, a reappropriation of traditional caste-based *tamashas* that came into prominence in the 1890s, 'were central to the consolidation of the base of the [Satyashodhak] Samaj,' (200) notes Rege. While the 'space and form' of the *Satyashodhak jalsa* was 'appropriated by the *Ganesh melas*' (200) that

accompanied the public worship of Lord Ganesha initiated by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in 1893, Ambedkarite jalsas played a key role in politicising lower caste groups in Maharashtra till the mid-twentieth century. Jalsas and songs based on folk forms were also central to the spread of the working class movement (Chandavarkar 2004) and the Samyukta Maharashtra movement (See the chapter *Interpreting a Shahir* for a detailed discussion on this aspect).

While these examples indicate that folk forms had a tenuous, abiding relationship both with the culture of the subaltern caste-classes and the middle class Marathi public sphere, Naregal (2010) draws attention to how ‘upper caste cultural dominance within the making of a middle-class Maharashtrian identity’ (79-80) was established through the Marathi sangeet natak, which emerged in the 1860s to cater to the sensibilities of an emerging Marathi middle class. Although the sangeet natak or barees were nourished by lower caste performative genres such as lavni and tamasha, by the 1870s ‘brahmins and the landed gentry had already made significant inroads into the performing circuit,’ and major commercial *natak mandalis* (theatre troupes) were ‘homogeneously upper caste and mostly brahmin’ (80). Along similar lines, Rege (2002) states that Marathi cinema developed in the 1930s drawing ‘its raw material from the lavani tamasha of the kolhatis, mahar and mangs’; but it was ‘dominated by Brahmins and Marathas’ (1044), and instances of lower caste tamasha actresses featuring in Marathi cinema were rare. She notes that after Marathi cinema acquired finance from the powerful agricultural lobby in the 1960s, films featured hypersexualised lavnis that facilitated consolidation of ‘caste and gender hierarchies’ (1044).

All of this clearly indicates that lower caste performative forms such as lavni, powada and tamasha had the potential to not only impact the culture of subaltern caste-classes but also the Marathi middle class public sphere that rendered caste irrelevant and invisible, though in different ways. A few examples from the repertoire of Avahan and KKM are enough to substantiate this point.

That Avahan’s songs could become chartbusters and be well-received by middle class audiences was clearly evidenced in the early 1990s, when a near identical copy of its song rendered by a professional singer named Anand Shinde became widely popular. The original song titled *Sun Meri Fatima Didi* was written by Avahan’s Vilas Ghogre. It featured a slum dweller in Bombay talking to a Muslim woman named Fatima about living in squalid conditions, cheek-by-jowl with criminals and drug addicts, and surviving on the kindness of neighbours. Avahan/Vilas often sang the song in live performances, but it was not included in Avahan’s audio cassettes or

song books. Shinde replaced Fatima with Amina, claimed the song as his own, and included it in his audio album released by Venus Records. While *Sun Meri Amina Didi* generated a controversy in Avahan (discussed in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*), the presence of numerous covers of Shinde's version on YouTube confirm its continued circulation.

Another theatrical piece from Avahan's repertoire called *Hora* also remains immensely popular especially in circles of cultural resistance in Maharashtra. *Hora*, in the first instance, refers to a theatrical form that derives its name from the *hora shastra*. Caur (2015) provides a pithy summary of the form based on an interview with KKM's Deepak Dhengle. She writes:

Hora signals towards the...twenty-fourth part of a day, an hour or hora. Since hora is part of the Indian astrology, it is used to predict or make prophetic declaration about future incidents or life, or of some distant event or occurrence. (87)

The play named *Hora* was a reappropriation of this form. It comprised a dialogue between a *songadya* (clown) – a familiar character in the traditional tamasha whose speciality is ribald satire – and a *hora/bhavishya-wala* (future-teller), akin to the astrologers and godmen who proliferate across Maharashtra.¹ The play proceeded in episodes, each featuring the hora predicting a great future for his client the songadya, and the latter getting led on for a while before eventually calling his bluff. Vilas, the writer of the play, also took the lead in staging it – mostly solo but at times with other actors and singers. Fellow Avahan member Sanober remembers him 'performing it with equal felicity'² in the *bastis* (slums), where there was no dias, lights or mikes, as well as on the stage.

Hora continues to be performed regularly by troupes such as KKM and Samata Kala Manch with a key variation. Likely owing to the decline of traditional tamasha performances in Maharashtra, the *songadya* is replaced by a group of children, whose exchange with the future teller has audiences in splits at their own expense. The following chapter titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken* includes a detailed discussion of *Hora* in performance.

Similarly, KKM's powada on the legendary Communist revolutionary and freedom fighter Bhagat Singh titled *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* was produced in 2005-06, and continues to

¹ Data compiled by the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, a rationalist organisation founded by Narendra Dabholkar, showed that godmen, astrologers and fortune tellers continue to exist in Maharashtra, in cities as well as the rural interiors. (Changoiwala 2017; 2018)

² Personal communication on June 6, 2022.

be performed widely by various progressive groups and activists not only in Maharashtra but also in Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and other places.³

In their interviews, members of Avahan and KKM provided further insights regarding why and how folk forms were especially suited for cultural resistance. They stressed that although content, i.e., the lyrics played a central role in defining the politics of a song, its presentation via forms that audiences were familiar with provided a surreptitious opening to influence their thoughts and behaviour.

It is noteworthy that Sanober, an upper caste-class activist who had little understanding of performative traditions in Maharashtra and whose mother tongue was not Marathi, struggled to articulate how this opening worked out in practical terms even though she credited lower caste activists like Sambhaji and Vilas for their masterful use of folk forms; she also seemed to suggest incorrectly that they replicated folk forms as is while tinkering with content. She said:

They [Sambhaji and Vilas] took all old folk tunes, so that people could identify the tune. The peasant could identify the tune...the powada, gondhal, bharud...these were actually feudal forms...It's a revolt within feudalism, but of that time. So they used this and they infused it with modern revolutionary content. That's why their songs are so great, because the persons can identify the song as they identify with the tune. That's why they don't reject the politics up front.⁴

Contrast this with Sagar's crisp insight on the surreptitious opening provided by folk forms, where form and content appear dialectically related, and work together to convey the many layers of meaning in a song, akin to Benjamin's understanding. The revolutionary song appears here as a tool for critical reflection, much like songs in Warkari bhakti and other subaltern performative traditions in the Indian subcontinent.⁵

Stressing that 'the political content in our songs is very important' as it differentiated them from songs based on folk forms that are churned out by the film and music industries, Sagar said:

When you bring your music, if your music is the same style, and there is

³ Videos are found on YouTube of performances in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Hyderabad Central University, in the trade union movement in Chhattisgarh and so on. The song was also sung during the 2020 farmers' movement against pro-corporate reforms in the agriculture sector (Various 2020).

⁴ Interviewed by me on December 24, 2018 in Pune, originally in English.

⁵ In various Vaishnavite bhakti traditions, Sufi traditions, the Baul tradition in Bengal and so on, songs are seen as a tool for critical self-reflection and meditation.

political content, people will listen to it once, twice, thrice. The more they listen, layers of meaning keep opening up. Like a flower that opens slowly – the petals, the parts, the fragrance, all of it comes to the fore slowly.⁶

He followed this up with an example about how meanings in *Jai Bhim Mhanane Adi* (Before Saying Jai Bhim) – KKM's song critiquing the empty valorisation of Ambedkar – came alive even when they danced to it in a drunken state. In his account excerpted below, the revolutionary song is seen functioning as a tool for critical self-reflection, which enables audiences to embody a radical politics even before they are conscious of it:

Like we discuss among ourselves, the public also discusses. Oh, see that line. When you give people politics in that same tune, people will talk about the politics as well. Like the song *Jai Bhim Mhanane Adi*...It played a lot in Satara during Ambedkar Jayanti. People danced to it as well. But, those who were there observed that when the serious part of the song would come – *Dalitancha roz vastya jaltat* [The bastis of Dalits are burning everyday] – people would adopt the appropriate expression...of grief and anger for their burning bastis. The person dancing there, he has no interest in politics, and yet, he embodies that feeling. He goes back to dancing, and the next time, when the part is repeated, he repeats the expression...That is how the process begins.

Sagar, Deepak, Ramesh and Jyoti from KKM – all from subaltern caste-class backgrounds – further clarified with examples that their songs did not merely replicate existing folk forms, but introduced several formal innovations that contributed to their popularity despite the troupe's repression. The question of which folk forms to use also appears highly considered, largely dependent on the tendency of the forms among target audiences:

Sagar: When we talk of forms, there's plenty. There are such good forms... (In one of) our workshops, there was discussion on *bharud*.

Deepak was amazed that there are such good forms. There are many...

Deepak: There are many folk forms in Maharashtra, like *bharud*; *kirtan*; many types of *powada*; forms that are prevalent in *tamasha*; *bhajans*; ab-

⁶ Interviewed by me on June 30, 2017 in Pune. Apart from Sagar, Deepak, Ramesh, Rupali and Jyoti from KKM also participated in the interview, which was conducted in Hindi. Translations are mine; emphasis added.

hangs created by Sant Namdev and others; then there are ovis [grind mill songs]; songs for weddings, like there are in the rest of the country; songs for festivals like Holi and Nag Panchami. We study these and take our tunes from there.

Ramesh: Sometimes what happens is, there are forms that have become dated; meaning their speed or something else, is out of tune with the times. In that, you can tweak things; increase the speed in keeping with current trends.

Sagar: Renew it, give it a rebirth...

Ramesh: KKM has experimented a lot. Like the aradhi form [typically used in devotional songs] is there in Jay Bhim Mhanane Adi. It appeals to people not only in the movement, but even those outside it. Many people have told us so.

There's also the song Sainik Raktatala [In the Soldier's Blood]. We have put in our content, and changed the tune a bit. The original song is Tulajapuri...It's a song in obeisance to the Tulja Bhavani Devi. In the original song, there is a khushnuma [mellifluous] style; in our version, there is aggressiveness. That we have to do. We can give a lot of examples like this. Like the Annabhau Sathe song Jag Badal Ghaluni Ghav. What changes have we made? Deepak changed the music...the earlier version was classical-based, as sung by Jainu Chand. We increased the speed, changed the style. The content is hard-hitting, but in the old tune, the punch was getting lost, so we changed that.

We also experimented on a ghazal by Wamandada Khardak. Bhima Tujha Matache [Of your Thoughts Bhima] We redid it. We changed the tune, the speed according to the current time... We are trying to give such songs a rebirth.⁷

Songs such as *Jay Bhim Mhanane Adi* and *Sainik Raktatala*, which were based on collective forms of devotional singing, bear witness to KKM's efforts to radicalise folk culture as well as

⁷ Interviewed by me on June 30, 2017 in Pune. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translations are mine.

reach out to sections of Marathi Hindu society that were religiously minded.

CONTEMPORARY FORMS

STREET THEATRE

Avahan and KKM's contrasting engagement with street theatre signpost two crucial phases in the history of the Indian republic. One phase spans the turmoil of the post Emergency years to the early 1990s, when street theatre played a crucial role in politicising the masses and hundreds of troupes aligned with the Left, women's groups and Ambedakrite groups existed and performed freely in major towns and cities across the country. The second phase covers the period after the 1991 neo-liberalisation reforms, when curbs on spaces for protests and dissent, requirement of permissions for performances, surveillance (physical and digital) and other developments posed immense challenges for activism through street theatre, especially in urban areas where troupes were earlier concentrated. The number of troupes dropped sharply even as government departments began enlisting troupes for social awareness campaigns on literacy, HIV-AIDS, gender discrimination, counter insurgency and other themes. Governments and corporates also floated street theatre competitions where large sums of money were given away as prize.

Many activists thus contend that although street theatre still exists, its depoliticisation and commercialisation is a betrayal of its more radical roots. The examples of Avahan and KKM that bear out the history of street theatre in India as a medium of protest and politicisation lend credence to this view.

Between 1979 and 1994, Avahan produced over 60 street plays that also included songs, and performed them across Bombay and its outskirts on more than 1500 occasions. Barring occasional police raids when they performed in the heart of the city (see the chapter *Interrogating the Collective* for details of one such incident), they faced no major challenges in accessing public space. Even during the textile mill strike in the mid-1980s when Section 144 was imposed in Girangaon and surrounding areas of Bombay, activists recalled performing in public lawns and gardens at the invitation of rebellious workers who often fended off disruption from the police by tightly encircling the performative arena.

It is noteworthy that Avahan's foray into street plays closely followed the birth of street theatre in India in the post Emergency period, when a host of Left-leaning collectives in different

parts of the country devised new street plays and performed them before working class audiences who often numbered in the thousands (Deshpande 1997). Among them, the Delhi-based Jana Natya Manch (Janam) and the Karnataka-based Samudaya comprised the most notable examples from the north and south of the country, and their forays into street theatre bear striking resemblances. Both came up with their first street play in 1978; Janam's *Machine* was based on the killing of six striking workers due to firing by factory guards in the outskirts of Delhi in 1978, whereas Samudaya's *Belchi* was based on the burning of Dalit agricultural workers in Bihar in May 1977 (Deshpande 1997, 12). Both 'allied themselves with the revolutionary classes, were 'theatrically innovative', and were 'very soon widely translated and performed all over the country' (ibid.)

Badal Sircar, founder of the Kolkata-based theatre troupe Satabdi, was also a key contributor to street theatre during this period, mainly through his formulation and practise of 'Third Theatre'. The posters to a theatre festival organised by Satabdi in Calcutta contended that theatre was the 'common link of communication' between people, one that did not need costumes, 'walls and roofs.' They decried its commercialisation and limitation within proscenium spaces and middle class audiences, and declared that theatre could unfold anywhere – 'in open grounds, under the sky...in small localities, markets, wherever there is man.' Sircar developed Third Theatre as a methodological tool towards this end, which comprised a combination of folk theatre (which he called First Theatre) and urban theatre (which he called Second Theatre), and involved intense training, extensive use of the body and physical acting (Chowdhury 2017).

Sircar pioneered the practise of Third Theatre in the mid-1970s through productions mounted by Satabdi, which were staged on open trucks parked in Calcutta's Maidan grounds before thousands of people. Actors used their bodies to fashion a variety of objects such as canons, which often left audiences in awe. Thus, although his contemporaries like Janam founder Safdar Hashmi (interviewed by Erven 2007) critiqued him for overemphasising on form 'as if that is all there is to theatre' (23), privileging the middle class view and promoting anarchy, they also acknowledged his contributions in the field of theatre. Janam member Sudhanva Deshpande (1997) writes:

Badal Sircar has made a tremendous contribution to Indian theatre by taking quality theatre to non-proscenium spaces. His efforts with Satabdi have not only enriched our understanding of the formal aspects of performing

in open spaces, he has also disseminated his learning widely, via the numerous workshops he has conducted all over the country; workshops which, as in the case of Samudaya, have inspired even street theatre groups of the Left. (13)

Avahan comprised another example of ‘street theatre groups of the Left’ that were deeply influenced by Sircar’s interventions. This was especially because in 1981, Sircar toured Bombay with Satabdi and staged six productions, which provided Avahan activists the opportunity to observe Satabdi’s work closely. Sanober mentioned interviewing Sircar for the bilingual journal *Kalam* that was co-edited by her and other VPS/NBS activists, which would imply that his ideas about theatre, the use of the body and the real possibilities for staging theatre in the open without ‘walls and roofs’ were disseminated and discussed among a cross-section of students and youth in Bombay.

It is also likely that the thriving street theatre scene in Maharashtra through the 1980s gave a further boost to Avahan’s decision to invest in street plays. In Bombay itself, there were troupes like Jagar associated with the CPI(M), Samagra Sadak Natak Chalwal associated with Shramik Mukti Dal, and Navnirman Sanskrutik Manch associated with Marxist-Leninist groups, that produced and performed street plays. Beyond Bombay, there was Madhyam in Pune, Young Debaters in Aurangabad, Panther Theatre in Vidarbha, Pratyay and Abhivyakti in Kolhapur, Prayog in Akola, SFI in Sangli and Maharashtra Andhashradhha Nirmulan Samiti in several locations (Bhagwat 2016). Women’s groups, proponents of the literacy movement and NGOs also made forays into street theatre during this period. Notable among them was the Bombay-based Stree Mukti Sangathana Parishad, whose 1983 street play *Mulgi Zhali Ho* (A Girl is Born) addressing discrimination against girl children and women received wide popularity and acclaim. The organisation’s website (Stree Mukti Sanghatana n.d.) notes:

Written by Ms. Jyoti Mhapsekar and enacted by women activists of SMS, this musical satire is translated in 8 Indian languages besides English and is being performed by 100+ groups in India. The play has been performed internationally at the 3rd International Women Playwrights’ Conference at Adelaide in July 1994 and at NGO forum in Beijing in Sept’ 1995. In India, among other places, the play has been staged at the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy-Mussoorie, Police Academy Hyderabad, and many prominent

Universities and colleges of India. The play is also a part of syllabus of two universities and has been telecast and broadcast several times. It is also used by many organizations as a training tool.

That Avahan was deeply aware of these circumstances is evidenced clearly in a short, cryptic comment in the introduction to *Roti ka Khel* (The Food Game), its book of street plays. It notes:

The experience of the past few years that clearly shows that in the struggle against the current exploitative social-political system, street theatre is the most impactful medium for the labouring masses. (Avahan Natya Manch 1994, 5)

Subsequent parts of the introduction were devoted to critiquing the commodification of street plays, including in state-sponsored competitions and by NGOs for social-awareness campaigns on HIV-AIDS and other issues; and explaining why street plays in Bumbaiya Hindi were especially suited for audiences in Bombay, a multilingual, fast-paced city. Core members of the troupe also recollected collective chanting, sloganeering, and singing in chorus in street plays as means to overpower the din of traffic in Mumbai.

The introduction provides two other important justifications for Avahan's foray into street theatre, which are also applicable for KKM due to two reasons. One is that Sambhaji (a core member of Avahan), among others, trained KKM in the initial years and it is possible that there was discussion among members regarding these aspects. The second reason is that the circumstances that KKM encountered were similar to, if not more dire than, the ones faced by Avahan.

The first justification provided for Avahan's foray into street theatre pertains to the collective lacking the economic resources to mount productions for the proscenium, television or radio; neither it nor its target audience comprising subaltern caste-classes could afford these devices.⁸ Street theatre, on the other hand, was a potent medium because it allowed these troupes to reach 'the maximum number of people at minimum cost' (Avahan Natya Manch 1994, 5); the bodies of activists comprised the primary resource in street plays, and little cost was incurred towards their production.

The second justification derives from Avahan's anti-state views, which were unlikely to be entertained on state-owned or regulated mass media such as TV, radio and newspapers. Street

⁸ In recent years, social media has opened up new avenues for collectives such as KKM to reach audiences directly, but poor internet coverage and smart phone access among all sections of the poor and poor knowledge about digital technology among activists has restricted its use.

plays offered a way to circumvent this censorship and reach ‘students, farmers, workers, women and the middle classes’ (6) directly, close to their residences or places of residence and work. Avahan performed street plays regularly without much trouble till its fracture in 1994, after which restrictions began being imposed on performances in public spaces in metropolitan cities. Janam member Molyashree Hashmi (interviewed by Ghosh 2007) recounted how it was especially difficult to stage performances in prominent market places in the city of Delhi after the mid-1980s:

...in a place like Delhi, for example, there are areas where we cannot perform just like that. We have to give a letter to the local police station. It’s supposed to be a permission, but we simply say we are doing this, now it’s up to you, the responsibility is yours. Earlier till the mid-80s, it was possible to go and perform in Connaught Place, Lajpat Nagar or any market place without being stopped by anybody. (86)

It is likely that KKM faced similar circumstances in Pune when it forayed into street theatre shortly after its inception, performing plays written or produced by other activists and troupes. Nevertheless, between 2005 and 2010, the troupe produced a number of original street plays and performed them near college campuses and slums in and around Pune. But its critique of the Brahmanical character of state power, especially following the Khairlanji caste atrocity case in 2006, and its participation in several popular movements antagonised its relations with the state and led to the incarceration of its members (discussed in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*).

After KKM’s revival in 2013, it rarely ventured into street theatre. This was because it was unlikely that authorities in Pune and other cities in Maharashtra would permit the troupe to freely propagate its views in prominent public spaces; in addition, there was also the likelihood of activists being implicated in further cases if they staged street plays without necessary permissions. In any case, this was a period when activism through street theatre was considerably reduced not only in Maharashtra but also across the country, and there was hardly any troupe of repute that consistently mounted street plays.

SONGS

A key gap in Avahan and KKM’s repertoire was the absence of songs based on based on Indian

and/ or Western classical traditions, like those that comprised distinct sub-genres in IPTA's music. A likely reason for this was the absence of activists in both troupes who were knowledgeable about classical forms; one exception was Sanober from Avahan, who had undergone elementary training in playing a piano. Moreover, neither troupe had the economic resources to deploy the instruments needed to accompany classical compositions during performances.

Similarly, songs based on contemporary forms such as rock, pop and rap that were popular among subaltern caste-classes in Maharashtra were entirely missing in Avahan's repertoire and few in number in KKM's repertoire. It is likely that Sambhaji and Vilas, who took the lead in writing and composing songs for Avahan, were not familiar with these forms and did not have the money to buy audio cassettes and players to study the same. But the availability of affordable smart phones, internet connectivity and social media platforms in the post 2000 period appears to have exposed cultural activists to a wide variety of musical genres and propelled the production of new songs based on these genres. Songs in this category produced by KKM include *Patra (Corrugated Sheet)* and *Aisa Kyun Hai (Why is it So)* that are best categorised as belonging to the Indi-pop and soft rock genres respectively.

In their interview, KKM activists stressed that they were interested in working with classical and contemporary forms in addition to folk forms, but could not do so owing to the lack of funds and social support.

Ramesh and Deepak's account excerpted below shows that activists were aware that in terms of technical finesse (Ramesh refers to this as 'quality'), their songs did not match products of the music and film industries. Yet, their confidence in at least three key areas is striking – in the performative abilities of troupe members and fellow cultural activists; in the popularity of their songs; and the revolutionary potential of some songs as finished products that could only be imagined. Each appeared well-founded.

Deepak refers to Ajit Panigrahi, a cultural activist from Odisha and singer of the *Bazar* (Market) qawwali, who was one of the lead performers of the Relaa collective (2016 onwards) that also included KKM.⁹ Ajit's exemplary command over classical and folk forms explains Deepak's effusive praise. He and Ramesh refer to songs like *Bazar* and a song on *Bhagat Singh* that they think are worth releasing as finished products. These songs comprised searing critiques of con-

⁹ Relaa is a pan-India collective of cultural activists and troupes aligned with various mass movements. For details, see Kumar 2022.

temporary society and politics – *Bazar* critiqued the impact of capitalism and money in everyday life and social relations, and *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* critiqued upper caste-class hegemony as internal colonialism. They were based on forms that were in wide circulation in Maharashtra and beyond – *Bazar* was a qawwali and *Aye Bhagat Singh* was a powada. Both songs were immensely popular: they were performed by other troupes and artistes in Maharashtra and elsewhere, and audiences often demanded that these songs be performed.¹⁰

Thus, *the* quality that defined these songs was their political tendency, which also included their artistic tendency, à la Benjamin. No wonder activists were confident that if produced as per their desire, the songs could create an uproar; their exaggeration of the potential impact of these songs as finished products signposts the impossibility of achieving their dream, given the lack of access to studios, instruments, musicians and social support. That the paucity of funds was acute and one of the biggest, most immediate obstacles preventing KKM from producing work that could compete with mass mediated products is clearly evidenced in the activists' account:

Ramesh: Your song must compare with the products in the market. Because that is your competition. People are listening to such high-quality songs, but what is the quality of our songs that are on our mobiles or online? We have good content, good singers, but in sound arrangement and studio set-up, we have nothing. They [commercial artists and troupes] spend Rs 1 lakh on one song, and we find it hard to put together Rs 20,000-25,000 for an entire album of 10 songs. So, the musicians and the sound guys, they hurry through our work. When we have the resources and a system in place, then you will see what we are capable of creating.

