Words as performance: Anti-caste articulations in the lyrics of Bhakti songs, contemporary Dalit music and Matua verses

Abstract

Group performances have historically been an act through which the marginalized gather and show resistance through the use and consumption of words. Kirtans and bhajans as group performances became a medium of verbal protest and social reformation between the thirteenth and sixteenth century during the Bhakti Movement in India. Performative elements like chanting in vernacular became an accessible form of devotion, through which people from marginalized groups claimed space and the right to demonstrate their culture and religious practice in Maharashtra, Bengal and some parts of South India. The Dalit musical scene in the twenty-first century too uses language to its strength, addressing issues of discrimination and other forms of the discontents of modernity. Words have been at the center of anti-caste movements.

This paper uses theories from V. Geetha and Judith Butler to show that language itself can be counterspeech and an act of performance. When a Dalit musical group or singer renders a song against caste oppression, the words, whether through repetition or claiming a new narrative, becomes an act of resistance. The paper assesses the use of language and words during the Bhakti movement and contemporary Dalit music. It makes inferences on how contemporary music, linked to the Bhakti movement, uses language as counter speech, strengthens Dalit identity and resists caste structures, proving to write a composite narrative against Hindutva Pop. Similarly, it also looks at the performative traditions of the Matua community in Bengal, whose kirtans combine devotional aesthetics with words of resistance. The paper traces how regional Dalit movements across India have historically used words to challenge caste, class, and gender-based marginalization. The study reveals that language among anti-caste performers is not just descriptive but constitutive of new social realities and acts of resistance, and has led to an active strife against caste during different periods of time.

Keywords: Dalit music, Bhakti movement, Matua verses, counterspeech, songs, performance, anti-caste resistance

Introduction

Kirtans are a means for people to come together and create an act of song through vernacular language as a collective group, a form of assembly that Butler (2015, 155) says has demanded social change historically. The sight of people gathering with purpose in a public space is already a symbolic image of protest. The performance that follows, by means of body language or artistic expression then makes it clear that the song or act is against an authoritative structure and reveals its political and social function. The lyrics of the songs then bring the final consequence of gathering, the purpose is made clear, and when repeated in numbers, this becomes an act of reclaiming power. Early forms of counter speech occurred through kirtans that used didactic storytelling along with protest and devotional elements. This paper reads certain verses by the Dalit community in Maharashtra, Bengal, and South India and traces it to anti-caste encoding in the Bhakti period.

As Bhakti became performative, through kirtans, bhajans, and other collective musical forms, it became a mode of protest, where language and public performances became acts of resistance. In Bengal, the Matua community's singing and community festivals served as public markers of Dalit identity. They became tools of caste resistance and formed images of collective empowerment through devotional musical performance. It is through the words they used and the theatrical components of their protest that language emerges as performative resistance. This paper connects different traditions and movements by analyzing the lyrics and performativity of the words. The verses and songs will be viewed through the lens of counterspeech, which means that the language, songs, and expression will be assessed as encoded messages of protest and resistance. Since caste remains a powerful medium of separation in modern India in addition to class and gender, this paper views how words are used to challenge its dominating effect that is has maintained through cultural and institutional stronghold. While Dalit marginalization has been repeatedly studied as a political and economic issue, the social study of Dalit life, culture and practices has recently gained scholarly attention. Recently the iterative work done by Paik (2022) situating *tamasha* as a performative act of Dalit resistance have been particularly formative for this essay. Amidst these social explorations of Dalit life, there has been a relatively curious silence regarding the power and prevalence of Dalit music. This paper aims to fill this gap by offering an insight into the power of songs as a tool of anti-caste rhetoric by studying music's ability to subvert the logic of caste by rerouting sanctity through the power of its language and voice.

Bhakti voice of resistance and reimagination

The songs sung during the Bhakti period were meant for oral transmission and collective recitation and challenged structural violence. The Bhakti poets were innovative in their expressions and also reimagined spaces and the use of words and their meanings. New voices, acts and performances gave life to the Bhakti Movement in different regions of South India. The devotional expressions of the Alvars and Nayanars were some of the first voices that emerged, however, this movement experienced a period of decline toward the end of the 10th century. With the advent of the Delhi Sultanate from the thirteenth to fifteenth century, again there emerged several socio-religious anti-caste movements in North and East India as well as Maharashtra. This phase is often interpreted as a revival and ideological extension of the earlier South Indian Bhakti traditions.