Deepak: See, there are some songs, if they are properly arranged, those sitting on top, the capitalists, will be shaken. Take the Bhagat Singh song for instance, or the one against superstition. There is a song on caste, if we can introduce a classical element in it, for instance. Or the Bazar qawwali [written and performed by Relaa member Ajit] – if we produce it according to our desire, what a song it will turn out to be! And what a voice! So,

¹⁰ Personal experience of organising/attending Relaa performances that featured these songs in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal between 2016 and 2019.

vocals is not a problem. Rhythm (taal) – there’s no shortage. Tone, harmony (sur, lay) – there’s no problem. Resources is the only problem.¹¹

COLLECTIVE PRODUCTION AND AUTHORSHIP

One of the many similarities between Avahan and KKM was their emphasis on the collective production of songs and plays / theatrical pieces, which resonated with the practices of Left-wing cultural formations elsewhere in the country, and differed strikingly from urban Marathi theatre. Both troupes offered an ideological explanation for this choice (discussed in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*): they contested the valorisation of individual creativity in Brahmanic and capitalist discourse and claimed that in the first instance, art was born of labour processes and created collectively.

Interviews with troupe members provide important insights into how the process of art production worked out in reality. Discussions in *Interrogating the Collective* show that Avahan and KKM often created plays and songs based on ideas from fellow activists or organisers of programmes, signalling the involvement of audiences in the creative process. The artistic collective clearly played a more important role in devising street plays and theatrical pieces (generally through workshops), whereas individual activists took the lead in composing songs. In both instances, ‘writing’ was a marginal activity as drafts were modified through rehearsals and collective reviews. Although this rendered the authorship of texts ambiguous, it also unleashed tremendous creativity within the collective, such that activists could produce 10 entirely new songs on a subject or theme in three days flat if members sat together! Besides, authorship was also evident in other ways such as the choice of words or lilt in a song, and did not always need to be asserted as a right.

PLAYS

From the interviews of Avahan and KKM members, it is evident that their process of producing new street plays and/or theatrical acts was similar, wherein the role of writing or a pre-written script was marginal, and the collective played a more important role in devising the play rather than one or a few individuals. Such collective production of plays that underemphasised

¹¹ Interviewed by me on June 30, 2017 in Pune. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translations are mine.

the playwright's role was sharply at odds with practices in 'streams of secular, urban theatre in Maharashtra' (Gokhale 2000, ix). In the preface to a review of 150 years of Marathi theatre, Gokhale writes:

...Marathi theatre accords the highest place to the playwright. The position of the playwright as the initiator, without whose work modern theatre cannot exist, has never been seriously challenged, not even during the most experimental phase of the parallel theatre.¹² No attempts have ever been made to evolve a theatre language of movement and gesture, or to construct texts collectively, bypassing the single writer model. (xi)

The 'single writer model' was nowhere in sight in Salim's step-by-step description of how Avahan devised new street plays. Instead, the focus was on evolving the 'text' of the play via enactment by one or more members before the rest of the collective, and modification based on their review. Writing was often undertaken collectively with more experienced writers taking the lead, whereas authorship was ambiguous and best attributed to the collective. Salim said:

For example, if you are talking about a workers' draconian law – first, we study what is the draconian law. Step by step, we see: if you go on strike, you will be in jail for 6 months; if you don't come to work on time, half day's salary gone; we would discuss these things. After discussing the topic, we would find out the main characters. For instance, if it is a workers' agitation, you must have workers, industrialists, some politicians, trade unionists, two types of trade unionists sometimes; those who support the law, even if it is draconian against workers. And then, in the end, there must be someone to explain all these things. Then, we take out the characters. ...If I am playing a role of a politician, I could be told to write the dialogues. So I will write and get. Or we will sit together and write...we discuss what the politician has to talk about. The politician will write on his own, and act it out in front of everyone. If everyone likes, it becomes part of the street play.

We did many plays that had similar characters; that was easy. [There would

¹²Gokhale (2000, ix) points out that parallel theatre emerged in Bombay, Pune and Nagpur in the 1950s 'in rejection of mainstream theatre which many felt had become irrelevant to the post-Independence generation of college-educated youth.'

be] one narrator, one jamoora-ustad [sidekick and master, common in tamasha and other folk theatre traditions]. If it's a slum issue, there has to be a politician, builders, slum dwellers, sandas [toilet] and paani [water] problem...things used to come very fast...Writing was collective activity. The more experienced people wrote more, obviously.¹³

Jyoti from KKM provided a similar picture about how KKM devised most of its street plays through workshops till 2010. She said:

Earlier, it used to be like...someone would come up with a theme—say, inflation. We would discuss what to show: Will there be a college scene? Will it involve politics or family? How will it proceed? So it would all start from a theme. Whoever was good at writing would write the first draft of the script. If someone felt that a dialogue or a scene must be added, the script would be modified—but even that was not final.

During rehearsal, we would understand loopholes. Like this concept is not matching or the dialogues are out of place...So during practice, the script would develop further and everyone would give their inputs. So KKM street plays were always group work, never individual work.¹⁴

She mentioned that in the post-repression period, when the number of street plays produced and staged by KKM dropped significantly, individual activists took on a larger role in writing scripts, likely because the collective found it difficult to meet, discuss and rehearse owing to a host of circumstances discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, she stressed that all pieces of writing were subject to collective feedback and review. Jyoti said:

Post repression (2011)...It is mostly Deepak who has written the street plays and we have given our inputs to him. There would be discussions, but he would write it start to end. Now, there is Ramesh; he writes like that, and we add; fill in political content or some gap. So now Ramesh has taken over that role. But even then, it is group work because we all work on it.¹⁵

Overall, Avahan and KKM's process of devising new street plays, where writing/scripts

¹³ Interview conducted in English in Mumbai on December 23, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview conducted in Hindi in Pune on December 27, 2018. Translation is mine.

¹⁵ Interview conducted in Hindi in Pune on December 27, 2018. Translation is mine.

played a secondary role and authorship was best attributed to the collective, resonates with practices of Left-leaning artistic collectives in India. For instance, Pralayan from the troupe Chennai Kalai Kuzhu and a member of the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers' Association said:

After watching our plays many ask, 'Who has written the play?' It is a difficult question to answer. We do not know how to answer this question. One may give an idea, but a play is always built collectively. So we always say that it is a collective effort. (Pralayan 1997, 76)

Along similar lines, Sudhanva Deshpande from Janam stated:

The initial draft of *Machine* was written by Safdar and Rakesh Saxena, and was finalized on the floor, where everyone present contributed. The author of *Machine*, as of all subsequent plays, is Janam, not Safdar: I stress this point only because many believe otherwise. Safdar was a superb writer, and often his contribution to a script was the single largest, but he was never the sole author. (Deshpande 1997, 7)

Further, Safdar's account of how the idea of *Machine* emerged signalled that the audience was involved in the process of art production itself:

There is a chemical factory . . . called Herig-India. The workers there didn't have a union. They had two very ordinary demands. . . They wanted a place where they could park their bicycles and . . . a canteen where they could get a cup of tea . . . The management wasn't willing even to grant these demands . . . The workers went on strike and the guards opened fire, killing 6 workers. So this old Communist leader told me about this incident . . . and he said, 'Why don't you write a play about it?' (Hashmi 1989, 159)

Similarly, Avahan and KKM activists mentioned several instances when they produced new plays/songs based on ideas and suggestions from fellow activists, showing that the audience was involved in the creative process from the outset. Among them, Sanober's recollection of Avahan creating and performing a play that depicted the exploitation of workers in front of the Hindustan Lever factory in Bombay is especially pithy, as it attests that: a) the artistic collective excelled at creating at a very short notice plays that related exactly to the situation of audiences; and b) the artistic collective was an intimate part of a larger collectivity of rebellious workers that also

comprised its audience.

In her account excerpted below, the artistic collective appears to be taking its cues regarding the subject matter of plays and the time and place for performances from the audience. It is willing to face the risk of police action while collaborating with the audience on their demands and crystallising a factory blockade leading to a strike. The audience, in turn, nourishes and protects the collective by standing between them and the large police contingent, which allows the play – or blockade – to unfold slowly; they then facilitate the safe exit of activists from the scene, bearing the brunt of police batons themselves. No wonder Sanober and others in Avahan were left amazed with this deep collaboration that merged art and politics. Sanober said:

Bennet and Franklin, they were our comrades, they were in Hindustan Lever. They were leading the Hindustan Lever Union. So there was a huge outcry because there was a bonus cut or something, and they were having a gate meeting. So he came the evening before... He said, we need a play, and it should be about our....

So we had a scene of repression in a factory from one of our boycott election plays. So we took that out, we took the scene, and we adapted it to the names of...so one Gurdeep Singh is the chief security officer, and some manager's name and all that, and what happens to people inside. They told us briefly what they were fighting, so we incorporated that...like adjusted that scene with the Hindustan Lever context. Next day, we went.

I remember everybody standing outside the gate. And there was a public meeting going on. It was announced that we are going to do a play. So I was told that try to do it in such a way that you try to shift the public that was waiting to cover the gate. Do it in front of the gate, so people come and stand in front of the main gate. It was a huge gate.

We had this 'aao re aao, natak dekho' [Come hey come, watch the drama]. So we started, so we blocked the gate. So people came to see it na. So they blocked the whole gate. So nothing could come out and go in. We used to block many gates and people used to wait till the thing is over.

So it was received...See, the atmosphere was...they were all very tense.

They were raring to go. So we blocked the gate. Police came in large

numbers, they surrounded us further. So we performed the play slowly and all. Then, we started the slogan, and the slogan was taken up by the others in the union and they went on with more and more slogans and the whole gate got blocked... They told us, now go from here. We went and we heard that there was lathi charge the next day. Because there was some ruckus, some pulling and pushing and all. Then that night only, strike was declared.¹⁶

SONGS

From the interviews of Avahan and KKM members, it is evident that the process that they followed to create new songs had similarities with their process of producing plays, but there were also some differences primarily in terms of the enhanced role of individual members in the creative process.

Typically, activists who were well-versed with popular forms and traditions took the lead in composing songs, based on discussions in the group, requests from other activists or organisations, or of their own accord. But composition did not begin with writing the lyrics; instead, activists sang out (often to themselves) various arrangements of words in a form of their choice and committed to writing what appeared to work best. They shared this bare song – i.e., the lyrics and tune – with fellow members, and modified it based on their suggestions and inputs. The subsequent step comprised setting music for the song, which necessitated the participation of a number of troupe members playing instruments such as the harmonium, dholki, daffi and so on. Changes in lyrics and tune were introduced here as well; further, many artists and troupes who performed these songs deviated from the written/published lyrics freely and often.

Authorship in case of songs thus appeared centred around the individual composer, but was also attributable to the artistic collective. This ambivalence was clearly evidenced in Avahan and KKM's published song books. For instance, in Avahan's two song books (Avahan Natya Manch 1983; 1991), most songs appeared under the name of individual members, but there were many that were attributed to 'Avahan Natya Manch'. The books also included Hindi/Marathi translations of songs from other parts of the country which appeared under the name of individuals or troupes, but the name of the translator was not mentioned. Similarly, in KKM's first song

¹⁶ Interview conducted in English in Pune on December 24, 2018.

book, individual names were appended at the end of every song (Kabir Kala Manch 2009), whereas in the second song book, each section featured songs by a different activist whose name appeared on a separate page at the start of the section (Kabir Kala Manch 2016). Troupe members also mentioned thinking about identifying individual activists *and* the group as authors in subsequent publications.

At times, this tension over who exactly owned a song appears to have spilled out in the open and led to questioning: Was the owner the original composer or the troupe, or both? What about those translating or performing the song? A good example of this was the controversy in Avahan over Anand Shinde copying Vilas' song *Sun Meri Fatima Didi* (discussed in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*), which created discord within the collective. Yet, from the interviews of activists in both troupes, it can be inferred that asserting authorship by name was often not necessary as it was evident in other ways. Jyoti for instance mentioned that 'we all have a stock of good words...depending on our background and culture'¹⁷ whose use in a song made authorship apparent.

Sachin explained in further detail how songs always carried the imprint of the original composer by referring to his and Sheetal's songs. Their example was highly pertinent because there were significant differences in their backgrounds – she was from the Matang jati and grew up singing devotional songs with her mother and others in Pune, in keeping with their traditional role in caste society; whereas he was from the Mali jati and grew up singing songs about agriculture while working with his mother in farms, akin to their caste-based occupation. Moreover, they knew each other rather closely as they were married and raising a family, indicating that Sachin's account about differences in their words, phrases and lilt of tunes was based on deep observation. Sachin said:

So when Sheetal composes a song, and the tune (chaal) she puts...there is a big influence of the devi songs that she heard at home and that she got from tradition. The words and phrases she uses in her poetry, or the forms of expression, are from her lifeworld, her experience. And if I write, the words, phrases and tune will come from my experience; they will be related to agriculture.¹⁸

¹⁷ Interview conducted in Hindi in Pune on December 27, 2018. Translation is mine.

¹⁸ Interviewed on February 20, 2018 in Satara. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translation is mine.

CULTURAL TRAINING

It is important to note that most Avahan and KKM members had no training in the fields of art and culture before they founded or joined the troupe. Some training sessions for members were conducted by external resource persons in the early phase of both troupes – Avahan was trained by Jaydev Hattangadi, Soni Razdan, and a few other theatre practitioners and critics in the initial months, whereas KKM underwent only one workshop spread over several days in 2005 that was conducted by Sambhaji and others.

Yet, both troupes included several artists whose exemplary skills in writing, composing, singing, acting and so on transgressed several specialisations in the culture industry. What really enabled the transition of so many amateur activists into fine artists? This question was posed to core members of both troupes. As if implementing Benjamin's advice that authors should teach others how to write, nearly all of them mentioned that those members who were better informed or experienced about art and artistic production conducted workshops for the rest of the collective, including for new activists who joined the troupe from time to time.

From the accounts of workshop conductors and participants, it appears that workshops were spread over 3-5 days on average. They comprised an eclectic mix of training sessions in acting, singing, writing, street theatre, folk theatre and music and so on, which countered participants' hegemonic ideas about art and artistic quality and spurred them to create songs and poems in simple language on the spot that the collective of trainees and trainers related to and appreciated.

In Avahan, it was Sanober who formulated the workshops that kicked off the troupe's activities based on what she knew courtesy her experience in proscenium theatre, readings in political theatre and help from fellow activists like Ashwin. She conducted workshops for new and old members of Avahan over the ensuing couple of years till Sambhaji and Vilas matured into fine artists. Her account of these efforts bore clear marks of the uncharted territory she was treading; she mentioned being clueless about how participants might respond despite putting in a lot of effort and was overwhelmed with their positive feedback. She also indicated that though Avahan's workshops in the initial years were restricted to theatre, they covered different topics such as various styles of acting, script writing and so on; and that from the very beginning, the collective's thrust was on enabling amateur activists to produce art on their own. Sanober said:

I used to take with every new section a workshop...means you know waves of people would come to participate in Avahan, for all of them I used to

do. Sambhaji and all picked up from there only...

The first one, I put in a lot of effort. I didn't even...actually I never understand. I have a very bad opinion of myself and I don't understand unless somebody reacts to me. So I remember Nishtha [participant who was briefly a member of Avahan] and all telling me how fantastic that first workshop...It was workshop of about 12 turns, and I took them from mono acting to mime...Everything, so that they were prepared. So that to themselves, they are able to write a script. Because I really feel that anybody with a little bit of imagination and creativity can do.¹⁹

The workshops likely enabled Sambhaji especially in the intended direction, as he subsequently took on the task of writing the first draft of the collective's plays. He also shared the responsibility with Sanobar of formulating and conducting future workshops for new members, which included sessions on theatre and music.

Additionally, Sambhaji was one of the resource persons who trained KKM in 2005, after which the troupe began producing original songs and plays. Deepak, who mastered scripting plays and composing songs prior to other core members, conducted workshops for newcomers in KKM till 2007-08, after which others took over. Workshops were similarly spread over 3-5 days and incorporated sessions on acting, singing, scripting, songwriting and so on.

Jyoti's account²⁰ of participating in a few workshops conducted by Deepak after she joined KKM in 2006 shows that these brought about a fundamental shift in participants' understanding of art, aesthetics and their own selves, and initiated their transition into writers and performers who were well appreciated, first by the artistic collective and later by audiences. Her ideas prior to participating in the workshops were clearly derived from hegemonic notions:

On artists / authors / heroes and heroines – Jyoti 'used to feel that street plays, songs, drama etc are written by big people;' the phrase 'big people' likely connoted the upper caste-class characteristic of varied kinds of venerated artists as well as the aura surrounding them. She thought 'that only some people can write, and it is by birth. Someone can't just start writing like that, neither can it be taught;' this likely derived from Brahmanical notions of artists being divinely ordained, and capitalist notions of the artist as an individual genius. She also felt that 'only some

¹⁹ Interview conducted in English in Pune on December 24, 2018.

²⁰ Interview conducted in Hindi in Pune on December 27, 2018, and translation is mine. The same applies for all her statements pertaining to workshops quoted in this section.

can be a hero or heroine,' which was explained by her hegemonic notion of beauty discussed later.

On poetry – Jyoti held 'that true poetry could only be found in books; that poetry is good to listen to, filled with difficult rhythms and heavy words.' This indicated that she was neither familiar with the shahiri tradition nor the vast body of Dalit literature that included poems in easy, everyday language. Her association of poetry with difficult words likely derived from the Brahmanical Marathi used by venerated upper caste authors, which contrasted sharply with her own colloquial Marathi. No wonder, she 'used to write too, but I used to feel my poems were good for nothing and only meant for me; they were not true poetry.'

On 'beauty,' the prerequisite for being a performer/actor – 'From Bollywood and the media, we have a normative idea about how heroes and heroines should look, so that people go to see them. So how do you place yourself before an audience when you have complex yourself, about the way you look,' said Jyoti. Her 'complex' was explained by her dark skin tone, which contrasted sharply with the hegemonic, 'fair is beautiful' notion of beauty in India. Its connotations with caste were strong. Sharma (2014) notes that Aryan immigrant groups that largely comprised the twice-born varnas were fair-skinned whereas Dravidians and other indigenous groups that largely comprised the lower varnas were variously dark-skinned. He also mentions that puranic literature played a key role in popularising the 'fair is beautiful' idea in the medieval period. Similarly, a 2016 study by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad found that the social structure defined by the caste system has a "profound influence on skin pigmentation" (quoted in Times of India 2016). Also in 2016, acclaimed actor Tannishtha Chatterjee walked out of a comedy show after being 'roasted' for her dark skin colour. Later, she wrote:

Some friends also told me don't take it so seriously, it's just a comedy. I think that's what the show also thinks. It's all fun and games! Except there is nothing funny about this. Precisely because, in a country where we still sell Fair n Lovely/Handsome and show adverts where people don't get jobs because of their complexion, where every matrimonial advert demands a fair bride or groom and the colour bias is so strong, in a society which has a deep-seated problem with dark skin, which also has deep roots in our caste system, in a country where dark skin is marginalised, making fun of it is not roast. Even considering that dark skin is a joke comes from that very

deep prejudice. (Chatterjee 2016)

For Jyoti, participation in workshops conducted by Deepak that comprised ‘training for performance, theatre, and songs’ overturned these hegemonic notions. The impact of the first workshop was especially deep, as evidenced in an anecdote she related. Prior to the workshop, she met some girls who had joined KKM around the same time as her, and they showed her a song they had written in colloquial Marathi. She thought it was ‘garbage,’ and wondered who would listen to such songs. But when she encountered performances of songs written by Deepak, Sachin and Sheetal in similar language during the workshop, and noticed how everyone including herself related and responded to them, she ‘started seeing all those songs very differently’. Jyoti said:

When I came across KKM songs, I found they were in everyday language...Like we write aahe (hai), but in our spoken language, we say haai. Somehow, we feel that aahe is correct and haai is wrong...Even the teachers at school and colleges would sneer at such spoken language. People would laugh...Had I not seen the response to those songs, I would have felt they were wrong, they were not art.

Further, she learned that conceptions regarding good language were part of ‘cultural hegemony:’

...we thought that one form of the language was preferred over the others because it was good. But the preference is only an imposition by the political and social elite, this I understood in the workshop. And it made a lot of sense. It was true! For me, the workshop changed my mindset a lot.

Alongside a mindset change, workshops seem to have demonstrated for participants – through hands-on song-writing sessions – that ‘writing’ was a sort of ‘documentation’ of one’s expression, and that anyone could excel at it by practicing. Such a perspective about writing and literature was no doubt polemical, but also highly suited to simplifying the writing process for subaltern caste activists who often struggled to articulate their thoughts in formal language or via writing, but expressed themselves with ease via performative traditions and forms. Jyoti said:

Deepak used to conduct the sessions on song writing. He was good. In the workshop, everyone would write songs. It would never be that someone did not write. We all have a stock of good words...depending on our own background and culture. This comes out clearly (in the writings). When

people express their thoughts on paper, it is so good for them to know and understand that this is also a way of expressing that may be different from what they are used to.

Workshops also seem to have pushed participants to recognise the cultural capital of lower castes in making and playing musical instruments; TM Krishna's book titled *Sebastian & Sons: A brief history of Mrdangam Makers* (Krishna 2020) makes a similar point in relation to Carnatic music. Jyoti stated:

Some people are good with documentation, so it seems like their understanding is good, or they really know a lot. But it's not like that. Documentation is a very different thing, meaning—what you express, documenting that is a different skill. But our expression is always happening. Expression and documentation...I understood the difference in the two.

You see this in the Brahmandwadi system a lot. Like many castes know how to play rhythm on the dhol or duff...what leather is to be used; what climate is good...but they have never documented these things. Because media of documentation, writing, was denied to them. Art is not someone's monopoly...the idea that it is was also broken in the workshop.

Additionally, in line with Benjamin, workshops seem to have stressed that quality and content were dialectically related, and that the primary quality of radical art was its tendency of being rooted in 'the living social context'. Jyoti stated:

They taught us the basics of song writing, about content and quality. If the content is good but the listener is not interested, that is a waste. And just quality is not enough, because there is a lot of good quality stuff in the market today, but the content is useless. So content and quality were the main criteria for judging songs.

Overall, both Avahan and KKM seemed to rely on the cultural capital of Dalits and other lower caste activists exposed to performative traditions to produce new songs and theatrical pieces. But how was this cultural capital acquired: Did it require investment of conscious effort and time on the part of activists, as suggested by Bourdieu (1986), or could it also be acquired 'second hand', contradicting his stand? What did it comprise in its objectified state, and which institutionalised spaces enabled its transmission?

Questions to this effect were posed to cultural activists in Maharashtra. The conversation with Sheetal Sathe, former KKM member and now part of Navyan Mahajalsa, is especially noteworthy for responding to the concerns outlined above. Sheetal, like the iconic shahir Annabhau Sathe, was a Matang; within Matangs, she was a member of the Aradhi sub-caste, whose traditional occupation comprised performance of devi songs paying obeisance to mother goddesses worshipped by lower castes. Anand Patwardhan's *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) shows that her family was devoutly Hindu and that her mother sang devi songs and bhajans at socio-religious gatherings in and around the Kasewadi slums in Pune to sustain the family.

Naturally, in the interview, Sheetal talks of a childhood suffused with music and singing, when she and her peers imbibed folk forms and learned to sing merely by listening to their mothers and relatives, which draws attention to how cultural capital could be acquired without undertaking any conscious efforts whatsoever. She talks of her caste brethren playing *halgi* (a one-sided percussion instrument played with hands/sticks), *jhaanjh* or cymbals, *tuntuna* (a single/multi stringed instrument), *dholki* (a two-sided percussion instrument played with hands), and so on, which shows that in the objectified state, the cultural capital of lower castes not only included popular forms but also the ability to make and play various musical instruments. Her reference to distinct castes/jatis comprised of performers such as Aradhi, Murali and Gondhali also shows that the caste system played a key role in the development and transmission of this cultural capital. Sheetal said:

Talk a little about your childhood and the environment at home. What did you do then that allowed you to do the work you are doing today?

This is a very good question. The caste I come from, traditionally, they worship all matru-devatas like Ambabai and Kalubai. The community that worships them is called Aradhi...they do Aradhana. Aradhis sing, so they have the halgi, jhanjh, tuntuna, dholki...they have such instruments. And they go to any house where there is puja to sing the arati. Programmes stretch across the night, and Aradhis have the stamina to sing through the night.

I have seen all this in my childhood...programmes of Aradhana and bhajan through the night. We also learnt to give chorus...there was no proper training, but just by listening, we learnt...all of us kids who sat there, we

learnt how to give chorus.

Are Aradhis a sub caste of Matangs?

No, it's not as if only Matangs do this work. You could say that untouchables who did not have any work in the village economy, they worked as artists. All they had of their own was art. There are 2-3 castes like that [in the Satara-Sangli area of Maharashtra] who sing. Gondhali is one of them...they sing and play the sambal for Devi's aradhana.

The interesting thing is the third gender...we never talk of them in the context of caste, but the identity given to them by our society is very hateful. So they can't fit into any structure. So those people, they go into such communities to get some respect. There is a separate caste comprising them now, and they remain attached to singing and Aradhana...they are called Muralis. Or Murali jamat.

Not all Muralis are transgender, but many are. There is a word called jop-tini. As far as I know, they all do Devi's puja. There are many artists from the Matang samaj too, especially the dholki and halgi players. Also folk singers, of devi songs. I have seen these two from my childhood.

Also, on traditional days and festivals, there would be songs in our house. Be it any festival. Like barsa, after the kid is born, he is put in a palna and all women sing together. Marriage, birthday or any traditional day, there are songs for them. And we have been trained listening to all of them I feel. I also used to sing devi songs as a kid, and people would appreciate a lot and say I was doing very well. And I used to feel I should sing more...devi songs. When I went to class V, I found a new stage...that of Ambedkar Jay-anti.²¹

Sheetal's account clearly shows that the caste system, from which subalternity accrues in a substantive way in the Indian subcontinent, could also provide the cultural capital for counter-hegemonic struggles. The same is also evidenced in Caur's (2015) analysis of KKM's work, where she mentions KKM's use of forms like powada, ovi and hora that are discussed earlier in the

²¹ Interviewed on February 20, 2018 in Satara. The interview was conducted in Hindi and translations are mine.

chapter. Caur also talks of KKM's use of lesser-known but popular dance forms like baalya and tarpa. Based on an interview with Deepak, she defines the two forms thus:

Tarpa is a traditional dance of the Adivasis. It is quite popular in Thane district of Maharashtra, Dadra & Nagar Haveli, and some parts of Gujarat.

Balya is also a form of folk dance. Also called shakti tura, it is quite popular in the Konkan region and is performed to invoke Ganesha. (Caur 2015, 87)

At this point, it is also important to make two caveats. The point made here about the cultural capital of subaltern caste groups is by no means meant to suggest that the role of members of such groups is important only as custodians of particular musical forms or skills or that this, in any way, justifies an essentialist link between caste and specific performative traditions. As Murliidharan's 2017 article on the musical instrument *parai* in Tamil Nadu brings out, ensuring that a performative tradition lives on often involves the difficult task of transforming the symbolic and political values associated with it as well as ensuring that the caste group in question is not forced to take on a new role of 'protecting tradition'. This is also related to the critique that is made of the idea of cultural capital itself; like other similar terms such as social capital and human capital, there is a risk that particular cultural skills are reduced to 'capital' that can be mechanically put to any kind of use without attention being paid to its social and political context (see, for instance, Fine 2002).

In contrast to the kind of concerns raised above, the case of troupes like KKM and Avahan is noteworthy in that they not only provided 'institutional recognition' (in Bourdieu's terms) to the cultural capital of subaltern social groups but also the space to acquire newer kinds of skills such as writing songs and plays, and more importantly, the scope to deploy all of this to dismantle caste, class, and gender exploitation and oppression.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion clarifies several aspects regarding the processes Avahan and KKM followed to produce new songs and plays.

It is clear that both troupes produced new work collectively. Their processes clearly undermined individual talent, but members generally did not seem to mind; besides, collective work unleashed immense creativity that allowed the troupes to produce songs and plays whose pop-

ularity 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.

The aesthetic formats that the troupes chose to create new songs and theatrical pieces were well-suited in terms of their use in social and political struggles in Maharashtra and beyond, as well as their popular tendency at the time. Folk forms predominated in their repertoires because most activists were of low caste origin who were deeply knowledgeable about such forms; but it was also the paucity of economic resources and social support, especially in the case of KKM, that 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, including castes like Aradhi, Murali and Matang whose traditional occupation in the Brahmanic social order comprised performance and communities like adivasis that had rich traditions of communitarian performance. This indicates that the caste system, from which subalternity accrues in a substantive way in the Indian subcontinent, could also provide the weapons for counter-hegemonic struggles.

CHAPTER 5
PERFORMANCE, SPIRITUALITY AND
THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SHAKEN
UNPACKING A KKM JALSA

INTRODUCTION

It is noteworthy that even in the age of social media when those engaged in cultural resistance in Maharashtra could access large audiences directly in a targeted way via digital technology, live performance remains their central mode of intervention. Previous chapters of the thesis bring out several reasons justifying this preponderance of performance, some of them related directly with the question of caste. For instance, the deep knowledge of subaltern caste activists regarding popular performative traditions and forms as well as the paucity of economic resources seems to explain the inclination for performance. Performances are also seen as providing energy and strength to participants in long-drawn movements. Further, the incident of Avahan activists mimicking the authoritarian ways of a Brahmin director who was conducting a workshop for the troupe indicates that performance allows for a radical critique of caste in embodied behaviour. Finally, performative forms such as *lavni*, *tamasha* and *powada* appear well-suited to represent new solidarities in artistic collectives as well as audiences.

While these factors seem to explain why performance predominates as a medium of intervention in cultural resistance in Maharashtra, they do not provide insights into what it really entails and accomplishes – for organisers, performers and audiences – that distinguishes it from other possible media such as literature and audio-visual content. Why do organisers reach out to troupes and invite them to perform? Why do the latter often travel long distances to stage programmes? 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 oppression and exploitation and how do audiences respond to their interventions?

These questions are pursued in a limited way in this chapter via a close reading of a *jalsa* by KKM in a village named Varkheda in Maharashtra's Nashik district on April 16, 2017. The performance is well-suited for such an analysis because *shahiri jalsas* are common in the scene of cultural resistance in Maharashtra, and their themes are similar to those evidenced in KKM's show – i.e., emancipation from caste, class, gender and other forms of exploitation and domination.¹ Additionally, largely owing to state reprisals against KKM discussed in previous chapters, the Varkheda *jalsa* foregrounds the challenges and difficulties that organisers, troupe

¹ Other contemporary troupes in the domain of cultural resistance in Maharashtra such as *Samata Kala Manch* and *Yalgaar Sanskrutik Manch* regularly perform *jalsas* touching upon these themes.

members and the prospective audience had to endure and overcome to make the event possible. This brings into sharp focus ‘one of Gramsci’s most significant insights: one of the greatest difficulties that subaltern social groups face in challenging the prevailing hegemony is finding a way past the barriers that prevent them from being heard’ (Buttigieg 2013, 41).

My presence as a member of the audience during the jalsa, my documentation of fragments using a digital camera, and informal conversations with audience members, organisers and troupe members before and after the show all feed into the subsequent presentation and analysis. News reports are used to a large extent in addition to academic literature and my experiences as a reporter in order to contextualise proceedings from the jalsa, which clarify KKM’s position vis-à-vis a larger caste-class politics unfolding in the state and country. Emphasis is also laid on elaborating the cultural memory of lower caste groups that the jalsa took for granted. It is important to note that not all strands of cultural memory thus traced were likely deciphered by the audience during the performance or that all aspects of the large context and their implications were known to all. Yet their effusive, unguarded responses to songs and plays and especially to commentary indicated that the broad themes traced here resonated strongly with them.

The first section lays out the key concerns and argument in this chapter. The second section The barriers to ‘being heard’, circa 2017 reviews key developments in Varkheda, Maharashtra and India preceding the jalsa, fleshing out the multifarious challenges that subaltern groups in India in general and the stakeholders of the jalsa in particular encounter to make such events possible. Cultivation of a critical consciousness pursues the task of listening intently to the performance and reception of the jalsa. It documents how the jalsa:

- provided performers the scope to express themselves – their thoughts, experiences, concerns, criticisms and shortcomings – outwardly and freely, and be acknowledged by the audience. That seasoned performers excelled at this activity and managed to involve the audience in determining the ‘text’ of the performance is evident.
- pushed the understanding of the audience regarding the reasons for their oppression – viz., caste, gender, class, region, religion, language and other forms of subalternity, capitalism, traditional politics and so on.
- provided participants the opportunity to imagine and live their lives differently, even if ephemerally for the duration of the show.

While the discussion in this chapter does not deal with the long-term effect of the jalsa on

the performers or the audience, it shows that within its duration, the performance provided much scope for all participants to alter their ways of thinking and living. A brief conclusion summarises key findings.

PERFORMANCE AND SPIRITUALITY: KEY CONCERNS

In an interview with theatre scholar and photographer Eugene van Erven in May 1988, founder of the Delhi-based cultural troupe Jana Natya Manch or Janam Safdar Hashmi spoke about the troupe's interventions in rather unusual terms. Hashmi said:

We help to motivate workers, for instance, to become active in the trade union movement. We impart values of struggle and solidarity when we go to the middle-class youth and students. As such we play a kind of spiritual role, albeit a small part, in the broader democratic movement. (Hashmi 1989; reprinted in Deshpande 2007, 58, emphasis added).

Although Hashmi did not elaborate further on this 'spiritual' role, he was clearly not using the word in the theological, transcendental sense. Instead, he seemed to be denoting as 'spiritual' the task of conjoining various sections of society with historic, transformational struggles.

Such a conception of the 'spiritual' appears strikingly close to Gramsci and Ambedkar's understanding of spirituality as a secular, immanent and transformative force. Zene (2016), among others, draws attention to how both Gramsci and Ambedkar were resolutely concerned with the liberation of subalterns / Dalits and minorities respectively, who were denied recognition as (fully) human in their own societies. They contended that struggles by historically oppressed groups for recognition and dignity were spiritual as they involved the 'task of thinking.' That is, groups and individuals not only had to acquire consciousness of their own circumstances, history and rights, but also stitch up alliances with other oppressed groups to register more vociferously their claims of being human.

For both of them, spirituality is not only the driving force behind the acquisition of the consciousness of human equality and dignity but also becomes indispensable for subalterns and Dalits in order to achieve these, in a variety of degrees and via a (spiritual) critical consciousness (consapevol-*ezza*). (Zene 2016, 559)

While Hashmi only implies that performance facilitates the acquisition of a critical, collective

consciousness à la Gramsci and Ambedkar and thus *makes* history, Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor (2006; 2013) advances both points strongly. She notes that performance – both as embodied practice and as performance event – has played a key role in the ‘transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and post-writing’ (Taylor 2013, 16), and shows how performance comprised the terrain on which native and marginalised communities in the Americas staked their claims to history. Drawing attention to the role of colonialism and logocentric ideas of history in delegitimising the historical character of performance, she states:

Performance practices were forceably expelled from colonial meaning-making systems when they threatened to transmit native history, values, and claims. If we take a historical look at the tension between performance and history, it becomes clearer that performance is not un- or anti-historical. On the contrary: it has been strategically positioned outside of history, rendered invalid as a form of cultural transmission, in short made un- and anti-historical by conquerors and colonists who wanted to monopolize power. (Taylor 2006, 68)

Taylor’s insights regarding the role of the ruling elite in excoriating subaltern performance practices and rendering it ‘invalid as a form of cultural transmission’ resonate strongly with the Indian/Maharashtrian context. Earlier chapters of this thesis show that since the early twentieth century, the state and the bureaucracy as well as sections of political and civil society (that resemble the Gramscian notion of ‘integral state’) often worked in tandem to appropriate subaltern performance traditions such as bhakti, ban or regulate performative genres like tamasha, and persecute and/or stereotype cultural activists and troupes. Under the forces of neoliberal Hindutva, the state is seen targeting dissident performance practices and troupes stridently, including in the case of KKM. Discussions in these chapters also show that akin to Taylor’s observations, the practices and interventions of shahirs and kalapathaks (including their songs and plays) transmitted those ideologies, memories and identities that were suited to the emancipation of subaltern caste-classes in their time and place.

This chapter turns attention to the performance event in particular, more specifically to its transformative potential and power in times of rising authoritarianism. It asks if and how a single performance in itself interrupts status quo, and if this contributes to the formation a public² that

² Following Novetzke (2007, 259), I use the term public to refer to ‘a social unit created through shared cultural

counters the official middle class public sphere premised on ‘stitching together Manu and Mill’ (Rege 2016, 24).

Drawing on Hashmi’s cryptic comment and insights from Gramsci, Ambedkar and Taylor, the chapter argues that KKM’s jalsa in Varkheda comprised the ground for spiritual development of all stakeholders, including the troupe, the organisers and the audience. That is to say, it occasioned the realisation of a collective consciousness and solidarity premised on the recognition of human equality and dignity in all its subaltern manifestations.

The chapter further argues that although the solidarity in this specific instance comprised primarily lower caste-classes, it represented what Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called ‘the solidarity of the shaken’. Patočka developed the concept in his final work *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, which was a response to the two violent World Wars and the ‘perils of materialist history, which laid the foundations for fascism and the communist regime in Czechoslovakia’ (Belejkanicova 2021). The solidarity of the shaken, he stated, is ‘the solidarity of those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about (courtesy their experience of an actual danger), and so what history is about’ (Patočka 1996, 134). It is similar to the publics forged by shahirs (like the one discussed in *Interpreting a Shahir*) in terms of its heterogeneous composition; additionally, it has ‘bonds other than a common enemy’ and is realised via ‘caring for the soul’ that includes the phenomenon of ‘loving those who hate us’, notes Zene (2016).

Nevertheless, Patočka warned that efforts to realise such solidarity were severely persecuted by the ruling classes:

The solidarity of the shaken is built up in persecution and uncertainty: that is its front line, quiet, without fanfare or sensation even there where this aspect of the ruling Force seeks to seize it (Patočka 1996, 135).

An earlier chapter of this dissertation (Interrogating the Collective) describes how state reprisal threatened the very existence of KKM and thus bears out the applicability of Patočka’s observations in twenty-first century Maharashtra/India. Subsequent sections of this chapter provide further evidence of the persecution and surveillance of the troupe’s efforts to realise ‘the solidarity of the shaken’ through its performances.

It is noteworthy that Patočka died in March 1977 from a brain haemorrhage following exhausting interrogations by the Czechoslovak secret police, after having protested against the

phenomena and reinforced by demonstrations in public of these shared cultural phenomena’.

communist government's infringement of human rights. Along similar lines, KKM is accused of being a Maoist front owing to its trenchant critique of social hierarchies and the Brahmanical, fascist character of state power, especially under the current Narendra Modi regime, and several activists are currently behind bars, accused of plotting to kill the Prime Minister (D. Singh 2018).

BARRIERS TO 'BEING HEARD', CIRCA 2017

In *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and BR Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns* (Zene 2013), Cosimo Zene, Joseph Buttigieg, Gopal Guru and other contributors stress that in modern liberal democratic states, Dalits and subalterns need to overcome multiple barriers in order to 'be heard'. Apart from 'raw hegemonic power and 'insolence' of state apparatuses and the law,' the ruling class has 'a formidable array of institutional and cultural mechanisms that enable it directly and indirectly to disseminate its worldview, inculcate its values, and mould public opinion,' writes Buttigieg (in Zene 2013, 35-42). With regard to Ambedkar, Guru (in Zene 2013, 87-100) shows that one way of rendering the silencing of Dalits and subalterns more effective is to extend it to those intellectuals who lend their 'voice' to them; noteworthy in this regard is the exclusion of Ambedkar and his writings from the Indian academia until very recent years.³ Further, Zene notes:

In order for silencing to produce the desired result – i.e. nullifying and 'erasing' the targeted people – it must be tactically planned and systematically executed via a series of 'mechanisms'. The most effective of these is... the constant stream of humiliation which engulfs a person and his/her group...for whom there can be only shame, both inner and physical...leaving the Untouchable 'bereft of being' and enduring 'ontological hurt' (Zene 2013, 210).

Though such barriers preventing subaltern voices from 'being heard' seem to have existed in India prior to and after independence in 1947, the 'silencing' of minorities, lower castes, women and other subaltern groups increased substantially with the ascendancy of Hindutva in national politics in the late 1980s. Incidents of communal violence, mostly targeted at Muslims and Christians and allegedly perpetrated by the RSS and its outfits including the VHP, Bajrang

³ Sharmila Rege talks about the exclusion of Ambedkar from academia in the introduction to *Against the Madness of Manu* (2016).

Dal and the BJP, became widespread in the 1990s especially after LK Advani's rath yatra across several states (Graf and Galonnier 2013). Muslims comprised the prime target of Hindutva rhetoric and its supporters through the 2000s included the middle class and the mass media. Elisha Nandrajog (2010) writes:

Sangh Parivar members spared no opportunity to direct rhetoric against Indian Muslims. Of particular significance is the manner in which Hindu nationalists used the discourse on global Islamic extremism to recast Muslims as a threat to the Hindus. The 2002 riots in Godhra exemplify the above. Exploiting violence to the party's advantage, then BJP President Jana Krishnamurthi announced March 9, 2002 as "anti-terrorism" day. Worse still, the media embraced this orientation. (169)

Another core aspect of Hindutva ideology was its furtherance of caste. Christophe Jaffrelot (2020) writes:

Indeed, the RSS has never explicitly denounced the caste system but attempted to reform it in order to preserve its basic structure. In 1939, for instance, in *We or our nationhood defined*, M.S Golwalkar, who was to take over from Hedgewar [the founder of RSS] the year after, considered that it was "none of the so-called drawbacks of the Hindu social order, which prevents us from regaining our ancient glory." Deendayal Upadhyaya defended the original varna vyavastha even more explicitly, in *Integral Humanism*, a text that is still considered as its ideological charter by the Sangh parivar.

In pursuance with this agenda, RSS and its affiliates opposed reservations for OBCs and lower castes in the wake of the Mandal Commission report in 1990; in doing so, they sought to 'erase' the histories of exploitation of lower castes, adivasis, women and other subaltern groups in the Indian subcontinent.

The silencing and erasure of subalterns clearly took on new meaning after the Narendra Modi-led BJP was voted into power at the Centre as well as several states including Maharashtra in 2014. Over the next three years (i.e., till KKM's jalsa in Varkheda), Maharashtra and other BJP-ruled states enacted laws banning cow slaughter and criminalising the sale and possession of beef, which was largely consumed by poor Muslims and lower castes and comprised a signifi-

cant source of protein for such communities.⁴ Governments handed over densely forested, biodiversity-rich tracts of land inhabited by tribal groups to private corporations with far greater ease and urgency than under earlier regimes, in flagrant violation of land and environmental laws.⁵ Ministers, police officials and bureaucrats turned a blind eye to a spate of mob lynchings and hate crimes across the country; in most cases, the victims were poor Muslims, lower castes or adivasis, whereas the perpetrators were associated with the Sangh Parivar.⁶ On November 8, 2016, the Modi government announced the demonetisation of all ₹500 and ₹1,000 banknotes in circulation, which wiped off the life savings of innumerable poor families, crippled small and medium businesses that provided employment to subaltern groups, and led to many riots, suicides, and deaths.⁷ The BJP also proactively targeted political opponents, civil society groups and activists who lent their ‘voice’ to subaltern groups and critiqued the ruling dispensation.⁸ Protests against these developments were organised by various entities across the country, but they faded in front of the Modi regime’s relentless propaganda on mass media and social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, which ensured the suffering, subaltern majority supported them regardless.⁹

Not surprisingly, KKM – the foremost voice of subaltern resistance in Maharashtra – was caught in these crosshairs. The Congress-NCP government in the state had implicated the troupe in a case under the draconian UAPA law and imprisoned two of its activists in 2011, who had then been freed in 2013 following bail from the Bombay High Court. But after the BJP assumed office in Maharashtra and the Centre in 2014, activists arrested the previous year were refused bail in various courts till the Supreme Court intervened to free them in January 2017.

The jalsa in Varkheda – a village in Nashik district located in the agrarian belt of western

⁴ For an overview on laws banning cow slaughter, see Patel (2020). On beef and food rights of various social groups, see Ilaiah (1996). On the beef ban in Maharashtra, see Biswas (2018).

⁵ For a brief list of environmentally hazardous projects cleared by the Narendra Modi-led BJP government in its first hundred days after assuming office in 2014, see Mazoomdar (2014).

⁶ For broad trends on mob lynching in India till 2017, see Baksi and Nagarajan (2017).

⁷ For a report on deaths following demonetisation, see Express Web Desk (2016). For an overview on job loss due to demonetisation, see Safi (2018). Regarding the impact of demonetisation on farm distress, see Kant (2017). For insights on the impact of demonetisation on small businesses, see Bhaduri (2018).

⁸ For a brief overview on the stifling of dissent by the Narendra Modi government, see Seervai (2016). For insights on the laws used to stifle dissent in India, see Human Rights Watch (2016).

⁹ Between the 2014 and 2019 general elections, BJP’s vote share among Dalits increased from 24 percent to 33 per cent. For details, see Poonam, Jyoti, and Prakash (2019); Singh (2019). On the BJP/ RSS use of social media, see Chaturvedi (2016).

Maharashtra – took place nearly three months later, i.e., on 16 April 2017. It commemorated the birth anniversary of BR Ambedkar and was organised by the local unit of Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI henceforth), an affiliate of the CPI(M). For KKM, this was an unusual invitation because most entities associated with the Parliamentary Left maintained a distance from it in the post-repression years, likely because they feared reprisals. I got in touch with Ketan G,¹⁰ then President of the local DYFI unit and key organiser of the jalsa, nearly two weeks prior to the event because I wanted to travel there from Mumbai, located more than 250 kms away. He was warm and welcoming from the beginning, and generously offered that I could stay over at his house that night along with troupe members. Additionally, as I was keen to know why he and others were inviting KKM to Varkheda and if they had needed to secure permission/clearance from the police, he and other villagers shared several anecdotes that provided insights into the ‘barriers’ that prevented KKM from reaching prospective audiences.

The first of these pertained to the harassment and intimidation of organisers of KKM’s shows by police and intelligence officials. Ketan and others¹¹ in the village mentioned that generally when they wanted to hold a programme involving the use of public space and loudspeakers, they had to intimate the local police station in advance; a simple letter stating the purpose, venue, schedule and important guests expected in the programme sufficed, they said, which was normally received with the official stamp and signature. But in this case, after the letter regarding KKM’s jalsa was submitted at the police station, Ketan was summoned there several times as police officials wanted to know in advance every possible detail about the jalsa. They asked for the names and addresses of KKM activists scheduled to perform that evening and the expected turnout, including where audiences were likely to come from, which Ketan complied with because they were keen to get on with the programme. But there was more: police asked them to submit in advance the lyrics and scripts of all songs and acts that KKM would stage, as well as a written undertaking saying that no statements hurting social harmony and peace would be made during the programme. Ketan said that they disregarded both these demands as there was no legal requirement for the same.