The Bhakti movement during the Sultanate period cannot be examined in isolation from its earlier antecedents. Texts such as the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* and the teaching of pre-Sultanate saints like Rāmānanda directly influenced the movement. The *Bhagavata Purāṇa* asserted that bhakti was hierarchically superior to both *karma* (ritual action) and *jnana* (knowledge). The word 'bhakti' came to receive new significance, one that was full of hope and liberation. The superiority of reverence, love, devotion, and the internalization of religion resonated with Bhaktas as the most direct way to attain *moksha* (liberation) compared to complex Brahminical rituals that repeatedly isolated them. The *Bhagavata Purāṇa* also laid out nine primary forms of devotion (navadhā bhakti) through which a devotee can deepen their relationship with God. This theological emphasis on personal devotion became a source of validation for vernacular expressions of faith, surpassing caste boundaries and allowing the marginalized to claim spiritual and social legitimacy. People who experienced the power of a new form of devotion that could unite people and challenge existing social ills and oppressive norms began to convene and form groups symbolic of assemblies.

Saint Ravidas and his emphasis on community and protest

Ravidas was a renowned saint of the Bhakti period, whose work flourished during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Born in the North Indian city of Varanasi, Ravidas came from a family of leather tanners, placing them among the lowest strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy who were traditionally regarded as untouchable. His preachings with messages of community and egalitarian living make him a figure of veneration amongst his devotees most of whom come from the Dalit community. The image of the group, of the community is a strong one, because it showed autonomy in gathering. Believers from Sikh and Hindu communities also came

together to revere him as a saint, in addition to those who claim to be followers of a new religious path which he started, although their evolution as a community is a of a more recent making. This sect focuses on the recitation of hymns attributed to Saint Ravidas. While the next sections analyze the works of Ravidas and other figures like him in the medieval context, the essay will return to the modern life of this sect and its central role in Dalit music and protest.

Chanting as de-authorizing the caste system

Saint Ravidas' songs showed that music could be used as a form of social protest. He outwardly rejected the varna system presented in Hindu religious texts that reasserted the narrative that caste (varna and jati) is divinely ordained, indisputable, and intrinsic to a person's very being.

He emphasized chanting as personal devotion when he sang:

> Whether you are Brahmin, Vaishya, Kshatriya (upper Caster) or Shudra, Dom, Chamar, Malech (lower castes), one only becomes sacred by chanting the name of the Lord. He only (who chants the name of the Lord) finds salvation for himself and the descents (Raidas).

This powerful verse was sung in the vernacular language to amalgamate mystical devotion and social critique. The words used shows that chanting the name of the Lord is not just devotional, but performative because it produces sacredness regardless of caste. The act of chanting becomes a political claim through which sanctity is not inherited but enacted to challenge Brahmanical authority. The sacred is accessible to all bodies through public action. Butler insists that language is not neutral. Sant Ravidas through bhakti musical performance shows that in a caste-based society where language is restricted by hierarchy, only this is asked of them who are marginalized: speak the God's name.

The verse focuses on the act of chanting as a central medium to claim one's own destiny, something that was originally dictated under Brahmanical authoritative social and religious practices. In Butler's terms, this is a challenge to the speech norms that constitute the 'social intelligibility' of subjects. Ravidas proposes a radical equality enacted through the shared act of chanting, a performance that bypasses caste. The shared breath, sound, and repetition become acts of equalization. Ravidas was able to show people that one can find God through intense personal bhakti, and personal bhakti performed by many would then become a social

act. Contrary to many other Bhakti saints, whose focus gravitated around spiritual liberation, Ravidas was unique in addressing both social realities and mystic devotion.

The bhakti songs performed in public allowed Sant Ravidas' words to resonate with individuals from marginalized communities, one of which was the Chamar population in Kanpur (Bellwinkel-Schempp). Kanpur was famous for its leather and raw hide markets. During the Bhakti movement, Chamars from different parts of India migrated to Kanpur to work in the production of leather. This was primarily because at the time, leather and hide were touted to be 'polluted' and hence the industry was left to the Muslims and Chamars.