The second major barrier pertained to intense caste conflict in the Nashik region as well as in the rest of Maharashtra and this also became evident in some of the differences that cropped

¹⁰ Name changed to protect identity.

¹¹ These conversations took place both before and after the show, many of them in Ketan’s house.

up in Varkheda when the jalsa was planned. Atrocities against Dalits were common in the state and the alleged perpetrators in most cases were Marathas – a wide cluster of castes whose elites maintained a stranglehold over political power and the agrarian economy in the state. Often perpetrators also included police and administrative officials (Saldhana 2018). Yet, some incidents of caste vengeance outstripped others in terms of brutality.

In 2013, for instance, a 22-year-old Dalit (Mehtar) boy named Sachin Garu and two of his friends were killed and their bodies cut into pieces and dumped into a well in Sonai village in Ahmednagar after they went to clean the septic tank of a Maratha family; Sachin was in love with the girl in the family and the trio was allegedly murdered at the behest of her family (Shantha 2014). In 2014, a 17-year-old Dalit boy named Nitin Aage was brutally beaten up and strangled to death in Kharda village in Ahmednagar, allegedly by members of an influential Maratha family, because he spoke to a girl from the family (Express News Service 2014). That same year, three members of a Dalit family were savagely murdered in Javkheda village and their mutilated body parts scattered on a farm, allegedly over a love affair between one of them and a Maratha woman (Banerjee 2014). In 2015, a 23-year-old Dalit man was beaten to death at a liquor shop in Shirdi by men from Maratha and OBC communities because his phone's ringtone was a song praising Babasaheb Ambedkar (Shantha 2015).

Almost parallelly, influential Maratha leaders began voicing demands for the abolition of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act which mandated strict punishment for perpetrators of caste atrocities, arguing that the law was being used to target their community (Trivedy 2016) even as data on cases under the Act showed that this claim was unviable (Phadke 2016; Rajput 2017; Phadke 2016). They also rallied behind demands that the community be provided reservation in education and services, especially since the majority of its members were dependent on agriculture wherein the returns were diminishing.¹² Kumar Ketkar wrote in *Seminar*:

According to the government affidavit, a large section of Marathas are agricultural labourers, landless peasants, small landholding farmers (middle rung farmers) barely managing to survive on the land. The largest number of farmer suicides are also from this group. (Ketkar 2017)

Reservation for Marathas also comprised one of the key electoral issues in the 2014 Maharashtra Assembly polls, but attempts by the outgoing Congress-NCP and the incumbent BJP

¹² For an analysis of the agrarian crisis in Maharashtra and farmer suicides, see Dhawale (2014).

governments to implement the same were stayed by the Bombay High Court and the Supreme Court.¹³

With tensions already flared, the alleged molestation of a five-year-old Maratha girl by a Dalit teenager in Talegaon in Nashik district on October 1, 2016 (Sinha 2016) added fuel to the fire and set off a one-sided caste riot. A report in *Scroll* noted:

On Sunday (October 2), more than one thousand members of the Maratha caste, possibly from across the state, descended on the Nashik-Agra highway, off which Talegaon lies. Together, they burnt 20 official vehicles, including police cars and buses. They entered Talegaon and vandalised the homes of...Dalit families. (Chari 2016)

Rioting in villages located along the Nashik-Agra highway continued for two days, as Maratha mobs singled out and attacked the households of Mahars/neo-Buddhists. Victims said that they tried reaching the local police station when under attack, but their calls were either not answered or their pleas for help were ignored.¹⁴ It was also alleged that local police targeted neo-Buddhist residents in the name of combing operations, forcibly entered their houses and beat men, women, and children, injuring many and arresting a number of innocent people (South Asia Solidarity Group 2016). Protests condemning the caste violence and demanding strong action against perpetrators were held in Nashik and other parts of Maharashtra in subsequent weeks, but these were mostly organised by Ambedkarite groups where Mahars predominated, and instances of solidarity among Mangs, Mahars, Mehtars, Chambhars and other Dalit groups, and between them and other caste groupings were rare except in select, progressive circles.¹⁵

Together, these contestations and attacks attested to the systematic 'silencing' and humiliation of Dalits in Maharashtra, including through hierarchies among Dalit groups. They also attested to deep-rooted caste divisions among the subaltern caste-classes in Maharashtra that comprised KKM's target audience. Not surprisingly, caste divisions were rife in Varkheda village (where KKM was set to perform) too.

Ketan said that divisions became evident when he mooted the idea to fellow villagers of organising a shahiri jalsa to jointly commemorate the birth anniversaries of Annabhau Sathe, Bhim-

¹³ For a timeline of the Maratha reservation issue, see Saigal (2021).

¹⁴ Personal communication with riot victims during a field visit a week after the riots abated.

¹⁵ Personal communication with progressive activists in and around Nashik during a field visit after the 2016 riots.

rao R Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. Although all three were revered anti-caste icons, their caste backgrounds were different. Annabhau was from the Matang jati that was classified as SC but lagged behind other Dalit jatis in Maharashtra in terms of socio-economic status, education, and representation in politics (Adagale and Naik 2017). Ambedkar was a Mahar, a community whose status and position was better than that of other SCs and who comprised a bulk of the Dalit middle class in Maharashtra (Teltumbde 2010); whereas Phule was a Mali, a community classified as OBC in Maharashtra that was primarily into agriculture and trade and well-represented in state politics (Zagade 2017). Consequently, Malis and Mahars in the village felt the stature of Phule and Ambedkar respectively would be diminished if their anniversary was celebrated alongside that of Annabhau. Ketan, who was from the Matang jati, received a visit from community elders including some of his relatives urging him to dedicate the jalsa solely to Annabhau. The matter was resolved to some extent by deciding that only Ambedkar's name would be used for the jalsa.

Ketan appeared deeply troubled by this state of affairs: his primary motive behind inviting KKM, he said, was to conscientise (*prabodhan karnya sathi*) his fellow comrades in DYFI as well as villagers in Varkheda regarding their casteist attitudes and practices. He briefed troupe members in advance about the row over the naming of the jalsa and the festering caste divisions among people in the village. The organisers also pooled in and paid around Rs 15,000 to KKM, which was barely enough to cover the cost of hiring an 8-seater vehicle to carry troupe members and instruments from Pune to Varkheda and back; as in other instances, KKM did not demand or charge any professional fees for the jalsa.

CULTIVATION OF A CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

This section is first and foremost an attempt to counter the silencing and erasure of subaltern voices of resistance (Kalyani 2021) in contemporary India via a written documentation of KKM's jalsa in Varkheda. It is pertinent to note that no such documentation of the troupe's performances exists till date. A few videos of their shows are found on YouTube, but the quality of footage and audio is poor, which makes it difficult to follow the proceedings; they are all in colloquial Marathi and without subtitles or translations, which restricts their reach; moreover, they rarely provide a picture of the audience and its responses. Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) is a rare exception in this regard as it contains glimpses of KKM's early perform-

ances, all duly subtitled, as well as interviews with activists. It is hoped that the documentation of KKM's jalsa here – notwithstanding the inadequacy of writing in conveying the non-discursive realm of performance – will add to this archive and make its work available to audiences beyond its time, space and linguistic background.

The presentation of the jalsa here largely follows the sequence in which proceedings unfolded in Varkheda.¹⁶ This enables the kinds of observations and analyses that KKM, the bearers of the jalsa, sought to advance. Drawing on Taylor's observations regarding 'the centrality of the investigator in oral and performed traditions who might be understood as creating the data rather than examining it' (Taylor 2006, 70), emphasis is laid on contextualising the contents of the jalsa with the history of subaltern groups in Maharashtra and India and their prevalent situations. This helps understand how the jalsa 'reactivate(s) historical scenarios' to 'provide contemporary solutions' (72), and how, notwithstanding its ephemerality, it marks a historical event wherein a group of people live their own lives differently than in normal course, at least for the duration of the performance. Taylor notes:

Performances... "quote" and reinsert fragments from the past (what Schechner calls "strips of behavior" [1985:35]) to supply historical antecedents for present claims or practices. They also make history by using lessons and attitudes derived from previous experience to produce change in the present. (72)

Taylor's concept of the scenario¹⁷ – 'a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end' (Taylor 2013, 13) – aptly captures the potential of a performance event such as the jalsa to forge collective consciousness. Scenarios 'exist as culturally specific imaginaries' (13) and are sustained by theatricality, she notes, stressing that as a concept, the scenario is especially suited to the study of performance as it accounts for corporeal behaviours and milieux that play a key role in making performance intelligible. Taylor also delineates six key characteristics of scenarios that are instructive to understand proceedings of the jalsa:

- First, to recall, recount, or reactivate a scenario we need to conjure up the physical location.

¹⁶ Three songs that were part of the jalsa in Varkheda – viz. *Majhi Mai* (My Mother), *Mehngai* (Inflation), and *Kaal Challa Pudhe Pudhe* (Time is Marching Ahead) are not included in the discussion in this chapter for reasons of brevity. But the themes addressed through these songs are covered in the analysis.

¹⁷ All references here pertaining to the concept of scenario are taken from Taylor (2013).

- (29)
- Second, in scenarios, viewers need to deal with the embodiment of the social actors. (29)
 - Third, scenarios, by encapsulating both the setup and the action/behaviors, are formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody, and change. (31)
 - Fourth, the transmission of a scenario reflects the multifaceted systems at work in the scenario itself: in passing it on, we can draw from various modes that come from the archive and/or the repertoire – writing, telling, re-enactment, mime, gestures, dance, singing. (31)
 - Fifth, the scenario forces us to situate ourselves in relationship to it; as participants, spectators, or witnesses, we need to "be there," part of the act of transfer. Thus, the scenario precludes a certain kind of distancing. (32)
 - Sixth, a scenario is not necessarily, or even primarily, mimetic. Although the paradigm allows for a continuity of cultural myths and assumptions, it usually works through reactivation rather than duplication. (32)

In the discussion of the jalsa that follows, performers are seen drawing on these characteristics in substantive ways. The presentation of songs and acts also appears focussed on depicting different scenarios of exploitation and oppression of subaltern groups in Maharashtra and India over centuries, and teasing out from within this history scenarios of spirited resistance which become vehicles of change in the present.

It is evident that an intimate bond strung together all participants during the jalsa notwithstanding the audience's diversity in terms of caste, age and gender and disparities among performers in terms of their skills and abilities. KKM clearly took the lead in forging this bond, with shahirs eschewing demarcations of private and/or personal from the start and referring frequently to their experiences off stage to contextualise their position and/or their songs and acts; this opportunity did not seem available to them otherwise – not even amongst themselves, as the troupe found it difficult to even meet in the post-repression period (discussed in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*).

The line separating performers from the audience and organisers was thin, sometimes non-existent, and the two shared affinities of language, social location, embodied behaviour and life experiences. In fact, shahirs on stage appeared as more critical, self-aware versions of the audience who promoted the 'task of thinking' collectively about their situation – an eminently spiritual

enterprise, following Gramsci and Ambedkar – through the jalsa.

Shahirs engaged in extensive, theatrically-charged commentary and dialogue with the audience in between songs and acts, critically examining the operations of Brahmanic-capitalist hegemony. They invoked past instances of subaltern resistance in the subcontinent through songs, acts and dialogue in order to stress on the agency and historical contribution of subaltern groups, thus reaffirming their humanity and dignity; they also subjected the audience's ways of thinking and living to unsparing, dramatic critique, showing how such practices contributed to their subalternity.

The audience was fully and consciously complicit in this 'task of thinking'. They responded readily and effusively to the theatrics on stage, with claps and shouts at opportune moments such as after select statements, lines of a song, scenes in a play, or at the end of songs and acts, especially when seasoned shahirs like Sagar and Ramesh helmed the show. They did not seem to mind when rookie performers like Rupali and Vishal went off tune or missed beats, which seemed to boost the performers' confidence. Significantly, none of them objected to the criticism and rebuke that they were subjected to, not even when performers called them out for addiction to alcohol and the empty valorisation of Ambedkar. Instead, they blurted aloud further details of their decadent behaviour, which were then relayed by shahirs as part of the jalsa; at other times, when performers critiqued their belief in godmen and religion and their emulation of mass mediated culture, they burst into peals of laughter and thumped themselves or others in mock disbelief, not seeming to care that the joke was on them. They also hummed and sang along during the chorus that followed every stanza of songs in the jalsa, affirming for performers as well as for themselves a real and expressed 'solidarity of the shaken'.

Further, much like Annabhau Sathe who strived for the unity of theory and practice in everyday life and fostered collective consciousness through his work but in a completely different time and context (as discussed in *Interpreting a Shahir*), shahirs from KKM repeatedly stressed during the jalsa that liberation from caste, class, gender, religion and other forms of domination and exploitation in everyday life involves two kinds of struggle – an internal struggle of the self against its own regressive practices and lack of critical consciousness, and an external struggle involving oppressed social groups discovering allies to counter hegemonic structures and processes including the state.

TIMING, PERFORMERS, AUDIENCE AND SETTING

The invite for the evening's jalsa mentioned that the programme would start at 7.00 PM. But by the time I reached Varkheda from Mumbai, changing buses twice along the way and then hitching a ride with two motorbike-borne men who worked in a raisin factory in the vicinity, it was nearly 9 PM. Afraid that I had missed a large part of the programme, I rushed from the main road towards the village square that seemed engulfed in yellow light, rupturing the darkness all around. As I reached closer however, the sound of musical instruments being tested wafted into my ears from loudspeakers; the jalsa, I was relieved to note, had not yet begun.

Although delayed by nearly two hours, the late start resonated with my experience of attending other shahiri jalsas in Maharashtra. In most cases, organisers announced a time at least an hour prior to the time at which they actually wished to start the show; performers too arrived at venues accordingly as did the audience, often accompanied with children. In fact, allowing audiences time to finish off their day's labour seemed to account for the warped time cycle in shahiri jalsas. In cities like Mumbai and Pune, programmes began around 8 PM so that audiences engaged in daily wage labour or jobs in the formal or informal service sector could travel back home to the slums, freshen up and arrive for the show in time; the shows then went on till around 11 PM, the hour till which loudspeakers were allowed by law. In rural areas, implementation of the loudspeaker deadline was lax which allowed for performances to start and end even later, so that families could finish their cooking, cleaning and dinner before arriving for the jalsa.

In Varkehda, as I approached the performance arena, I saw from a distance that troupe members were huddled around the musicians on stage; Jyoti was on the microphone, asking organisers to turn on lights to illuminate the audience so that performers could see them. Though at odds with typical practice in theatrical and musical programmes, lights focussed on audiences were common in shahiri jalsas, and KKM clearly had informed Ketan and other organisers about the requirement in advance.

Once lights came on, the composition of the 500-plus audience became evident. Most of them comprised men of various ages, seated on plastic chairs assembled in neat rows facing the stage; other men and youth were converging behind and around these chairs, and did not seem to mind standing for the duration of the show. Many of the men were attired in loose white kurta pajamas and white Gandhi caps, which indicated that they were farmers and likely belonged to the kunbi-Maratha caste cluster; a few of them wore crisp, white shirts and trousers, with

matching shoes in some cases, indicating that they were Dalits; most other men were attired in simple trousers and shirts or t-shirts.¹⁸ A large group of women were seated on a dhurrie in front of the men on chairs, mostly wearing sarees. Horizontal bindis on the foreheads of some women indicated that they were Malis. Around 25-30 children were seated on the dhurrie ahead of the women, some busy giggling and playing amongst themselves as the performers on the stage warmed up.

The stage itself was located barely ten feet away from the audience. It was slightly elevated from the ground, made of bamboo and wooden planks, and measured around 30 feet by 20 feet. A large digitally printed banner comprised its backdrop, conveying via the use of images, words and colours the convergence of struggles against caste annihilation and class emancipation. Specifically, it was awash in hues of red and blue merging into each other, and the slogans *Jai Bhim* and *Lal Salam* appeared on its left and right corners at the upper end, reprising the '*Jai Bhim Lal Salam*' saying that was popular among those advocating the convergence of Ambedkarite and Marxist struggles in India. Images of icons associated with emancipatory struggles from across the world appeared between these slogans; they included Shivaji, Jyotirao, Savitribai, Shahu Maharaj, Annabhau Sathe, Birsa Munda, Karl Marx and Che Guevara. A large picture of Ambedkar in the robes of a Buddhist monk, staff in hand, adorned the banner's left flank, and its right flank carried a picture of Bhagat Singh ensconced inside a red star. In the middle, overlaying an impression of KKM's logo were the words: '*Organised towards Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar anniversary celebrations 2017 / Vidrohi Shahiri Mahajalsa / Presenter: / Kabir Kala Manch.*' A thin band at the bottom of the banner noted: '*Organiser: Bhartiya Lokshahi Yuva Sangathan (D.Y.F.I.)*'

On stage were eight activist-performers dressed identically in crimson red kurtas and white churidars and dupattas. None of wore any makeup or carried any props. Two activists were seated at the rear left end of the stage, each supplied with a separate microphone; they were tuning the dholak and keyboard, and adjusting the sound level based on feedback from speakers. Six others were milling about on stage, conversing amongst themselves, drinking water, opening songbooks to the required page, etc. all in preparation of starting the show, as I exchanged pleasantries with Ketan and others who were expecting me and took up a place at the head of the audience, beside the children. On stage, Sagar walked ahead a few strides. He took the microphone

¹⁸ The reading of what different clothes indicate is based on personal observation during my trips in rural Maharashtra as well as views of other activists in the state.

placed at the front of the stage, thanked the audience for their patience and welcomed them, signalling that the jalsa was about to begin.

VICHARANCHI LAVNI: LOVE SONG OF IDEAS

Shahir Sagar Gorkhe kicked off the evening's proceedings with a brief introduction to Kabir Kala Manch as members of the chorus took positions behind microphones on either side of the stage. He said:¹⁹

Myself, Shahir Sagar Gorkhe, our Shahir Ramesh Gaichor...and those who are not here – Shahir Deepak Dhengle, Shahir Siddharth Bhonsle, Shahir Anuradha Sonule...all these KKM artists were thrown into jail by the regime. Their intention was clear – that they should not work in any movement here; they should not speak about the issues of the poor; if they do, they must only speak from the side of the rich and affluent. Speaking from our side, that is not desirable, that is just not acceptable.

We were released from jail a few days ago. On January 7, the Supreme Court granted us bail. On January 10, in the place where the Ramabai Nagar hatyakand took place, in a 'compassionate' city like Mumbai, we staged our first programme on the occasion of Bhagwat Jadhav Remembrance Day. And since that day, our throats have not had any respite, because mai-baap janta like you have placed your faith in us, and invited us for programmes every other day. Our voices are sore, but we are upright. And this staying upright, those in power do not like or appreciate.

The reference to the Supreme Court granting KKM members bail foregrounded KKM's rebelliousness, and the fact that their implication in legal cases was a ploy to silence them. It also posited the state as the foremost 'barrier' that muzzled the voice of those like KKM who stood on the side of the subaltern caste-classes.

Bhagwat Jadhav, whose commemorative programme Sagar and others participated in three days after their release from jail, was a member of the Dalit Panthers. He was killed on 10 January, 1974, when 'a historic anti-Congress government rally led by Namdev Dhasal' in Bombay was

¹⁹ All commentary, lyrics and anecdotes from the jalsa documented here were originally rendered in Marathi. Unless stated otherwise, the translations are mine.

attacked allegedly by the Shiv Sena. In an interview with the portal *GroundXero*, his brother Sumedh Jadhav who was also part of the rally said:

Congress, Shiv Sena, Jan Sangh (BJP's precursor), and RSS got together to plan how to control the rally... They pushed Shiv Sena to the front, but the planning was done by all those forces in complete collaboration. The Congress had the responsibility of providing state-administration support to the attackers... With all the plannings done, on the day of the rally, they attacked it with all their might. They were armed with stones, tubelights, and other sharp objects. They had set themselves up on the terraces of buildings along the route of the rally, and all of a sudden started throwing sharp stones upon us from these rooftops. The police instead of protecting us, stood and watched and let the stone peltings go on. My brother [Bhagwat], in trying to save a woman and her children from the stones, got hit on his head by a sharp stone, and bled to death. He became the first martyr from the Dalit Panthers Movement. And at this point, the police instead of arresting the attackers, opened tear gas and lathi charge on the people in the rally, adding to the mayhem. (GroundXero 2019)

The programme to commemorate Bhagwat Jadhav's 43rd martyrdom day was held in the BIT (Bombay Improvement Trust) chawls in Mumbai's Mazgaon area; it was organised jointly by the Krantiputra Shahid Bhagwat Jadhav Smruti Kendra, Republican Panthers, Mumbai, and the LIC Karmachari Republican Union, Mumbai, of which Sumedh Jadhav was a key leader. A number of well-known activists including Anand Patwardhan, Sambhaji Bhagat and Shantanu Kamble spoke on the occasion, while KKM and Samata Kala Manch collaborated to put up a shahiri jalsa.²⁰

Sagar's reference to the performance marking Jadhav's commemoration not only clarified that the KKM was not silenced by state reprisal, but also claimed the legacy of the Dalit Panthers for KKM. His reference to Mumbai as a 'compassionate city' was clearly sarcastic, as he mentioned it in the context of the Ramabai Nagar *hatyakand* – an incident in which 16 Dalits protesting against the desecration of an Ambedkar statue in the Ramabai Nagar slums in Mumbai were killed in police firing in 1997; many survivors and witnesses interviewed by Patwardhan

²⁰ The summary of the programme is based on my participation as an audience member and Thorat (2017).

(2011) called the incident cold-blooded murder.

Sagar held up the *dafli* against his left abdomen with his left arm, and said, ‘All of us in Kabir Kala Manch are going to sow amongst you a set of ideas (*vichar*),’ striking the *dafli* a couple of times. ‘On our feet, there are anklet bells (*ghungroo*),’ he said, tapping his right foot to draw the audience’s attention:

...for lavni. Here, there will be a lavni of ideas. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Dr BR Ambedkar, Annabhau Sathe, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule – we will sow their ideas...

In stressing on the salience of the ideas of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Dr BR Ambedkar, Annabhau Sathe, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule and so on, Sagar drew attention to KKM’s commitment to and allegiance with struggles against caste, class and gender exploitation, as opposed to its being a staunchly Ambedkarite/Dalit group. By summarising the upcoming programme as ‘vicharanchi lavni,’ he also reclaimed the lavni from the lasciviousness that it was associated with in mass-mediated culture.²¹ He continued:

These so-called famous singers – ask them why they don’t sing Babasaheb’s songs, and they say we have no time. They have no time to talk about our people! That is why the duff [another word for *dafli*] in our hands...

There’s a popular saying, ‘Bamna ghari liwna, Kunbiya ghari daan, Maanga Mahara ghari gaan (In Brahmin houses writing, in Kunbi houses paddy, in Mang and Mahar houses songs)’; we made weapons out of that – this duff and our songs of freedom from exploitation!

While the idiom distinguished between the three major caste clusters in Maharashtra in terms of their occupations, a round of applause greeted Sagar’s take on it that was accompanied by beats of the *dafli*. The applause indicated that the audience saw sense in and appreciated how the performers had made weapons out of the very forms and practices that conveyed the subalternity of Dalits.

This is why our voices are hoarse. People say – where is your tune? Do you know any raag? We say, there is only one raag we know, which we show when we hit the streets.

Sagar’s play on the word *raag* – referring not to classical *ragas* but to the Marathi word *raag*

²¹ See *Interpreting a Shahir* for more details.

meaning rage that accompanies protests by Dalits – drew even larger applause from the audience.

ON SUBALTERNITY

In the 500 plus audience in Varkheda, few would have had direct experience of, or spent time in, prison. And yet, KKM's take-off point for the night's jalsa was the shahirs' experience of jail: specifically the bad quality of food served in jail,²² and the incarceration of the activists in the *anda* cell, a room measuring six feet by six feet within the Arthur Road and Taloja jails in Mumbai and other prisons in India which was meant for solitary confinement.²³ Sagar noted:

When we were in jail, mausi, they used to serve us food. There were worms in the food. I asked, 'Sir, what is this?' But they said, 'What's it—just mauri and jeera. Eat it'. We saw this, there was repression... We were sent to the extremely dreaded anda cell. But even then, Kabir Kala Manch did not bend. We wrote songs from jail. And it is with one such song that we will begin today's programme.

Sagar cringed while talking about worms in the food; he switched instantly and effortlessly to exude servility when asking the jail official; and to derision and indifference when the official spoke back. His shoulders broadened and his voice reached a high pitch as he spoke of enduring the *anda* cell and writing songs from jail, which received wide applause from the audience.

YA TURUNGACHA

The song that kicked off the jalsa was titled *Ya Turungacha* (Of these Jails). Written by Shahir Sagar Gorkhe on June 26, 2013, weeks after he and other KKM activists were arrested and remanded in judicial custody, the song could be interpreted as a prisoner's attempt to understand, come to terms with, and resist imprisonment, and find within it the scope for regeneration. But

²² Reference to the bad food in jails can be found in numerous news stories (DNA Web Team 2013; Dogra 2021; Kulkarni 2019; Press Trust of India 2016; Times News Network 2018), and research studies (Barik 2018; Human Rights Watch 1991).

²³ The *anda* cell entered national headlines when Ajmal Kasab, convicted for his role in the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai was lodged there. The terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, popularly known as the 26/11 attacks, occurred on November 26–29. They were carried out by 10 gunmen who were believed to be connected to the Pakistan-based terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba. At least 174 people, including 20 security force personnel and 26 foreign nationals, were killed, and more than 300 people were injured in the attacks. Nine of the ten terrorists were killed, and only Ajmal Kasab was arrested and subsequently sentenced to death by hanging.

its genius lay in uncovering the various meanings of jail that effectively turned every person into a prisoner of some sort: as a physical prison with walls, fences and iron gates; as a legal and penal institution that criminalised and incarcerated subaltern groups; as patriarchy and disparities of caste, class, religion, gender, region and language that restrained people and curtailed their freedom, opportunities and choices. Since prisons were not new, and imprisonment was likely life-long – more in some cases than others, like for women in patriarchal societies – the only way to counter it was by digging tunnels through the foundations of prisons, the song stressed; referring to the prisoner as ‘O Tiger,’ the song asked them to rise with a bellowing roar to announce the rebellion.

Sagar led with the song’s reprise, closing his eyes momentarily as the chorus repeated the lines, and then cast a quick glance at his peers behind him, to his right, perhaps to ask if it was going alright; they, in turn, nodded back in agreement.²⁴

या तुरुगांच्या गजा गजामध्ये कुठ एवढी ताकद र..
 रोखतील वळणार्या मुट्टी कुठ एवढी हिम्मत र..
 How powerless, these prison fences...
 So cowardly against (our) rebellious fists...

The lines seemingly referred to physical prisons, especially as they came after Sagar’s recollection of their imprisonment. In an interview published in *The Wire* in 2017, the activists stated that they were ‘assaulted by negativism’ when they went to jail and found it especially tough to accept the ‘complete control’ of the jail management over prisoners’ lives (Iqbal 2017). But imprisonment also provided them time to ponder over life and create new songs such as this one, uncovering the various meanings of prison. The first stanza held forth on some of these ideas. It said:

इतिहासाची पान बघा र रंगली आपल्या बंडान..
 बंडकऱ्यांना कैद करून जखडल साखळदंडान..
 बेड्या घातलय सैनिक,पोलीस,मिलीटरीच्या षढान..
 बंड दडपण्या तुरुंग बनवले क्रूर सत्तेच्या गुंडान
 या गुंडांच्या मनगटा मध्ये कुठ एवढी ताकद र..
 स्वातंत्र्याचा रोखील सूर्य कुठ एवढी हिम्मत र..
 Pages of history throughout, painted with our revolts

²⁴ The song is originally in Marathi, translated by Raturaj Sawant.

Revolutionaries jailed, clasped with chains and bolts
Shackled by military, police and their impish colts
Revolts suppressed by cruel powers, prison walls and delinquent lots
how powerless, these goons of impotent action.
Helpless, they cower against the rising sun of liberation.

The claim regarding pages of history being painted with ‘our’ revolts and subaltern revolutionaries being suppressed, fettered and imprisoned by the state was well-founded on several key counts. It derived primarily from the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, which was enacted by the colonial government in the wake of the 1857 revolt; the law designated as Criminal Tribes nearly 200 communities that were ‘largely concentrated in semi-arid zones, mainly in western, central and Deccan India,’ which ‘served as refuge zones to nomadic communities to escape from the caste Hindu society’ (Bhukya and Surepally 2021). Literary scholar and cultural activist GN Devy writes:

The persons belonging to these tribes had to spend their entire lives proving to the authorities without any specific reason that they were not criminals. Thus, life itself became a trial for them without any let up whatsoever. The communities ‘Notified’ under the Act acquired the form of some ‘social raw material’ for use in empire-building. The members of these communities came to be used in the colonial construction projects of railways and factories.

...The infamous CTA asked for forced ‘isolation’ and ‘reform’ of the communities listed... The CTA required creation of ‘settlements’ as reformatories with ‘strict procedures.’ These procedures kept becoming increasingly inhuman. Forced labour became the daily fate of the inmates. The CTA of 1871 went through several revisions, every revision bringing in new forms of ‘punishment’ for being born within the listed communities. The last of the CTA was passed in 1924. By then a total of 191 communities had been brought under its purview. (Devy 2013, 2)

The list of Criminal Tribes included Matangs, and many who were arrested and imprisoned were venerated as Robin Hood-esque characters within the community. Annabhau Sathe’s novel titled *Fakira*, based on the life of his maternal uncle with the same name, chronicled the valour

and exploits of such rebels; similar stories made up of part history and part myth circulate among the respective communities in the present period.

The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed by the postcolonial Indian state in 1952, and many of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs henceforth) were subsequently (1952-56) included among SCs and STs; quite a few were classified as OBCs, whereas many others did not find place in any of these categories. But their fate of being branded as born criminals and subjected to stigmatisation and dehumanisation continued via the Habitual Offenders Act, 1952, which allowed the police to identify, register and restrict individual habitual offenders with the consent of district magistrates (Tandon 1982). In 1998, Ganesh Devy along with acclaimed authors and activists Mahashweta Devi and Laxman Gaikwad formed the DNT-Rights Action Group, which moved the National Human Rights Commission and various Ministries of the Central Government to abolish the Act and to provide a rights protection mechanism for the DNTs. The NHRC subsequently recommended the repeal of the Act. In March 2007, the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination said, 'The so-called de-notified and nomadic people which are listed for their alleged 'criminal tendencies' under the former Criminal Tribes Act (1871), continue to be stigmatised under the Habitual Offenders...', and asked India to repeal the law and rehabilitate the DNTs (as cited in Sharma 2017). While the law was not repealed, Devy – the chairperson of the Technical Advisory Group on Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (2006) appointed by the Ministry of Social Justice – wrote that DNTs:

are getting rapidly pauperized and stand at the tail end of the human development index within the Indian context. The figures for their illiteracy, child mortality, food insecurity, indebtedness, non-profitable migration, non-access to credit, and to formal education and healthcare are uniformly higher than the overall national figures for these categories of disadvantage. (Devy 2007, 128)

Additionally, recent reportage by Sukanya Shantha provides damning indictment of how caste underlies the segregation and division of labour in the Indian carceral system, and how research and advocacy on the subject largely sidesteps the caste question.²⁵ Shantha writes:

Caste-based labour, in fact, is sanctioned in the prison manuals of many

25 The report cited here was produced by *The Wire* in partnership with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting under its series 'Barred—The Prisons Project'.

states. The colonial texts of the late 19th century have barely seen any amendments, and caste-based labour remains an untouched part of these manuals. While every state has its own unique prison manual, they are mostly based on The Prisons Act, 1894. These jail manuals mention every activity in detail – from the measurement of food and space per prisoner to punishments for the “disorderly ones”.

...Across states, prison manuals and rules stipulate the labour that needs to be carried out on a daily basis. The division of labour is roughly determined on the dichotomous ‘purity-impurity’ scale, with the higher castes handling only work that is considered “pure” and those lower in the caste grid being left to carry out the “impure” jobs.

...The National Crime Records Bureau data has consistently pointed to the over-representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs in Indian jails. However, barring a few anti-caste organisations, and individual lawyers like Alagumani (practicing at the Madurai bench of the Madras high court) and Raja (counsellor and founder of the Global Network for Equality, an NGO working with the children of prisoners), most rights groups have overlooked the caste realities of the carceral system in India. Research and advocacy campaigns largely focus on tangible violations. Violative practices like caste discrimination don’t make it to the discourse. (Shantha 2020)

Further, in recent years, especially after the BJP government assumed office in 2014, claims have been made that the state used the bogey of Naxalism/Maoism to proactively target Dalits and adivasis, in addition to the targeting and vilification of Muslims. A 2017 report in *The Wire* noted:

Jignesh Mevani, who led the Dalit movement in Una last year, puts it bluntly – if the state needs to target Dalits, it labels them as Naxals, and if it is Muslims then terrorists. Both of these abuses are prominent in the larger discourse of ‘anti-nationalism’. In past few years, anti-nationalism has become the most easily available and readymade discourse, evoked to counter any criticism directed towards the government.

...The worst sufferers of the Naxal discourse have been adivasis and Dalits, and organisations like the Kabir Kala Manch, who are not even remotely connected to Maoism, get booked by the police under such a planned targeting. (Siddiqui 2017)

Notwithstanding the claim of KKM being a 'Maoist front' advanced by the NIA and other state functionaries especially with regards to the Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case, a close scrutiny of the troupe's activities (as in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*) shows that it was targeted for opposing development projects by private corporations that were backed by the state in Maharashtra. Likewise, lawyers and activists in Maoist insurgency-hit areas in central, eastern and western India including Maharashtra said that those who resisted the handover of land and mineral resources to corporates were routinely framed as Maoists and charged under draconian laws and sections such as the UAPA and sedition.²⁶ A report by international human rights advocacy group Human Rights Watch points out that these laws are 'vaguely worded, overly broad, and prone to misuse, and have been repeatedly used for political purposes against critics at the national and state level' (Human Rights Watch 2016, 1).²⁷

In calling out the casteist nature of India's carceral system and drawing attention to the role of the state in crushing subaltern rebellion and criminalising entire communities, the first stanza of the song reaffirmed the humanity and agency of subaltern groups in myriad ways. But the next stanza went beyond the physical manifestation of prison and correlated it with social divisions, thus bringing the idea of imprisonment several steps closer to the audience and its everyday life. It said:

²⁶ Personal communication with activists in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal between 2013 and 2021.

²⁷ With regard to the two laws, the report states: 'Counterterrorism laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) have also been used to criminalize peaceful expression. In India, counterterrorism laws have been used disproportionately against religious minorities and marginalized groups such as Dalits.' (Human Rights Watch 2016, 7) Further: 'The sedition law, section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), is a colonial-era law that was once used against political leaders seeking independence from British rule. Unfortunately, it is still often used against dissenters, human rights activists, and those critical of the government.' (*ibid*, 1)

तुरुंग सदा उभे जातीधर्माचे वर्णाचे अन वर्गाचे
 प्रांतवादाचे भाषावादाचे पुरुष सत्तेच्या नरकाचे..
 तुरुंग आम्हाला नवा नाही र,नाही नवा कारावास
 जन्मठेपही नवी नाही र नाही नवा ह्यो गळफास..
 आर या फासाच्या दोरखंडात कूठ एवढी ताकद र
 बांधतील विद्रोही वादळ कुठं एवढी हिम्मत र..
 Prisons of yore, of caste, class and religion
 of regionalism, linguistic politics, patriarchy - an immemorial hell..
 Prisons are not new for us, neither is imprisonment
 Nothing new in life incarcerated, neither in gallows bell.
 how powerless! the strands of this noose
 unable to rein, the rebellious storm breaking loose..

Prison, in this stanza, was clearly equated with subalternity in its various manifestations – be it of caste, class, religion, region, language or patriarchy. Lest the audience think these prisons were all separate, Sagar broke off after the first two lines, and shared an anecdote showing how intersectionality characterised and compounded the experience of subalternity in real life.

Recalling his shift from the arid, backward Marathwada region of Maharashtra to Pune, the state's cultural capital, several years earlier and the taunts that he used to face for the manner in which he would speak, he said:

These people from Pune, Mumbai, they tell us to say anni, but we say ani.
 They make fun of us; on the basis of us not being able to speak their kind
 of Marathi, they deny us equal status, they deny us jobs. What do I tell you
 friend of why they do this...They create these prisons to contain us, to keep
 us in our place.

The reference to varied linguistic practices among different groups of people within Maharashtra and of the privileging of one form of the language—a Brahminical Marathi that emanated from the metropolitan centres of Mumbai and Pune—over other forms resonates with Gramsci's understanding of the role of language in hegemonic processes.

'The language that enjoys social currency will inadvertently promote its own conception of the world,' wrote Gramsci (2014, 324). True to his words, Brahmins – who played a major role in the standardisation of Marathi – sought to fix the letters in the alphabet and remove anomalies

in pronunciation beginning with the colonial period; this, in turn, was fiercely contested by subaltern groups (P. Deshpande 2016). The contestation over language has been apparent in contemporary Marathi literature too. For instance, Namdeo Dhasal's poetry in the 1970s—that came out of his lived experience as an untouchable resident in Kamatipura, Mumbai's red light district—shocked the Marathi literary world; its use of rough, abusive language and cuss words was considered an affront in most circles. In the foreword to his translations of Dhasal's poems, Dilip Chitre noted that the world Namdeo spoke of in his poems, its ideas and conceptions, were in so many ways unknown to speakers of the English language (Dhasal 2007).

Sagar's weighing in on the side of the uncultured 'ani' mid-way through the song re-affirmed the presence and vigour of such contestation, as did the lyrics of the song. Another example is the use of *turung* instead of *karagruh* to refer to the prison. While the latter originates in Sanskrit and is part of the standardised Marathi used in government and bureaucratic documents, *turung*, whose roots likely lie in Urdu, is more popular. That using *turung* instead of *karagruh* was a conscious choice was clearly evidenced in an early draft of the song written in jail, where Sagar wrote about these 'turung' in the lyric, but signed off with 'Taloja Madhyavarti Karagruh', the official name of the prison complex in Navi Mumbai where he and Ramesh were lodged, followed by the date.

Since 'prisons of yore, of caste, class and religion / of regionalism, linguicism, patriarchy – an immemorial hell' were not physical but social, the verses indicated that subalterns needed to discover solidarity and build alliances with other subaltern groups.

KKM activists' experience of imprisonment provided them with first-hand knowledge of how such solidarity could be discovered even among groups that seemed to have nothing in common. Noteworthy in this regard was the bonhomie between "political prisoners" (i.e., KKM activists) and the "bhai log" (i.e., imprisoned mafia and underworld dons) mentioned in the chapter *Interrogating the Collective*. which showed that there was some ground for solidarity between different groups affected by state power, even if the *bhai log* could not necessarily be equated with the KKM activists in terms of subaltern locations or the kind of activities that led them to be imprisoned. But it was perhaps taking a cue from these experiences that the verses foregrounded how different groups were 'imprisoned' within the same social space and how they could counter the 'noose' through a 'rebellious storm,' which implied they had to wait for an opportune moment and work alongside others to raise the storm.

On stage, Sagar continued:

या तुरुंगाच्या विध्वंसाची शाहिर लिहिल गाणी र
 गाण्यांच्या उर्जेन होईल पोलंदाच पाणी र
 गित पेटविल शाहीरांचे जनतेच्या हृदयी आग
 शाहीर गाईल स्वातंत्र्याचे गीत नवे बंधू जाग
 या दमनाच्या तप्त लोह्यात कुठं एवढी ताकद र
 वितळविल शहिदांची स्वप्ने कुठं एवढी हिम्मत र..
 The Shahir sings of demolishing these prisons,
 Fierce are his songs, melting even steely beams.
 Igniting hearts of people, the fiery Shahir sings,²⁸
 Rousing songs of freedom, arise my brothers.
 How frail the smouldering iron of oppressors
 In courageous defiance endures, the dreams of martyrs.

While Sagar and Ramesh were in prison, court hearings provided them with opportunities to meet fellow group members and supporters and pass on any songs, melodies and poems that they had written and composed in the preceding weeks, but only after much effort and planning. Having attended several hearings,²⁹ I was witness to how at least 6-7 armed guards who accompanied Sagar and Ramesh from the jail and back trailed them in the court premises, never letting them out of sight and always remaining within hearing distance, listening in on their conversations with fellow group mates and supporters. They scrutinised every newspaper, journal, book or magazine that friends and supporters brought for the jailed activists, withholding those that they found problematic. They also rarely allowed Sagar and Ramesh to pass on any paper or written document beyond letters to their families. Nevertheless, the duo managed somehow to pass on lyrics to members who were outside, who then set them to music, performed them before live audiences, and shared feedback about audience response in subsequent hearings.

The lines ‘fierce are his songs, melting even steely beams / igniting hearts of people, the fiery Shahir sings’ alluded to such instances, when the shahirs were able to send out their songs and poems to people outside and touch their hearts; they also recorded for posterity a transaction, a

²⁸ Alternative translation for the preceding three lines, also by Raturaj Sawant: ‘The Shahir writes of prison annihilation / Intense are his songs of alchemic exception / His songs igniting hearts of the proletarian.’

²⁹ I attended multiple hearings of KKM’s case at the Bombay City Civil and Sessions court between 2013 and 2017.

subversion of authoritarian state control, that was not found in news reports, documents or research studies.

The last stanza reminded the audience about the need to demolish these physical and metaphorical prisons. Evidently, this was not a task that could be accomplished by an individual; instead, it required the coordinated action of many prisoners who had to acquire consciousness of the ‘injustices all around’:

बंदिवान आर राजा उठ र कडकडून डरकाळी दे
या तुरुंगांना सुरंग लावण्या विद्रोहाची हाळी दे
चल उठ बंधू अन्यायाची करण्या आता गिणती रे
ढासळतील हे बुरुज धडाधड, कोसळतील ह्या भिती रे
या भितीच्या थडया थडया मधी कुठं एवढी ताकद र
रोखतील जाणतेचा रेटा कुठं एवढी हिम्मत र..
या तुरुंगाच्या गजा गजा मधी कुठं एवढी ताकद र
रोखतील जनतेचा रेटा कुठं एवढी हिम्मत र..
O prisoner O brother, rise with a bellowing roar
Announce the rebellion, of the prison demolition.
Arise O brother, Look, injustice all around
Towers shall crumble and walls collapse in shambles
Ramshackled, these derelict walls stand frail
How powerless! How frail! When masses burst through jail..
How powerless! How frail! When masses burst through jail..
When masses burst through the jail..

A key feature of the song was the lack of any vengeance directed at the enemies, i.e., the captors and controllers of myriad prisons; they were neither abused and called names, nor did the verses ask the audience to attack, maim or crush them. Instead, it equated prisons with hegemonic processes and imprisonment with subalternity, highlighting how nearly every person was confined within some or the other metaphorical jail.

Time and again, after every stanza, the reprise reaffirmed that prisons were man-made structures, whereas the rebels/rebellion were identified with forces of nature; they were referred to as ‘the rising sun of liberation,’ ‘the rebellious storm,’ as tigers who could issue ‘a bellowing roar’ and their songs emitted ‘oorja’ (energy) and ignited ‘fires’ in people’s hearts that melted iron bars

to 'water.'

The rapt attention of the audience and the loud applause that broke out as Sagar sang the last notes indicated that audience members were not agitated or troubled at being painted as prisoners, perhaps because through the song they discovered a solidarity with performers and other audience members, including those not present in person. Many of them also sang along when the chorus repeated the reprise, signalling in no uncertain terms that they were part of a spirited resistance.

ON CASTE

Two songs in the jalsa – *Kagadi Nota Sathi* (For currency notes) and *Bhima Sodun Ya Ghara* (Bhima leave home and come) – invoked the memory of historical struggles against Brahmanic hegemony led by Buddha, Ambedkar and others; critiqued the fractured nature of the Ambedkarite movement and the vacuous idolisation of Ambedkar; and pushed audience members to look beyond self-interest and caste boundaries and discover a larger subaltern solidarity. A common element running through both songs was the reference to all those who venerated Ambedkar as Babasaheb's children. The term was widely popular among subaltern counterpublics in Maharashtra,³⁰ especially Dalits, and my experience at the Chaityabhoomi in Mumbai on December 6, 2015 showed that even adolescents took great pride in calling themselves Babasaheb's children. While I was photographing a group of 12-16 year-old boys placing flowers at the feet of Ambedkar's statue, they asked me what I did for a living. 'I'm a journalist. I write for a newspaper.' I responded. 'Can we read what you write?,' one of them asked, the conversation unfolding in a smattering of Hindi and Marathi—more Hindi on my side, and more Marathi on their side. 'You can, but it is in English,' I said apologetically, assuming that they did not know the language. 'Toh kya? We are Babasaheb's children; we know English,' shot back one of them promptly, bringing out beaming smiles on both sides of the conversation.

KAGADI NOTA SATHI

On stage, Jyoti stepped forward as applause for *Ya Turungacha* petered out and Sagar joined the musicians seated at the back. She launched into a conversation with the audience straightaway,

³⁰ In recent years, Marathas, Vanjaris, Dhangars and other subaltern groups in Maharashtra have turned to Ambedkar to substantiate their claims of being 'backward' (*magas* in Marathi) and demand recognition as OBCs/ STs as well as reservation in jobs and education.

asking, “Tell me, what is the price of a vote here?”

Given my experience of election reporting in Nashik and other parts of Maharashtra, I knew that this was an odd question to ask, even though the practice of politicians offering money to poor voters in exchange for their vote was widespread (Gangan 2016; Press Trust of India 2019; Shaikh and Vaktania 2017; Times Now Digital 2019). Often, when I posed the question to strangers in informal conversations in *mandis*, marketplaces and *chai* shops, their response was guarded; most either denied accepting money to vote for a particular candidate or said it was not much. Only some people opened up about prevailing rates, but only after several minutes of conversation wherein they asked who I was, where I was from and why I was interested in the question.

Yet, the response to Jyoti's question was prompt – a couple of people at the back of the audience shouted out the answer. ‘What? Five thousand!’ she exclaimed, widening her eyes in disbelief and raising her left hand, all five fingers spread out, to ask if she had heard right.

‘What – five hundred?’ she asked again, in a more soft, sober tone as people from the back shouted out louder and recounted the figure three times, as is done in auctions, to confirm it. She said:

Are you sure this is the rate? 500 – 1, 500 – 2, 500 – 3. So then, the price of our votes is fixed at Rs 500. This is a very important matter. Babasaheb used to say that there should be economic, political and social equality in our country. To bring about political equality, Babasaheb gave everyone the right to vote. The rich and powerful can cast one vote and only one vote, as can the poorest. Whichever caste or religion, whether men or women, everyone has the right to cast one vote.