Rather than disseminating the belief that the social caste system could be reformed from within, he sang of the ideology that true *bhakti* and theological commitment were independent of birth, social status and caste. He revoked unjust structures through counterspeech and his egalitarian approach appealed to Dalits who were restricted, ostracized and institutionally denied the opportunity to practice religion. His ideological position reflected the teachings of his contemporary, the poet Kabir, who said, 'God neither resides in a mosque nor in the images of Hinduism. God is "Nirguna" (beyond form and image) and salvation can only be gained through devotion' (Bellwinkel-Schempp, 2178).

An imagination of a new space of belonging

Saint Ravidas's bhakti extended beyond lyrical and musical composition. He spoke of *Begumpura*, the city without sorrows, to demonstrate to the public the ideal of living in a classless society. This society, he imagined, would stand for universal brotherhood and tolerance. The imagination of Begumpura becomes a performative re-inscription of the marginalized self into a liberated future. When an artist grants form to a certain emotion, it becomes more powerful and visionary for people since they can envision its material realness. He gave *Begumpura* the quality of housing humanity, thereby imagining a free space, away from the space they occupied in reality. Through this means, he elevated the position of the marginalized to a higher plane.

In one of his verses, Saint Ravidas declares, 'Everyone is trapped in the caste system/ Ravidas, humanity is being eaten up by the disease called caste' (Paswan 2024). This verse sent a message to the masses that the caste system is a trapping mechanism not a divine truth. It is a means of control, far from humanitarian grounds. Through the articulation of *Begumpura,* the

poet saint equipped the marginalized with a powerful alternative to the society of his time. He was able to create a symbol of resistance against Brahmanical hegemony.

Female Bhakti poets

The verses of female poets are crucial in the study of performativity because women were able to identify structures of patriarchy that were controlling, and also saw caste as an extension of the narrative of dominance. Their verses show connections with nature and also erode the logic of hegemonic control.

The maiden of Uttirnallūr

Strong condemnation of rituals, ceremonies, and idol worship came from both south and north Indian saints. A Tamil saint known for using language as a means to rid society of the evils of caste was known by the epithet, the maiden of Uttirnallūr. A *paraia* by caste, she writes in her devotional composition "Parchalūr Padikam":

> All your talk of caste and creed
> Is it even as natural as the spider and its web?
> The four blessed Vedas, were they created by Brahma?
> Is caste and creed worthwhile, ye elders of Paichalür?
> One palm tree, from it hangs nongu [fruit] and toddy For the knower of truth one no different from the other Will one then be superior and the other inferior Why then blame the paraya, ye elders of Paichalür?
> The smells of neem and sandalwood are distinct when they burn.
> But indistinguishable is the smell of the burning Brahmin.
> Does fire smell different if an unkempt Pulaya burns?
> Does the burning stuff and flame differ, ye elders of Paichalür? (Ramaswamy 1992, 144)

'Women had to observe their dharma, that is, *stridharma*, failing which their essential animality, their wild nature or *strisvabhava*, would take over their lives.' (Geetha 2007, 107). Even the narrative of nature was supposed to make women subservient, hence when the Tamil saint in the above composition writes about that which comes from nature, comes without such hegemony and all of nature is equal, she tries to reclaim the truth easily found in the environment. Language became a form of reclamation. Women from lower castes or classes

are frequently denied access to village commons and resources by men from dominant castes through coercion or threats of sexual violence. Even when they have formal rights, these resources are often controlled in ways that reinforce patriarchal and caste hierarchies (Geetha 2007, 65). Thus, the metaphors of nature free from bonds of society and become the most reliant hidden form of counter speech.

Janabai

In medieval India, other mystic poets such as Janabai, who belonged to a marginalized caste, spoke of God's direct interaction with people from oppressed communities. In her *abhangs*, she recounts how Chokhamela, a saint from the Mahār caste, expressed such profound devotion that God dined with him despite his status as an outcast. In portraying God as willingly sharing the social and ritual "pollution" imposed on lower castes, Janabai unsettles the dominant caste hierarchy and subverts the prevailing social order. This inversed the notion of ritual pollution and challenged the beliefs of upper caste individuals who refused to dine with people who were from the lower caste.

Auvaiyãr

Another example of breaking caste norms through storytelling and language is the poetry attributed to Auvaiyãr who said,

> There are no castes but two if you want me to tell
> The good men who help the poor in distress
> The other, that will not so help These are the low born (Ramaswamy 1992, 144).