This political equality that Babasaheb gave, for that it was important to have economic and social equality. As the maker of the Constitution, he ensured that in this country, the utpanna of the biggest shrimant was not very different from the utpanna of the poor, because it could be fatal for democracy. But in our country, Ambani, Adani and other bhandwaldars – their utpanna per minute runs into lakhs, whereas people like us, we can't even make a lakh after working throughout our life. Isn't it true?

The economic equality that Babasaheb tried to give, that did not materi-

alise. Why not? Because we sold our votes. We did not just sell our votes – brother, sister, we also sold off Babasaheb’s ideas, Shivaji Maharaj’s ideas. Someone comes by, circulates false (khotya) ideas in their names, and rallies people with flags and sticks.

This is why what has happened is, reservation – okay, tell me honestly, OBCs who are present here – do you think that someone has stolen the reservation due to OBCs? Anyone? No one wants to speak openly about caste, but OBCs have captured Marathas reservation, Dalits have captured OBCs reservation, Dhangars have captured adivasis reservation, adivasis have captured Dhangars reservation – these are the ideas of our topmost, venerated leaders, and we hear these false ideas and hit the streets. On WhatsApp, in the media they issue statements affirming commitment to securing reservation. This drama plays out for months. They get elected, get the post of leader, and we are left where we are.

Our reservation – pay attention, let it enter your mendu [brain] and dokya [head] – our reservation has been privatised. I’m saying a very important thing here. This is privatisation of reservation, it must be called out.

And the person who was Babasaheb’s inspiration behind reservations, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, they just put up his photos and insert their own ideas in them – this is what is going on.

This is why we must not let the ideas of Babasaheb, Shivaji or any other mahamanav be sold off – not for mutton, not for liquor, not for money, not for anything else. This is what our next song presented by Shahir Vishal Bhalerao says.

Although Jyoti did not invoke Marx by name, the imprint of Marxist thought was clearly evidenced in her commentary. For instance, her references to price not being a determinant of value, and the widening class inequality in India reprised key concerns raised by Marxist parties and intellectuals in India and other parts of the world. Her reference to Ambedkar’s efforts to realise political, social and economic equality was a rarity in popular discourse about Ambedkar, whereas the idea of privatisation of reservation – of various subaltern groups thinking of reservation as their private property and speaking of others grabbing their share – was radical, and in

consonance with views advanced by Keshav Waghmare (2017) and others.³¹

Vishal, who stepped forward to present the song, was a relatively inexperienced performer. He began singing straightaway, but the initial lines were out of tune. His singing improved as the song proceeded but unlike Sagar, he did not break into commentary or conversation with the audience mid-song. Neither did he use his body to evoke and express theatricality. Instead, he sang standing stiffly in one place, his left arm held straight and his right arm moving in the air occasionally; at times, he tapped his right foot to keep rhythm, while the ghungroo was on the left foot!

The verses of *Kagadi Nota Sathi* elucidated what selling off Ambedkar and his ideas meant in the lives of Babasaheb's children. Addressed to Ambedkar, or Bhima as he is called in intimate circles, the song started off as a lament about how Bhima's children – standing in for the Ambedkarite counterpublic – sold him off for a small price, for liquor, mutton and appetisers. Vishal sang:

कागदी नोटांसाठी मटणाच्या बोट्यासाठी
 चकण्यासाठी दारूच्या घोटासाठी
 भीमा तुला विकलं बा पोरानीच तुज्या दारूच्या घोटासाठी
 For notes of paper, for pieces of mutton
 For appetisers, for a swig of liquor
 Bhima your sons sold you off for a swig of liquor.

Three subsequent stanzas of the song critiqued ordinary Dalits for selling their votes to the highest bidder during elections. They also castigated Dalit leaders for allying with ideological-political opponents to hold on to power and amass wealth. Opponents were mostly identified by their electoral symbols, with lotus signifying the BJP, clock signifying the NCP, palm signifying the Congress, and arrow signifying the Shiv Sena; the absence of Communist motifs such as the hammer and sickle in the list was explained by the insignificance of Left parties in electoral politics in the state by that time. Vishal sang the verses flatly, without any intonation or emphasis on key ideas:

³¹ Scholarship in this direction is rare; Keshav Waghmare's book titled *Khairlanji Te Rohit Dashkachi Aswasthata* (2017) is a recent publication that critiques the over-emphasis on reservation in the Ambedkarite movement.

भीमा तुज पोर आता तुज राहिलं नाय रं तुज राहिलं नाय रं!
 साथ सोडून धरतो वैर्या च पाय रं वैर्या च पाय रं
 जगतो स्वतः साठी खोट्या थाटामाटासाठी
 भीमा तुला विकलं बा पोरानीच तुज्या दारूच्या घोटासाठी
 Bhima your sons are no longer yours, no longer yours
 Leaving you, they hold the enemy's feet, the enemy's feet
 Live for themselves, for false pomp and show
 Bhima your sons sold you for a swig of liquor.
 भिमा तुज्या नावावर होतीया कमाई रं होतीया कमाई रं !२!
 पायदळी तुडवत्यात तुझी लोकशाही रं तुझी लोकशाही रं
 ठरतो मोल तुजा एका एका मतासाठी
 लागतो बाजार तुजा लिलावी करण्यासाठी
 भीमा तुला विकलं बा पोरानीच तुज्या दारूच्या घोटासाठी
 Bhima in your name there's money making, money making
 Trampled under the feet your democracy, your democracy
 Your value is decided for each vote
 Markets are set up to conduct your auction
 Bhima your sons sold you for a swig of liquor.
 भीमा तुज्या पोरानी सोडलीय लाज रं सोडलीय लाज रं !३!
 मानापानासाठी गहाण ठेवलाय समाज गहाण ठेवलाय समाज
 कधी कमळाच्या पाठी कधी घड्याळापाठी
 हाताच्या पंज्या पाठी कधी बाणाच्या पाठी
 कधी मनसेच्या पाठी
 रोज नव्या पक्ष्यांची हाती धरतोय काठी
 भीमा तुला विकलं बा पोरानीच तुज्या दारूच्या घोटासाठी
 Bhima your sons have cast aside shame, cast aside shame
 For false respectability, they have mortgaged the community, mortgaged
 the community
 Sometimes behind the lotus, sometimes on the side of clocks
 Sometimes the side of the palm, sometimes on the side of arrows
 Sometimes on the side of MNS

Everyday, they hold in their hand the banner of a new party
Bhima your sons sold you for a swig of liquor.

The verses corresponded strongly with the views of other radical activists in Maharashtra. For instance, in his interview with GroundXero, Sumedh Jadhav spoke about how Dalit politicians routinely betrayed the struggles that established them as leaders:

Every time our struggles have thrown up a key leader, those in power have done everything in their capacity to buy those leaders over. And unfortunately, too many times our leaders have fallen for such things and betrayed the movement.

If you look at Ramdas Athawale [incumbent minister for social justice in the Narendra Modi government] for instance, he started with organising our people on the Naamantar demand, he spent years living in hostels without anything, working full time for emancipation of our people. But once he got access to power, over the past 35 years of his career as a politician, he has amassed a property of 300 crore rupees. (GroundXero 2019)

Jadhav and other activists shared anecdotes indicating how various political parties competed with each other to offer money to Dalit voters during elections in Maharashtra and how the latter lapped up these offers rather easily. Much of the competitive bidding happened in public, they said, with leaders promising more kickbacks for votes and more freebies after they got elected in the presence of statues, busts and photographs of Ambedkar.³²

The following stanza mentioned Bhima's party being split into 'four' factions, with the number four designating euphemistically the fracture of the Republican Party of India established by Ambedkar in 1956 into numerous factions. It stressed that people's struggle would bring about change, and urged Bhima's children to fight for the sake of all 'labouring peoples,' including farmers, slum dwellers and women, thus expanding upon the Ambedkarite counter-public to include other subaltern groups. Vishal sang:

³² Housing rights activists in Mumbai associated with the *Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan* related several incidents showing practices like cash/liquor for votes were rampant in the city. Similar instances were also reported by activists from other parts of Maharashtra during my field visits to cover elections in the state between 2013 and 2017.

भीमा तुज्या पक्ष्यांचे झाले चार दल रं झाले चार दल रं !४!
 जण लढ्यातून घडेल बदल घडेल बदल
 लढा आमचा हक्कासाठी लढा आमचा न्यायासाठी
 लढा कष्टकऱ्यासाठी लढा शेतकऱ्यांसाठी
 झोपडीत राहण्याऱ्या त्या माझ्या भावा साठी
 राब राब राबणाऱ्या त्या माझ्या बहिणीसाठी
 Bhima of your party there are four factions hey, there are four factions hey
 People's struggle will bring change, will bring change
 Fight for our rights, fight for our justice
 Fight for labouring peoples, fight for farmers
 For our brothers living in the slums
 For our sisters working very hard.

In the last stanza of the song, Bhima's children spoke in one voice and vouched that they would neither sell off Ambedkar, nor allow him to be sold. Vishal tried speaking instead of singing the initial couplet – a feeble attempt at addressing the audience directly – till the chorus kicked in:

आणि आता बाबासाहेब आम्ही तुम्हाला विकणार नाही
 आणि विकूनही देणार नाही
 And now Babasaheb, we will not sell you
 Nor allow you to be sold.
 नाही विकणार रं नाही विकू देणार तुला
 नाही विकणार रं नाही विकू देणार तुला
 नाही विकणार रं नाही विकू देणार तुला
 Not sell hey, nor let you be sold
 Not sell hey, nor let you be sold
 Not sell hey, nor let you be sold

The audience did not seem to mind Vishal's lacklustre rendition of the song; instead, some of them joined in when the chorus sang and nearly all of them burst into a brief round of applause when the song ended, as if they were taking a vow to follow Ambedkar's example.

BHIMA

Sagar returned to lead the jalsa after Vishal's rendition of *Kagadi Nota Sathi* and shared an anecdote from two days earlier during Ambedkar Jayanti to show how those who prided themselves on being Ambedkarites merely venerated the great leader in name, but engaged little with his ideas in everyday life.

The anecdote featured a drunkard who was celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti, and who offered Sagar liquor when they met, right under Babasaheb's statue. This not only referenced widespread alcoholism among lower caste-class men,³³ but also exposed the negation of one of the vows enlisted by Ambedkar regarding abstaining from consumption of liquor.³⁴ The drunk spoke about ongoing efforts to construct memorials to BR Ambedkar, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Chhatrapati Shivaji. All three memorials were announced between 2013 and 2015 by BJP governments in Maharashtra and Gujarat, and their foundation stones were laid by Narendra Modi. Each featured a statue and other tourist attractions and facilities. At 182 metres in the Narmada valley in Gujarat, Sardar Patel's statue was billed as the 'world's tallest' ("The World's Tallest Statue of Unity" 2019). The height of Shivaji's statue proposed off the coast of the Arabian Sea was 212 metre, but this included an 88.8-metre pedestal, thereby putting the statue's actual height at around 123.2 metres (Waghmode 2021). Ambedkar's statue proposed in the Indu Mill compound in Mumbai was the smallest among the three – it measured around 137 metres, including a 30 metre pedestal (Adimulam 2021). Many Dalits in Maharashtra considered this an affront and leaders of various Ambedkarite parties demanded an increase in the height of Ambedkar's statue to address the injustice (Press Trust of India 2018).

As if tapping into this sentiment, Sagar recalled the drunkard asking KKM to launch an agitation because Babasaheb's statue was the smallest among the three. He spoke with a slur and enacted the drunkard – who stood in for the Ambedkarite community in many ways – in bits and parts, drawing peals of laughter from the audience, even as he rejected the latter's demand for a movement over the small size of Ambedkar's statute and stressed that the real need was to free Ambedkar and other icons or *mahamanavs* from statues. He said:

Day before yesterday was Jayanti, brother. On the statue, our people were
pouring Tango Punch, Phuga, desi, bidesi, and the colour of chakna...aha

³³ Personal communication with activists in Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur between 2013 and 2018.

³⁴ There were 22 vows, of which vow no. 17 stated: I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc. For a list of all the vows, see <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/22-vows-of-dr-ambedkar/>

ha ha ha ha ha. They were deriving heavenly pleasure from it.

One of them met me and said: “Brother, do you want some?”

“It is Baba’s Jayanti brother! The statue is behind us, looking at us.”

“Let him see,” he said, “So what? There’s no problem.”

In some time, the rest of our people came. They saw our clothes, and said, brother, we have seen you somewhere.

I said, whether you have seen us, that only you can say. How can I say if and where you saw us?

“Are you people from Kabir Kala Manch?”

I said, you recognised us correctly.

...After a while, he’d drunk some more and loosened up, he came and said, what work do you do? Take up some original work brother, original work...Like what, I asked.

“Do you know, the government of our country Bharat has taken up three important projects and is planning to begin construction soon.”

Suspending the enactment, Sagar threw questions at the audience asking who these three memorials were dedicated to. In every case, he received the correct answer from several audience members, and exclaimed:

Very good. This means that you do not use the paper merely for wrapping chapati, this is abundantly clear. Otherwise, we use the paper only to wrap chapatis – and what can we possibly do, since we have not learned how to read and write throughout our life.

This served to remind the audience that although they were literate and could read newspapers, many others in the community were still cut off from formal education. Meanwhile, Sagar switched back to enacting the drunkard, standing tall on his haunches and raising his hand or cowering down and lowering his hand to indicate the height of the statues of the three leaders. He said:

So these three memorials are being constructed, and do you know what, Patel’s height is sooooo much.

I said, very good.

He said, and Shivaji Maharaj’s height is a little smaller...say this high.

I said very good.

But our Babasaheb's height is only this much. Much smaller than the other two. Launch an agitation, will you, launch an agitation. Why only sing songs, he asked.

Then he suddenly went to take a piss. His pyjama's thread was undone and he was stinking of liquor from a distance. And he was telling us, agitate to increase the height of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue!

The question arose in our mind – who has in fact reduced the stature of Babasaheb Ambedkar?

These people who are waylaid, who only know Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar by name, but have forgotten his ideas. These people who take the name of Shivaji Maharaj... It is because of such people that the stature of mahamanavs has been reduced.

The audience's unguarded laughter on witnessing the antics of the drunkard celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti demonstrated that they related with Sagar's theatrical rendition. They also showed no rebuke when Sagar indicted them for reducing Babasaheb's stature. In fact, they broke out in even louder peals of laughter as Sagar made fun of typical Ambedkarite leaders and their attire, and dismissed them as show-offs. He said:

And the ones facilitating this are our leaders. We have seen many of them smartly dressed in suit and boot.. ahahaha, blue jacket, and on that a badge, showing a robust fort of Bhima, ahahaaa, blue head band, blue bag – what show-off!

We need to become anuyayis of Babasaheb Ambedkar; they have become bhaktas, and trapped him in statues.

Bhakta here denotes blind followers who do not question scriptural/religious authority; it is also used widely to refer to cadres of Hindutva organisations. *Anuyayi*, on the other hand, denotes a rational, critical human who engages with a set of ideas, relates them with existing circumstances, modifies bits that were out of sync, and adopts them as a guide for everyday praxis. The latter term/concept is popular in the Ambedkarite movement in Maharashtra. In Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011), the fiery orator and founding member of the Dalit Panthers Bhai Sangare is seen recollecting an oft-repeated story from Ambedkar's life before

a massive audience in Mumbai; the story featured Ambedkar telling a long parade of Dalits interested in denouncing Hinduism after him that he wanted them to be *anuyayis* and not *bhaktas*.

Sagar continued:

KKM is of the clear opinion that unless the mahamanavs are freed from statues, unless their ideas circulate and enter the mendu of our people through their dokya, change cannot come about in this country.

While in prison, this song was written in extremely disturbing conditions.

The words of this song, in truth, seek to reclaim our Bhima and bring him out from the statue.

Written by Sagar on March 2, 2014 when he was lodged in Taloja Jail in Navi Mumbai, the song followed a long line of entreaty poems in Marathi that were popular among various subaltern groups since the bhakti movement. The child in the song signified the Ambedkarite community, and different stanzas recounted past instances of its resistance against caste exploitation and/or delineated the ways in which its members upheld Brahmanical, capitalist values and principles in their everyday life; a reprise at the end of every stanza urged Bhima to come to the aid of the waylaid child.

On stage, Sagar's eyes welled up as he let out a prolonged, heart-rending cry – Bhimaaa, with musicians following his lead as he launched into the song. The first stanza invoked the deep entwinement of caste ideology with bodily practices and psychological dispensations. Specifically, it referred to the 'wound of caste on our forehead' that was infected and bleeding; the cuffs of caste and slavery that imposed boundaries in the world; and the 'stony walls of caste raised on our chest,' and stressed that Bhima had provided the power to fight against this injustice, which his child had forgotten.

Subsequent stanzas critiqued 'bhim bhaktas' for overstating/imitating Ambedkar's external attributes, confining him in statues and honorary titles, and turning him into a god.

They designated the social life of Dalits – such as gatherings during jayantis, annual pilgrimages to Chaityabhumi, Nagpur and other places, and the proliferation of images and statues of Ambedkar in neighbourhoods and important public spaces – as a 'market of bhim bhaktas' where Babasaheb was depicted in 'sahebi (foreign) suit-boot' in busts and photographs; where 'gharbhedya' (turncoat) political leaders, divided into factions and parties, competed with each other to install his statues and honour him as the 'maker of the Constitution' and 'leader of Dalits.'

Such an understanding of Dalit life and of the importance of the market in it, though at odds with dominant trends in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra, was well-founded. Anand Teltumbde (2010; 2017), Gail Omvedt (2006) and Keshav Waghware (2017), among others, draw attention to the development of a Dalit middle class by the 1980s that whole-heartedly supported the neoliberal-Hindutva project while claiming to uphold Ambedkar's ideals. At the same time, the emergence of numerous new/social media channels on dalit-bahujan issues in recent years and the status of *Sairat* – a Marathi film featuring an inter-caste relationship between a Dalit boy and a Maratha girl that released in theatres in 2016 – as the 'highest-grossing Marathi film' (Sutar 2016) attest to the presence of a sizeable market for Ambedkarite/anti-caste discourse.

Understandably, verses in the song contended that references to Ambedkar as 'maker of the Constitution' and 'leader of Dalits' reduced him to mere emblems that were contrary to his practice. For instance, such emblems disregarded the presence of several non-Dalits among Ambedkar's close collaborators³⁵ and overlooked the fact that his second wife Savita was a Brahmin. They also overlooked or ignored his engagement with Marxism and Buddhism and his efforts to realise an alternative morality rooted in materialism, rationality and fraternity through the Constitution.³⁶

The Hinduisation of Dalits also came in for searing critique in the song via a play on words with multiple meanings, which conveyed that the commodification and deification of Ambedkar and other countercultural icons like Buddha went hand in hand. Bhima was 'trapped' in 'putla' (statues) and 'murti' (idols); he was 'seated...among gods' in the 'sanctum;' and gatherings in his name were called 'jattras,' a term used to refer to secular mobilisations such as rallies and demonstrations as well as religious fairs celebrating gods and goddesses. This corresponded with the idolatory treatment accorded to Ambedkar by a majority of Dalits, who installed his busts and photographs in public spaces and in their homes, among a multitude of other gods and goddesses.

Similarly, Buddha, who 'rejected god, rebirth and soul' and 'opposed idol worship' – all central tenets of Brahmanism – was 'confined' in idols and vihars were 'converted into temples,' steeped in 'ritualism.' This corresponded with the co-option of Buddha within Hinduism as an avatar of Vishnu; although the RSS and its affiliates have emphasised this most vociferously in

³⁵ KB Khairmode's biography of BR Ambedkar provides much insight on this.

³⁶ *Ambedkar's Preamble* (Rathore 2020) draws out key features of constitutional morality as evidenced in the Preamble to the Constitution of India. Upendra Baxi has also written and lectured extensively about constitutional morality.

recent decades, both the claim and the strategy of using incarnations to broaden and deepen hegemony is much older. ‘The doctrine of incarnation...provided Brahmanism with an extremely useful device for establishing its cultural hegemony,’ noted Suvira Jaiswal in *The Making of Brahmanic Hegemony*. She wrote:

The clearly stated purpose of an incarnation is to uphold the Brahmanical view of socio-political and moral values...The doctrine provided a potent tool for the capacious accommodation of numerous aboriginal, local cults and legends within the mainstream Brahmanical culture through processes of acculturation, retaining, modifying or expanding them in accordance with the Brahmanical norm. (Jaiswal 2016, 137)

Jaiswal’s insights explain the convergences between Hinduism and mainstream Buddhism and the rejection in the latter of those who converted to the religion following Ambedkar’s lead. Inveighing against these practices that were ‘revolting to the body’ and caused ‘deep gashes in the kaleja (intestine),’ Sagar broke off mid-song to remind the audience that Buddha vihars were supposed to be nerve-centres of the Ambedkarite movement. He said:

In our vihars, the way in which pompous show-off is the trend now, that is a turning away from Babasaheb Ambedkar’s ideas, isn’t it friends?

We are playing songs there. Of Sairat...Zing Zing Zingat!³⁷ Our children are going hungry and our farmer brothers are dying, there are no jobs in the market We are divided into Matang, Mahar etc. What kind of dirty politics is this happening in our vihars?

These vihars must be centers of the Ambedkarite movement. Place books on the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar there; Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, Shivaji Maharaj, Annabhau Sathe, place their books in vihars.

These vihars must be nerve centres of the movement, but here, it is the opposite.

Subsequent verses of the song urged Bhima to ‘take us to the home of Buddha, from where the stream of equality flows,’ which reprised Ambedkar’s characterisation of Indian History as a conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism (Ambedkar 2014c) and his efforts to draw out from Buddhism a philosophical and moral counter to Brahmanic hegemony. They recounted

³⁷ The song was part of the Marathi film *Sairat* directed by Nagraj Manjule.

him advancing ‘navyan’ – meaning a new vehicle, as well as Buddhism as re-interpreted by Ambedkar – and administering ‘vows of materialism’ as the basis of embodied behaviour to ‘break the chains of caste,’ and contrasted these with the moral turpitude of contemporary Dalit leaders who lacked in principles (*tattva*), dedication (*nishtha*), sacrifice (*tyaag*) and positive precepts (*shilta*), making reason (*vivek*) extinct.

Although referred to in their negation, these terms invoked the alternative morality enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of India. The Preamble, wrote Rathore (2020) ‘trumpets our collective aspirations as a republic; indeed, it articulates the principles that precondition the possibility for our unity as a nation’ (xvi), delineating how ‘justice’ referred to the removal of social, political and economic inequalities (28); ‘liberty’ included Dalit liberation as opposed to swaraj or freedom, concepts that were widely used in the national movement in which the exclusion of untouchables was ‘almost universal’ (55); equality was a ‘distillation’ of crucial concerns of ‘forefront critics’ of caste and gender inequalities in India across time such as Basaveshwara, Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram, Guru Nanak, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, Iyothee Thass and Ambedkar himself (59); fraternity was rooted in the concept of *metta* or ‘loving kindness’ (75) that meant ‘affection for everyone, hatred for none’ (146).

The song rebuked contemporary Dalit leaders for driving a wedge in the movement, fissuring it into ‘1700 factions and parties,’ indulging in the ‘game’ of equating ‘Ganpati with the elephant’ and bringing together ‘Shiv and bhimshakti,’ as seen in alliances between dominant caste parties like Shiv Sena and various Ambedkarite parties. Such leaders and Bhima’s followers who were ‘sitting silent at home’ had turned core principles to dust, the verses stressed, even as Sagar broke off mid-song once again to relate the lines more closely with the lived experience of audience members. Critiquing the way leaders pandered to their specific jatis/communities and functioned as power brokers for parties representing dominant caste interests, he said:

This division into Mang, Mahar, Chambhar is what lies behind the sorry state of Dalit politics in the country today. Babasaheb made such great sacrifices and achieved so much, but those following his footsteps in electoral politics—the Athawles, Kambles, Kawades—they keep swaying towards whoever is in power, all the while fattening their pockets.

Sagar’s scathing words for the Athawles, Kambles and Kawades – easily recognisable as leaders of various factions of the RPI that were in alliance with BJP, Congress, Shiv Sena and other es-

tablished parties – and his enactment of their servility through bodily gestures drew instant, boisterous applause from the audience, showing that they were in agreement with the interlocutors on stage and quite adept at being reflexive and laughing at themselves.

The second last stanza of the song referred to caste exploitation as ‘cruel’ and ‘heartless,’ and recounted how Dalits, especially Dalit women, were subjected to ‘naked parade’ and stripped of modesty; their homes were burnt, hands broken and ‘gutter water’ forced down their throat. Discussions in the section titled *Barriers to ‘being heard’* show that these references corresponded strongly with prevailing conditions across Maharashtra, where caste atrocities and caste-based riots and violence were common; in fact, given the attack on neo-Buddhists and homes by rampaging Maratha mobs in Nashik district a few months earlier, the verses almost certainly struck an eerie chord with the audience reminding them of their precarity and demonstrating why Bhima needed to protect the community.

The last stanza stressed that the ‘public is tired of this fakery,’ urged Bhima to ‘remind’ the waylaid child about the prolonged and ongoing struggle to ‘annihilate caste,’ and to awaken the child with a pat on the back, egging him to ‘set alight the embers of war’ and to take ahead the ‘chariot of equality.’ The long-drawn applause that broke out as the song ended indicated the audience was fully in agreement, and open to further criticism.

ON BRAHMANICAL PATRIARCHY

Returning as compere, Jyoti mounted a no holds-barred attack on the RSS and its affiliates while introducing the next song titled *Hazaron Salon Se* (For thousands of years). She focussed first on how RSS used religion as an instrument of social and political control, contrasting the exuberance of political leaders, especially from the BJP in religious issues such as the construction of a Ram temple or beef-eating with their silence and insensitivity in matters that affected the subaltern caste-classes like farmer suicide and drought.

Secondly and more importantly, she posited that gender hierarchy and control over women’s independence was a core aspect of caste society and that the ‘Hindu Rashtra’ (Hindu nation) and the struggle for gender equality was an inherent part of the annihilation of caste. Jyoti said:

There’s a BJP aamdar [MLA] – what does he say? We will construct the Ram mandir, and whoever comes in the way, we will behead them. Lakhs of farmers are committing suicide, but when farmers die, they don’t issue a

statement, they don't even say a sentence.

They issue statement after statement on the ram mandir, but don't say a word on farmer suicide. Tell me – what is more important, ram mandir or farmer suicide? What is more important brother? It is farmer suicide which is important, right? Only when people are there will there be a need for temples. And they want to kill people to construct a temple!

We are not interested in targeting any religion. But our stand is clear: no political leader and no minister should mislead our naïve, gullible people in the name of god and religion and use them. Our naïve, gullible people believe in god, believe in Ram, believe in Vitthal. And they, exploit our faith and use it, and tell us for constructing the Ram mandir, behead so and so. We need to beware of them.

In our community (samaj), for hundreds of years, there's the practice of eating cow meat. Earlier, everyone including Brahmins used to consume cow meat.³⁸ But these people are doing politics over it now – if someone eats cow's meat, then they will meet Akhlaq's fate, they say, their heads will be severed.³⁹ So Muslims and Dalits are being targeted and killed.

It is RSS which is behind all this. BJP is only the political wing, it is an off-spring of the RSS. They all help the RSS, and RSS controls everything, and wants to set up a Hindu Rashtra. What does Hindu Rashtra mean?

When women became widows, they had to become Sati... Babasaheb and Shivaji Maharaj, they changed all this, and took us ahead, now we are headed backward. They say women should not speak in a loud voice. How women should talk, how women should dress, how they should move... These people are deciding all that!

All the work that Babasaheb did, Shivaji, Phule and other mahamanavs did for thousands of years to annihilate caste and bring gender equality, these leaders and ministers want to undo all of that, especially those from the BJP and RSS. The ways in which this caste system oppresses, Shahir Rupali

³⁸ DN Jha (2002) provides a detailed picture of beef eating in ancient India in *The Myth of the Holy Cow*.

³⁹ The first notable incident of mob lynching over possession of beef during the Modi era was the murder of Md. Akhlaq in Dadri, UP. For more details, see Iyer (2021).

Jadhav will talk about that.

Uma Chakravarti's work on Brahmanical patriarchy in early India shows that there is a strong basis to considering gender emancipation as fundamental to caste annihilation. Chakravarty (1993) writes:

...a preliminary analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy in early India reveals that the structure of social relations which shaped gender was reproduced by achieving the compliance of women...through a combination of consent and coercion.

Chakravarti notes that the consent part was worked out through the formulation of *streedharma* or *pativrata dharma* in a number of Brahmanical texts written by men including Manu, where women were instructed to be obedient, chaste and faithful to their husbands in return for which they would be venerated; whereas in situations where the ideological control over women was unsuccessful,

...law and customs, as prescribed by the brahmanical social code, were evoked to keep women firmly under the control of the patriarchal kinship network. The right to control a woman's total existence, especially regulating her impulses vested firmly in the male members of her family, first in her natal household and then in her conjugal household.

Chakravarti cites several Brahmanical texts as well as Jataka tales from early India to show that special responsibility of guarding women was laid upon the husband who was represented as most vulnerable to the loss of his progeny through the infidelity of women, whereas the father-in-law was also tasked with keeping the daughter-in-law in check. The authority of the male kinsmen was further backed by the potential right to use coercion and physical chastisement of women who violated the norms established for them. Women, along with lower-caste men, were also kept away from material wealth and resources.

Sharmila Rege's (2016) analysis of the middle class public sphere in India during the colonial period lends further credence to the view that struggle for gender emancipation was an inherent part of caste annihilation. She notes that the privileged castes who constituted the middle class public sphere fashioned a 'fractured modernity' that 'joined new principles of individualism with endogamy, and varnashrama dharma with notions of universal division of labour' (24). Manuals on domesticity and childbearing in early twentieth-century Maharashtra detailed the tasks and

modes for the new middle class women. This had ‘a significant impact on the restructuring of the “personal,” especially the invention of the model of companionate marriage’ (26), and concealed the complicity of privileged caste women in the persistence of class privilege and Brahmanical patriarchy. She refers to the proceedings of the Multilingual Brahmin Mega Convention in Pune in 2009 wherein a code of conduct was published, spelling out a dress code for women and stressing on their duties to the family and the community, thus showing that control over women remained a central feature of Hindu discourse.

Rege also draws attention to the presence of strong contestation to graded/Brahmanical patriarchy in the Ambedkarite counterpublic in Maharashtra, which corroborates Jyoti’s reference to the efforts of Ambedkar and other anti-caste icons towards realising gender equality. As opposed to companionate marriage where the relationship between the husband and the wife was private and separate from the political:

In the musical compositions on the life of Ambedkar and Ramabai, companionship transcends the realm of the private. It suggests that community, the household, and the political realm are inseparable. (36)

Further,

In their assumed capacity as dutiful daughters of Babasaheb, Dalit feminists have sustained a long-term defiance of Brahmanical feminisms and patriarchal ideologies and practices of anticaste politics. In doing so, they have traced different histories and futures of feminism and anticaste politics in India. (56)

Hazaron Saalon Se, the song that followed, built on these ‘histories and futures of feminism and anticaste politics.’ Written in Hindi by Deepak Dhengle during KKM’s early years, it placed the exploitation and oppression of women squarely within the caste system, and stressed that their liberation involved struggles against external structures and entities as well as their own thoughts and actions.

HAZARON SALON SE

Like Vishal, Rupali was a rookie performer, and did not break off mid-song to contextualise the verses or relate anecdotes. Yet, the audience – including men who were in majority – listened attentively as she sang, referring to caste ideology as ‘cuffs of enslavement’ and ‘fetters’ that called

women ‘animals’ and ‘shoes,’ considered them ‘the lowest among the low,’ ‘plundered’ them in bed, and threw them into ‘hell’ for thousands of years. Urging them to strike a ‘heavy blow’ and break the cuffs and fetters, she sang:

For thousands of years
Cuffs of enslavement
Are crying out
Need a blow
Break them break them
The fetters of caste
Time now demands
A heavy blow.

Animals, women were called
And thrown in hell
Lowest of low by caste
Were called shoes for the feet
Power of varnas
Have plundered on the bed
Get up, o woman
Strike a blow.

Divided into different castes
You won’t be able to unite friends
All slaves for free
You won’t be able to fight friends
Manu’s ponytail
Old sacred threads
Cut off and throw them
Strike a blow.

The verses resonated strongly with the positions of BR Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, among others. Phule pointed out in *Gulamgiri* that women were considered lower and more im-

pure than sudras in Brahmanical scriptures, and classified as *panchamas* alongside ati-sudras or untouchable castes. Ambedkar contended in *Castes in India* and other writings that control over women's bodies and sexuality was central to the perpetuation of the caste system. The reference to women as 'muft ke gulam' (slaves who worked for free) also reprised key concerns raised by the feminist movement regarding unpaid domestic labour and the invisibilisation of women's work. An article published on the Feminism in India portal in May 2017 noted:

The gender inequality of the patriarchal Indian society is not only a social issue but an economic reality as well. India has one of the largest gender pay gaps in the world, with women earning approximately 25% less than men as of 2016. Women are systematically marginalised unless they prove their worth in male-dominated fields of work. In addition to this, women also carry the burden of additional work, which receives neither respect nor remuneration. (Javalgekar 2017)

Yet, in foregrounding the 'sameness of patriarchy' and stressing that women's liberation was only possible through annihilation of caste, the song also militated against dominant practices in the Ambedkarite counterpublic in Maharashtra.

For instance, women had little representation in the leadership of Ambedkarite parties and organisations; such entities too rarely adopted programmes or positions to counter Brahmanical patriarchy. Additionally, male activists and leaders who were aware about Ambedkar's views on gender sought to keep their wives and daughters away from public life. 'That is why our leaders and activists in the Ambedkarite movement say: "*Stree mukti asawi, pan majhi baiko nasawi!*" (Women's liberation is required, but not for my wife!),' KKM and other kalapathaks often told audiences. However, non-Dalit feminist groups rarely voiced concern about caste or protested against instances of sexual violence against lower caste women, which were seen as caste atrocities as opposed to sexual atrocities.

The call in the song to cut off 'Manu's shendi' and 'old sacred threads' – both physical attributes distinguishing Brahmin men from others – mounted a no holds barred attack on Brahmanical patriarchy and explained why the song harped on the sameness of patriarchy and made only a passing mention of caste divisions among women.

Subsequent lines recounted how Buddhists, Warkaris and other religious groups countered Brahmanical patriarchy in philosophical terms only to be co-opted subsequently. Rupali sang

flatly, not moving about much or gesturing with her arms, eyes or body, showing that she was still learning the ropes of leading a jalsa:

Whoever has clashed with casteism
Has been defeated, dear
Philosophies of religions crumbled
Turned to dust, all
Very deep roots
The disease is old
Cut off infected parts
Strike a blow.

With new weapons, friends
New philosophy for help
Cast out from heart, mind and society
The pot of caste
Clash with feudal lords
With goons of caste
At pandas⁴⁰ of religion
Strike a blow!

The song urged women to unite and ‘clash’ with those whose power and authority was legitimised by caste ideology, including feudal lords who treated lower caste women as their property and ‘pandas’ or Brahmin priests who controlled entry into temples. It also urged them to ‘throw out from heart, mind and society / the pot of caste,’ attesting that the struggle against oppression was both internal and external, against authorities who imposed Brahmanical gender codes as well as women’s own thoughts, aspirations and practices that ascribed to such codes.

ON THE CAPITAL-RELIGION-POLITICS NEXUS

HORA

While children were rarely seen in proscenium theatres in the cities in Maharashtra, in shahiri

⁴⁰ Brahmin priests who control access to temples/sanctums.

jalsas, a large group of children in the audience was a regular feature. Their presence often posed a challenge for performers; kids had a tendency to run around, play with each other and have a good time, and their cacophony would often interrupt performances and dialogue between performers and the audience.⁴¹ Given these circumstances, kalapathaks often chose to include acts or songs that engaged children, and *Hora*, a play written by Vilas Ghogre of Avahan Natya Manch in the 1980s, was among their favourites. And so it was in Varkheda, where about 50 children seated under the summer night sky were watching the KKM jalsa.

In the version written by Vilas, *Hora* (Ghogre 2015, 72-75) revolved around an encounter between a *hora/bhavishya wala* or fortune-teller who signified a coming together of the forces of religion, politics and the market, and a *songadya* or clown commonly seen in traditional tamashas (Ghogre 2015, 72-75). The format of the play was episodic, with each episode split in two. The first part of every episode featured the *songadya* asking the *bhavishya wala* if their aspiration of having a good education, job, house, etc. would come true and the latter replying in the affirmative, setting off a spell of celebratory song and dance. This alluded to the widespread practice of people consulting astrologers/godmen⁴² and their so-called ability to predict and/or alter the 'fate' of clients owing to their 'supernatural' powers. In the second part, the fortune-teller disrupted the song and dance, and provided a fresh prediction based on the material and social circumstances of his interlocutors, exposing their belief in fate and godmen/fortune-tellers as irrational, and demonstrating how they were complicit in their own subjugation. In later years, coinciding with the decline of traditional tamashas, kalapathaks that enacted *Hora* replaced the *songadya* with a group of adolescents/youngsters; many troupes also updated the script, imbuing it with their own understanding and mannerisms, adding or dropping scenes and dialogues as they saw fit.

In Varkheda, the play started with one of the youngsters (played by Ramesh) coming across

⁴¹ After a performance of the Samata Kala Manch in Nashik in 2016 when kids kept running around, requiring the performers to admonish them on several occasions, its founding member and old KKM member Ramdas said, "This is why at times, we ask the organisers to seat the children behind the adults, so they can indulge themselves without distracting others."

⁴² In 2013, Maharashtra enacted the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, based on a draft bill prepared by the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS), a rationalist organisation working for decades to bust superstitions. MANS also carried out campaigns in rural Maharashtra to weed out superstitions and expose godmen (Times News Network 2002). Despite this, instances of godmen defrauding naïve clients, including into human sacrifice, have continued in the state (Changoiwala 2017; 2018).

the fortune-teller (played by Sagar). The youngster asked if the latter would throw light on what lay in store for him in the future. When he agreed, the youngster offered his left hand. The *bhavishya wala* sniffed from a distance, and made a face. ‘Have you washed your hand, is it smelling?’, he asked, referencing the normative practice of using the left hand to clean up after defecation and setting off a peal of laughter in the audience.

‘With Patanjali soap’, the youngster replied promptly! The effusive smile and nod of the *bhavishya wala*, also addressed as *baba* (a term commonly used to denote religious heads/ authorities), signalled that he approved of the choice.

The bit about Patanjali soap was introduced by KKM a few years prior to the show in Varkheda; earlier, the *baba* would only ask if the youngster had washed his hand, and the latter would reply in the affirmative. The reference helped accentuate the connections between religion, politics and the market. The founder and brand ambassador of Patanjali Ayurved, which manufactures soaps and other fast moving consumer goods under its brand name, was Baba Ramdev, who is said to be close to the BJP/RSS (Karat 2016); he also backed Narendra Modi’s candidature as Prime Minister in the run-up to the 2014 polls (Bhagwat 2013). Piggybacking on Ramdev’s popularity as a yoga guru and the claim of being ‘swadeshi’ (Sen 2016), Patanjali became a household name across India in the decade spanning its founding in 2006. In January 2017, a report by industry body ASSOCHAM noted:

Patanjali Ayurved has turned out to be the most disruptive force in the Indian FMCG market...it witnessed a whopping annual growth of 146 per cent in fiscal year 2016 grossing a turnover of USD 769 million, whereas its peers including ITC, Dabur, Hindustan Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive and Procter & Gamble struggled to get a growth much less than double digit.
(Quoted in Press Trust of India 2017)

On stage, the youngster and the *bhavishya wala* did a quick jig—crooning and shaking a leg for Patanjali—before the former interrupted the proceedings: ‘Could he call his friends over for the future-telling session, since they too would be interested?’ Once the *bhavishya wala* said yes, he called out to his friends who then arrived in a horde, almost descending on the fortune-teller. Scared out of his wits, he fell flat on the ground and writhed in pain. Sagar’s antics, as the *baba*, drew peals of laughter from the audience.

After recovering from the fall, the *baba* asked the youngster if he owned any property, or if

he had connections with top business groups like Tata, Birla, Adani and Ambani. Once he figured that the client was poor and had nothing much to give him, his body language underwent a change. He was no longer so interested in telling their future. But the youngsters were adamant, so he relented.

In song and dance mode, he said that the slums where his interlocutors lived would soon be a thing of the past, and that big buildings would take their place; the place would be neat and clean; the buildings would gleam with fresh paint; and there would be a separate toilet and taps in every flat! The youngsters jumped about and danced as they sang in celebration, excitement writ large on their faces. Suddenly, they stopped, and one of them asked: ‘Would they really get all this—an apartment with a separate tap and toilet?’

A world without dedicated taps and toilets was something that the performers and the audience knew all too well. Most KKM activists lived in the slums in Pune, where queues and fights over shared toilets and limited water supply were everyday affairs.⁴³ Government data shows that in 2017, less than 50 percent rural households in Maharashtra had piped water connections,⁴⁴ and the proportion of rural households that had separate toilets with septic tanks and flushes was a notch above 30 percent;⁴⁵ in both instances, coverage was positively linked with the economic status of households. Additionally, according to the 2011 census, Maharashtra was the third most urbanised state in India, with an urban population of 45.23 percent (Pawar 2011), and multi-storied apartments were common in most small towns and district headquarters. Nashik, located barely 30 km from Varkheda, was also the third largest city in the state and home to relatives and acquaintances of the villagers. The reference to an apartment with a separate tap and toilet thus tapped into a minute detail in the aspirational landscape of the audience in Varkheda. The important question, though, was whether it could really be theirs.

When the youngsters posed this question, the chastened fortune-teller responded: ‘No no, it's not like that.’ ‘You will be evicted, and rendered homeless,’ he said, breaking out in song,

⁴³ Anecdotes of slum dwellers in Mumbai and Pune.

⁴⁴ According to a press release issued by the Press Information Bureau (Ministry of Jal Shakti 2021), on August 15, 2019, only 48.43 lakh (34.02%) of rural households in Maharashtra had tap water supply. Figures from the 2011 census quoted in a press release from the Ministry of Drinking Water & Sanitation (2013) pegged piped water coverage among rural households in Maharashtra at 50.2 percent.

⁴⁵ Toilet coverage data was cited in a report available on the website of the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Planning Department, Government of Maharashtra. https://mahades.maharashtra.gov.in/files/publication/unicef_rpt/chap7.pdf

and referencing routine slum demolitions in big cities; all the youngsters on stage joined in chorus, repeating a couple of times – while dancing in unison – that they would be evicted and rendered homeless.

The baba then led them into another dream for the future: that of advancement through education. There would be new schools, swanky new engineering and medical colleges at the block level offering free education; every village school would have a teacher, and the children—they would all grow up to earn high-sounding degrees and fat pay checks; they would be smart and English-savvy.

The youngsters got led on by the baba's utopic dream: 'Really, would they earn fat degrees, speak polished English and get jobs at the drop of a hat?'

Again, the enactment tapped into and spoke to existing realities and the aspirations of the audience. Education was largely seen as an exit route out of poverty, and spoken English coaching classes and computer training institutes proliferated in slums and low income neighbourhoods in cities like Mumbai, Pune and Nashik as well as in small towns and block headquarters.⁴⁶ All of this formed the backdrop of the education sequence in *Hora*. The antics of the KKM actors on stage, hilariously intoning how their children might speak fluent English after being educated, induced peals of laughter.

'But would they really be able to live this dream,' asked the youngsters.

The baba's bluff was called again. 'No no. It isn't like that,' he responded, like in the earlier episode; breaking into song, he said that their degrees would remain on paper, the kids would 'keep bumbling along.' The chorus repeated the couplets a few times as the audience clapped along.

The baba went on to see other futures for his pauper clients from there on—profits in agriculture, especially from cash crops and the export industry; swanky new factories and cushy new jobs; equality for all irrespective of caste, class, gender.

In each case, his bluff was called: their crops would keep rotting; in factories, the owners would grow richer while workers starved and went hungry; in the wider society, caste would persist, and Dalits' homes would be identified and burnt down; even the realm of electoral politics offered no hope, as those who would come to power would only look after their own interests.

⁴⁶ Field observations during news reportage between 2013 and 2017.

‘What was to be done in such a situation?’ the youngsters on stage pondered. The chastened fortune-teller offered a response: ‘We, the labouring people (*kashtakari*), must come together and probe and expose the scams and irregularities of the rich. We must fight for our share of the pie. That’s the only way this fake democracy will go, and a new democracy of human liberation will take its place,’ he said, with the youngsters repeating the lines in chorus several times, helped on with claps and whistles from the audience.

Although the play exposed their susceptibility to irrational beliefs, such as in godmen, the members of the audience did not seem to mind and seemed more than happy to laugh at themselves!

FLAG AND LINE

Despite drawing substantively on Marxist thought, KKM rarely invoked Marx/Marxism directly during jalsas involving lower caste audiences. This was because Ambedkarite organisations and activists typically represented Marx as an outsider, as ‘*bahar ka baap*’ (father from outside), and any reference by KKM to Marxism would result in similar accusations, said troupe members. They also said that Ambedkarite leaders often pointed to uptight, upper caste leaders of the organised Left and said that those influenced by Marxism would end up being like them. ‘Unke jaisa ban jayega Marx pada toh’ (You will become like them if you read Marx), KKM activists often heard in their early years.

Since the jalsa in Varkheda took the common sense of the Ambedkarite counterpublic as the point of departure, performers did not mention Marx by name. Instead, they smuggled in references to Marx(ism) by other means. Towards the end of the jalsa, Sagar pointed at the squarish flag that he and every other performer carried; half of it was blue, and the other half was red. To the audience, he contextualised the colours of the flag and what they represented thus:

This flag in our hands is not just for show. It is a necessary part of the struggle to annihilate our enemies. There are two colours in the flag—red and blue. Blue is the symbol (*prateek*) of Babasaheb’s struggles and ideals. And the red—the red is the symbol of the blood that martyrs have shed in this intense political struggle. For Comrade Annabhau Sathe, this red was representative of the struggle for equality. Annabhau was a Communist, but people are not willing to accept that today.

These two strands – represented by the red and blue – need to come together. Only when these two strands of history come together can there be a real struggle for change in this country. Only then will democracy and equality come to be!

Stressing that the time and place for ‘real struggle’ was now and here, Sagar finished off with a few verses from *Kaal Challa Pudhe* (Time is Marching Ahead), which was followed by a massive round of applause from the audience, whose size was nearly the same as at the start of the programme. Moreover, although it was nearly midnight, many of them stayed on for another half an hour or so, exchanging pleasantries with and talking to KKM activists.

Over dinner later that night at Ketan’s house as well as the next morning, he and his fellow comrades discussed with KKM the prospect of conducting cultural training workshops and raising a similar troupe in their area, and agreed to continue conversations about the same in the near future. A couple of years later, KKM activists were rearrested and put behind bars by the National Investigating Agency, in a fresh case alleging that they were part of a conspiracy to overthrow the Narendra Modi government.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion shows that leading voices of cultural resistance in India such as KKM contend with innumerable barriers and hurdles erected by the neoliberalised, Hindu-ised Indian state that come in the way of their ‘being heard’ in wider society. The barriers are of two kinds: extreme, coercive measures directed against dissident activists such as 24x7 online and offline surveillance and prolonged incarceration; and softer, more benign efforts directed at muzzling their freedom of expression, such as refusal of police permissions for programmes and harassment and intimidation of organisers. Additionally, the impact of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies on the embodied culture of subaltern caste-classes including the presence of deep-rooted caste divisions pose a third important barrier.

Massive as they are, the example of KKM’s jalsa in Varkheda shows that the barriers were overcome with close collaboration between troupe members, organisers and the audience. It is apparent that performance straddled both stages of Gramsci’s schema to bring an end to subalternity. The ‘first stage’ in the struggle, notes Zene (2013), comprises ‘the progressive acquisition

of awareness of one's historical identity', which includes discovering 'every trace of autonomous initiative' in the history of subaltern social groups; the second stage involves finding allies and overcoming barriers that prevent subalterns being 'audible and visible in state and civil society' (16). In accordance with this schema, the jalsa focussed on recovering those 'traces' of the fragmented and episodic history of subaltern groups that pointed towards their self-awareness and realisation as a counterhegemonic community. It invoked resistance to Brahmanical patriarchy and graded inequality including in struggles initiated by Buddha, bhakti poets like Tukaram, and anti-caste icons like Jyotirao Phule; it also referenced communist icons such as Annabhau Sathe and struggles against class exploitation to show how intersectionality contributes to subalternity.

Shahirs from KKM led the 'task of thinking' collectively through songs, acts, commentary and dialogue, which pushed the audience's understanding on the operation of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies including in their own embodied practices. Seasoned performers excelled at dismantling the distinction between them and the audience, and between the enactment on stage and the latter's embodied behaviour and expressions, while a chorus after every stanza in songs allowed the audience to sing along. It appeared as if the performers and the audience was living out an alternate reality, where they resisted hegemonic ideas, structures and practices together, in practice, here and now.

Further, all participants were bound by a 'solidarity of the shaken' whose material basis was their bodies and whose ideological basis was the shared experience of domination and exploitation – the 'understanding what life and death are all about...and so what history is about,' in Patočka's words. Although comprised predominantly of lower caste groups in this specific instance, at a discursive level, the solidarity encompassed various subaltern social groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and OBCs that were negatively impacted by state policy and decisions, and especially threatened under the successive BJP regimes. Resonating with Patočka's ideal of 'care for the soul' that included the phenomenon of 'loving those who hate us', the solidarity was defined by a moral-ethical core rooted in egalitarianism and *metta* or 'loving kindness' that meant 'affection for everyone, hatred for none'; in this, it was also analogous to Ambedkar's ideas.

In summary, the discussion in the chapter shows that the jalsa accomplished the realisation of a critical, collective consciousness encompassing the performers *and* the audience in the course

of the three hours that it went on for. While not caring apparently about the spiritual, it facilitated subaltern auto-critique by depicting scenarios of oppression and resistance, which struck at the very bases of Brahmanic-capitalist hegemony. It also provided urgent reminders of the challenges to their emancipation, including their own attitudes and behaviours, and fused together strands from Marx(ism) and Ambedkar(ism) to elaborate a ‘political model conducive to human freedom for a historically situated humanity’ (Zene 2016, 543). As a performance event, thus, the jalsa rendered spirituality immanent and transformative even as it spiritualised politics, seeding a distinctive counter-hegemonic public.

Questions that arise inevitable from this discussion – about the existence of such public(s) beyond the performance event, and about whether one or a few performances are enough to produce lasting social change – are addressed in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The entry point for this thesis was the coercive action that cultural troupes in Maharashtra have increasingly faced and the question that this raises about the work that they do. Drawing on trends in cultural resistance in India, four sets of conceptual questions were outlined in the introductory chapter pertaining to the nature of the shahir's work; the role and scope of artistic collectives; the process of art production; and the meanings and potential of performance. The thesis draws on concepts from the work of Diana Taylor, Walter Benjamin, Nancy Fraser and Sumangala Damodaran (among others) as well as scholarship on the political philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and BR Ambedkar in order to answer these questions.

The three prominent voices of cultural resistance in Maharashtra that have been analysed in the thesis – Annabhau Sathe, Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch – cover nearly a century, but display significant continuities vis-à-vis the insights that emerge from their work. At the same time, there is also indication of the limits of the impact of cultural resistance, especially in recent times. In what follows, first the summaries of the four core chapters are used to bring out the key insights that have emerged about cultural resistance in Maharashtra and how this has resulted in the formation of counterpublics. The chapter then outlines the various developments that may have contributed to the shrinkage of the counterpublic, but concludes on a more hopeful note about the role of cultural resistance in current conditions.

KEY INSIGHTS ABOUT CULTURAL RESISTANCE

The chapter titled *Interpreting a Shahir* examines the predominant position of shahirs in the scene of cultural resistance in Maharashtra via a close scrutiny of Annabhau Sathe's life and work. It shows that shahirs are organic intellectuals in the Gramscian mould who reinterpret traditions and emancipatory ideologies to fashion a philosophy of praxis 'keyed to human emancipation and equality' (Rao 2020a, 45) in their time and place. Akin to the medieval Warkari sant kavis but without any reference to religion/god, shahirs stress on realising the unity of theory and practice and intersubjectivity in their everyday life and through their songs, poems, plays and other artistic work, which renders them permanent persuaders of sorts in circles of Marxist and Ambedkarite politics. Even then, the reach and popularity of their work clearly transgress ideological boundaries, and they appear as exemplary constructors of subaltern resistance who foster group/class consciousness.

The intellectual nature of the work of cultural activists and artistic collectives – the manner

in which they draw on different kinds of knowledges and different traditions of resistance to address the concerns of their times – is evident in the subsequent three chapters too, which deal with Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch. However, these chapters are primarily used to address the remaining three sets of questions, which cannot be addressed in the case of Anabhau Sathe given the lack of availability of the required data.

The chapter titled *Interrogating the Collective* examines the role and scope of artistic collectives in cultural resistance via the examples of Avahan Natya Manch and Kabir Kala Manch. It shows that when collectives are not rule-bound or limited in terms of expression or form, they occasion the materialisation of a microcosmic counter-hegemonic community premised on radical egalitarianism and fraternity, where members work together acknowledging and enhancing each other's skills, strengths and differences and mature into fine artists. The collectives' views on art, Indian culture and resistance bring out how they view ideologies as 'mental frameworks' and remain acutely alert to the evolving mechanisms and operations of Brahmanic and capitalist ideologies, including as neoliberal Hindutva. Their thrust is on re-creating the terrain of ideas 'on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc' (Gramsci 1929-1935; 2009, 377), so as to advance struggles against dominance and exploitation; this, in turn, is facilitated by the diverse backgrounds and life experiences that activists bring to the group.

The chapter titled *Collective Art Production*, which elaborates on the process followed by Avahan and KKM to create new songs and plays, shows that both troupes underplayed individual talent and produced new work *collectively*, which unleashed immense creativity and resulted in songs and plays whose popularity and appeal exceeded their time and space. Their process of art production had important organising functions too – it bypassed specialisations as more experienced members took on a number of roles such as composing and writing songs, scripting street plays, acting and so on, whereas new members were systematically trained in theatre, music, writing and performance and often ended up rethinking their ideas of art, literature and quality. At times, the audience was also involved in the creative process in significant ways, such as by suggesting the subject/theme for a play or song, or helping to stage a performance in defiance of prohibitory orders. The cultural capital that sustained and enlivened the artistic productions of these troupes came primarily from subaltern caste activists, including from castes like Aradhi, Murali and Matang whose traditional occupation in the Brahmanic social order comprised performance, and communities like adivasis that had rich traditions of communitarian performance.

This indicated that the caste system, from which subalternity accrues in substantive ways in the Indian subcontinent, could also provide weapons for counter-hegemonic struggles.

The chapter titled *Performance, Spirituality and the Solidarity of the Shaken*, which examines the predominant role of performance in cultural resistance via a close reading of KKM's jalsa, shows that the live three-hour performance accomplished the realisation of a critical, collective consciousness encompassing the performers *and* the audience during its duration. Further, this happened in spite of the various barriers to performances of cultural resistance that had been put in place by the state. Shahirs from KKM led the 'task of thinking' collectively (an eminently spiritual enterprise following Gramsci and Ambedkar) through songs, acts, commentary and dialogue. They depicted scenarios of oppression and resistance from the lives of the subaltern caste-class audience, often involving them as active collaborators, and stressed on the intertwinement of struggles against caste, class and gender hierarchy and exploitation. The solidarity that strung together participants of the jalsa resembled Patočka's notion of 'the solidarity of the shaken'; it was defined by a moral-ethical core rooted in egalitarianism and *metta* or loving kindness that meant affection for everyone and hatred for none.

It is possible that some of these insights (and their actual working) may vary if the current research is extended to a study of cultural resistance in other parts of Maharashtra as well as in other states, where there might be different 'traditions' of resistance and different dynamics and histories of mobilisation in terms of caste and class. But at least from the discussion and findings in these chapters on Annabhau Sathe, Avahan and KKM, it appears that cultural resistance constitutes and, in turn, also creates a counterpublic whose ideas and practices differ sharply from the official middle class public sphere as well as from the Ambedkarite counterpublic. Shahirs and kalapathaks seem to play a preeminent role in forging this counterpublic comprised of various subaltern caste-classes, whereas their efforts to combine strands from Marx(ism) and Ambedkar(ism) in order to elaborate a 'political model conducive to human freedom' (Zene 2016, 543) in the here and now provide the public its contrarian, radical character.

However, the size of this counterpublic appears to have shrunk considerably since the early twentieth century. While this is something that would require further study, a brief comparison of the three voices of cultural resistance in different periods (given below) indicates that this is a real concern. The possible changes in the larger society that may have led to this are also outlined below.

SHRINKING COUNTERPUBLIC ?

Annabhau Sathe's efforts as a shahir in the throes of the Samyukta Maharashtra movement (1930s-1960) bear witness to a time when ideas of resistance seeded the Marathi public sphere. Annabhau sought to bring together a cross-section of Marathi society including workers, peasants, various other subaltern castes and communities, students and the middle class through his songs, plays and performances; he sought to conscientise them about their histories of resistance against exploitation and invasion, and the need for joint commitment to caste annihilation and class emancipation. The abiding popularity of his work attests that some elements of cultural resistance from the period have stayed on, even if this is sometimes just as culture — without the resistance — as when songs like *Majhi Maina* are included in commercial films.

In contrast, Avahan's reach and popularity was noticeably lesser, and its activities coincided with a time when TV and other mass media significantly boosted the Hindutva-isation of Indian society. The troupe was closely aligned with various emancipatory mass movements through the 1980s and early 1990s, and its work was highly sought after in these circles. But its impact on wider society, especially among sections not engaged in agitation, appeared limited. This seems in large measure due to lack of access to mass media / distribution channels as well as resources to create products matching industry standards; whereas the popularity of *Sun Meri Amina Didi* – a copy of Vilas' *Sun Meri Fatima Didi* – indicates that counterpublic ideas could and did resonate with apolitical audiences.

The reach and popularity of KKM was even more limited. Like Avahan, the troupe was closely aligned with various emancipatory movements, and its work was highly sought after in these circles. But the geographic and demographic spread of these movements was far lesser than in earlier decades. Additionally, although KKM performed widely among students and slum dwellers in Pune during its initial years, its implication in legal cases from 2011 onwards significantly reduced its reach and access in wider society.

This shrinkage in the size of the counterpublic needs to be contextualised against three important developments. The first development pertains to changes in the nature of the Indian state. This can broadly be characterised in terms of a transition from the Nehruvian welfare state to the pro-market neoliberalised state sometime in the early 1990s. While there are many changes in the political economy and the socio-cultural domains that one can attribute to this, one important change is that the Nehruvian welfare state was (mostly) secular and non-interfering in

the religious domain as against the pro-market neoliberalised state that openly advocated Hindutva ideology. Recent years have also seen a massive increase in surveillance, propaganda and reprisals by sections of the state apparatus. The changes in the nature of the state have not been discussed in the thesis, nor has the idea of the 'state' itself been unpacked. But it is apparent that Hindutva ideology and increased state surveillance have posed innumerable challenges to those engaged in cultural resistance.

The second development pertains to the divergent yet similar trajectories of caste and class politics in the country. Notwithstanding the immanence of caste-class relations and the relative bonhomie between Marxist and Ambedkarite camps till the 1950s, the two groups have moved farther away from each other in recent decades; for instance, caste rarely features in discourses of Left parties today and class meets a similar fate in Ambedkarite parties. Moreover, each camp has splintered into numerous small fragments, many of which don't see eye to eye with each other. All this indicates that spaces where people from different social locations and backgrounds can meet and work together towards social change are severely limited, if not absent, barring in the domain of cultural resistance.

Additionally, Left parties that played a crucial role in setting up and running pan-India cultural organisations such as the IPTA (1930s-1950s) and the AILRC (late 1970s-1990s) have considerably weakened in recent years, leading to a vacuum in terms of opportunities where cultural activists and troupes from various states and regions could meet and exchange their ideas and artistic productions. It is also noteworthy that today, when major Left parties like the CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML) Liberation are undertaking joint campaigns in various parts of the country, no substantial effort is seen towards developing a joint cultural platform that can advance ideas of democracy, egalitarianism and fraternity to counter the politics of Hindutva.

The third development pertains to the inadequacy of responses from the domain of cultural resistance to the two preceding developments. Shahirs and kalapathaks in the present period seem deeply aware of this, whereas Sambhaji Bhagat draws attention to tensions within progressive movements that hinder cultural activists from experimenting with new technologies of audience engagement such as social media, that could help counter some of the new obstacles and result in a more widespread dissemination and impact of their work. In an interview with me in 2017, he spoke of his efforts to launch a YouTube channel named *The War Beats* that would follow a well-planned outreach strategy, and the opposition that it engendered from fellow activists

who were part of progressive movements:

In the earlier century, we could not study and write, and people understood that education could improve our lot. But no Brahmin was willing to take us in school, because...reading and writing was the technology of that time. Internet, social media strategy is the new technology. I understand that.

The technology is in my hand, but I don't understand it. The person who does, he may be a friend, but how much time can he give. He may be committed, but what can he do alone? If he is not a friend, his service has to be purchased, and for how much? If I purchase for Re 1, they will purchase for Rs 1 lakh. This unequal fight pains me.

...I, as a person of the movement, if I have to get into business, people from the movement turn against me...After I came out with War Beats...and I put in whatever money I got into this effort, people from the movement have been targeting me. On the one side are right-wing Ambedkarites who call me a Naxalite, and on the other side are people who call themselves Naxalites, who call me a bourgeoisie Ambedkarite.¹

Sambhaji's comments also raise larger questions about dissemination, circulation and reception that have not been addressed in this thesis but which require more in-depth consideration. Can wider circulation take place without a certain amount of commodification and commercialisation? Can new technologies be developed and used outside of these logics (as alternative initiatives in software and movements in support of open access and copyleft would seem to indicate)?

Further, how does one think of reception beyond the immediate reactions of an audience in the course of a performance? Can existing networks of resistance – encompassing a wide variety of actors such as social, political and cultural organisations, NGOs, participants of mass movements dispersed across the country, social media influencers – be utilised better to extend the reach and scope of cultural resistance? This question is important because it is the persistent changes that take place in ways of thinking and acting within people (who have attended such

¹ Interview conducted in Navi Mumbai on July 1, 2017, originally in Hindi with a smattering of English; translation is mine.

performances) and in their interactions with others, that would constitute ‘resistance’ along with the ‘resistance’ of the cultural activists and artistic collectives themselves.

Here it is also important to keep in mind that people are subject to a variety of influences (through social media, in their places of work and employment, in everyday bureaucratic practices, and so on) and the influence of any performance may be strengthened and reenforced or weakened and countered by way of these other channels. Hence the long-term impact of cultural performance may also be affected by the kind of control that state and private entities exercise in various domains of life, ranging from the syllabi of schools and colleges and the language used in government documents to the (stereotypical) representation of particular groups in films and the manner in which festivals are celebrated. This also then leads to the question of whether cultural resistance alone is enough to bring about the kind of change desired, without more institutionalised efforts being undertaken in a variety of spaces and on a larger scale. It is not possible to engage with this question in any depth here, but some brief reflections follow on the working of cultural resistance, which can perhaps at least feed into the beginnings of an answer.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Consider again the meaning of cultural resistance discussed in the introductory chapter and in particular, some of the points made by Stephen Duncombe about how it taps into existing discontent, counters the dominant culture and seeks (or should seek) to create an alternative (that is, the ‘resistance for what’ question) (Bettel and Zobl 2013; Duncombe 2012). Strangely enough, this may help us understand the manner in which proponents of Hindutva such as the RSS have successfully used a variety of popular cultural forms since the early twentieth century to resist the secular, welfarist foundations of the Indian nation-state.

The RSS’ co-option of bhakti traditions across the subcontinent during the colonial period stands out as a prominent example of cultural resistance that furthered the Hindutva agenda. Discussions in the thesis provide some glimpses of how this development impacted not only the interpretation of bhakti literature and the suppression of verses that questioned Brahmanic religion, but also the circulation of bhakti songs and poems through the music and film industries in the current period. Epic poems such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the Gita that comprises a small part of the latter, were also used by Hindutva proponents to advance a masculinist, Hindu majoritarian idea of the nation-state, especially since the mid-twentieth cen-

ture. The mass media – including TV, radio and print media in earlier decades, and social media in recent years – have played a key role in this process; not surprisingly, it has functioned as the primary tool of Hindutva propaganda since 2014.

It is possible that these interventions contributed to the emergence of Hindutva as the new ‘common sense’ among very diverse groups of people.² What is important to highlight here is that whether it is bhakti or other traditional performative forms, ‘culture’ has been an important part of reshaping subjectivities and behaviour; but the ‘resistance’ that culture engenders is neither always benign nor necessarily liberatory. At the same time, the preceding discussion once again underscores the power and transformative potential of cultural resistance, which has been an underlying theme of the thesis. How best to harness this potential and create a growing public which can counter the new common sense of Hindutva and neoliberalism as well as re-think older hierarchies and divisions of caste, class, gender, religion, etc., is the difficult question.

Some preliminary answers may be gleaned from the workings of Relaa, a national-level collective comprised of cultural troupes and individuals from a wide variety of fields that emerged in 2014-15 through a series of meetings and conversations in several states.³ A resistance-themed arts festival named *Horata* (meaning struggle in Kannada), that was organised by the NGO Maraa in Bengaluru in 2014 and was attended by a diverse range of activists and troupes from different parts of the country, served as the starting point for discussions about the need for a broad cultural platform that could unite and amplify dispersed voices of resistance. This foregrounded the role that NGOs with access to funds to organise such gatherings and host participants could play in providing spaces for collaboration and solidarity at a time when such spaces are markedly absent otherwise. But, subsequent events, provided important caveats regarding the involvement of NGOs and middle class activists (akin to the artist-organiser that caused a furore in IPTA circles) in such collectives and in the domain of cultural resistance more generally.

Early proponents of Relaa who organised follow-up meetings after *Horata* included Maraa members alongside cultural activists like Sambhaji Bhagat, Vira Sathidar (both from Maharashtra), Kaladas Deheriya (Chhattisgarh), Shankar Mahanand (Odisha), and Kamaan Singh Dhami (Bengaluru). Over the next year or so, meetings spread over 3-4 days were held in Bangalore, Pune, and Bhilai involving activists and troupes from surrounding regions. The name Relaa – meaning

² A similar argument would also apply to the spread of neoliberal ideologies.

³ My association with Relaa began with the meeting in Pune in 2016, and I was closely involved in coordinating a 3-day-long residential workshop in Navi Mumbai in June 2017.

a jubilant mobilisation or a fair in dialects of Chhattisgarhi – was adopted by consensus at the meeting held in Pune in June 2015, and efforts were made to chalk out a calendar of cultural resistance for 2016, and plan activities and performance tours accordingly. While KKM's association with Relaa began with the 2015 meeting, and performances were held in Delhi, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Kerala among other places in subsequent months, questions were raised by several constituents (present and prospective) about Maraa's stewardship of the collective and the lack of ideological clarity and consensus. Following Relaa's Delhi tour in mid-2016, an alternative theatre troupe accused Maraa members of being rude towards fellow artists, and pulled out of the collective via email alleging it was 'foisted from above' by Maraa instead of being 'incubated from below'. Maraa members, in turn stated they were involved in Relaa as individuals, and that while they 'set off on this journey with a set of questions, searching for ways and paths, forms and content', Relaa was 'not a network that has figured out all the answers'; they also largely withdrew from the collective⁴.

Steered subsequently by a core committee of seasoned cultural activists from several states, Relaa's network grew significantly over the next year and a half, and meetings and performances were organised at the district-level in several states. In an interview published in *The Wire* during this time, core committee member Kaladas indicated that Relaa was more about resistance for equality than anything else. He said:

Look, I am an Adivasi who talks about jal, jungle, zameen (water, forests and land). Yalgaar [Mumbai-based troupe and Relaa constituent] talks about caste oppression and the Indian Folk Band [Bengaluru-based troupe]...does the same but through their drums. In contrast, Shankar Mahanand, a musician and theatre person from Odisha, talks about the same jal, jungle, zameen, but in Odia. What do we have in common? The answer is, everything. We might speak different languages, but we are united through the experience of oppression and the hunger for equality.

(quoted in Sharma 2016)

A 3-day long residential workshop – comprising Relaa constituents from Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Odisha, and Delhi – that was organised in Navi Mumbai in June 2017 stands out as a prominent example of what a collective owned and run by seasoned

⁴ Personal Communication with concerned Relaa members

cultural activists and troupes can achieve despite a coercive, vindictive state apparatus, immense paucity of economic resources and constant surveillance. Pre-lunch sessions on all three days were comprised of sessions on key ideas about cultural resistance, acting, and audio-visual documentation and production using mobile phones, each conducted by upper caste, middle class participants like myself. Though these sessions generated much discussion, they also exposed the inadequate understanding of conductors vis-à-vis the context of cultural activists/troupes and the inability to make ideas and practices they were unfamiliar with intelligible to them. In contrast, post-lunch sessions that had no designated conductor and were focussed on developing new performatic productions were effervescent – they elicited enthusiastic participation of all participants who seemed not to care about authorship or credit, and innovatively deployed a variety of popular musical and performative genres such as qawwali, powada, kirtan, shloka recitation, rock and pop to produce ten new songs in just three days, notwithstanding the constant presence of two under-cover intelligence officials on the premises! These songs comprised the mainstay of Relaa's performances over the next few months and were widely shared on social media till the arrests under the Bhima Koregaon conspiracy case (including of KKM activists) majorly interrupted the activities of the collective.

What lessons does Relaa hold for amplifying and broadening cultural resistance *for* human emancipation and equality in the here and now, under a stridently authoritarian, fascist regime? Firstly, funded NGOs that are often critiqued as beneficiaries and proponents of neoliberalism could open up new possibilities for expansive cultural resistance. Secondly, its stewardship must wrest with those whose lived experience encompasses oppression, and who are deeply knowledgeable about popular forms, traditions, myths and embodied practices. Thirdly, entities in civil and political society that have hitherto focussed on instrumental use of culture must learn from exemplary practitioners of cultural resistance such as shahirs. They must grasp the importance of cultural resistance as distinct from, but entwined with political resistance and institute mechanisms, processes and spaces conducive to its development.

Only then perhaps a broad-based counter may emerge to the neoliberal Hindutva common sense.

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