Judith Butler viewed identity categories as performative. Caste as a 'identity' is not a fixed notion, but performed. Caste as theatrics is the notion that repeated behaviors get solidified in society, which goes against its proposition as a fixed truth. Hence, Auvaiyãr's attempt at rewriting this identity by bringing in a moral and ethical dimension presents caste as a marker of distinction and not inherited at birth. Service was an essential part of Bhakti because the bhaktas were encouraged to see all sentient beings as emerging from the divine. This meant that there was no space for the Brahmanical class which claimed to be the median between the masses and the divine. Complete equality is difficult, a utopia difficult to realize so she presents her own version of an equal society. It should be noted here that the distinction presented here is in fact a way of subverting inequality because the distinction will not lead to discrimination.

In both cases, it is about action and behavior, about the performance of caste. The aim of the distinction, as presented by Auvaiyãr, is to inspire others to be more inclusive by helping those *lower* than one self and those who are in distress. Auvaiyãr uses language and furthers its link to behavior. By grouping the good people into one caste, the ones who cater to those in distress, Auvaiyãr does what Butler calls plural performativity but through verbalization; she creates, through action, a group, a new identity.

Dalit musical scene in the twenty-first century

Music is central to the mechanism employed by the Kabir Kala Manch (KKM) which is an anti-caste pro-democracy group formed in the light of the 2002 Gujarat Riots. It is a collective that advocates for anti-caste and democratic ideals through other creative forms in addition to music, such as poetry and theatre. Dalits have developed distinctive cultural expressions such as the *halgi* to voice their resistance to caste oppression (Ajotikar 2018). The *halgi* is a percussion instrument traditionally associated with Dalit communities. Such musical practices were inherited by generations as an occupational and ritualistic practice connected to their social and religious functions. Performance or *tamasha*, through generations, have been a part of protest in the Dalit community. The *shahiri* and *Ambedkar shahiri* taking a new form of music and sound spread 'the ideas of the anti-caste movement to the masses, paving the way for Dalit literature' (Deshpande 2019). It is a genre that originated during Shivaji's era, to inspire soldiers and sing of their victories. It has evolved into a developed genre of protest within the Dalit community. The Vidrohi Shahiri Jalsa is an example of a collective, formed by anti-caste cultural activists in Maharashtra (Ajotikar 2018). The work of *shahirs* and *stridasyantas* is important to form a reformed cultural consciousnesses that annihilates caste structures. Groups such as the Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), a Dalit and Ambedkarite cultural activist group, also write and perform rebellious, provocative songs such as "De Dalita Thoka" (158) which translates to "Fight back Dalits!" Their performances address several timely socio-political issues, including caste oppression, displacement caused by Special Economic Zones and the consequences of state-directed developments on Dalit communities. These are the words that are used in one of KKM's songs written by Shital Sathe:

> Your face is covered in blood, the power is in the hands of the wolves Tell me,
> descendants of Hitler, how many people will you kill
> Tell me, descendants of Manu, how many people will you kill? (Ajotikar 2018, 159).

The violence of Hitler is compared to the violence of those who have used the Manusmiriti to condemn the marginalized. The word ‘descendant’ used here shows the continued hatred as if it were genetically transferred from one generation to the next. It shows vulnerability and also emphasizes on the continued killings and paints a picture of the reality of death.

Songs such as “Rohith Gela, Dalit Mela”, written and composed by Shital Sathe, following the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula also reveal similar strains of anger towards the established order:

> You cannot be educated
> You must only toil
> Manusmriti banned us from education!
> If we heard the Vedas, chanted the verses
> You poured molten lead in our ears
> Generations of control and power
> A forced rule on knowledge!
>
> An honest child of Babasaheb
> Went to the university to do research
> The casteists felt envious
> They insulted, threw him out
> And displayed their rowdiness Rohith is gone,
> a Dalit is dead
> Democracy is dead! (Ajotikar 2018, 160).

The democratic spirt was born in expression, through expression and words. Here, the narrative of control that was used against the Dalits is reiterated in the first lines, where labour was used as a tool of suppression and social immobility. The verse says that religion was also restricted by the casteist people. When Rohith Vemula, a young PhD scholar, was driven to suicide because of casteist oppression, his death shocked the Indian parliament and was covered widely in Indian media. Perhaps the most poignant part was the release of his suicide note which mentioned his love for stars inspired by the renowned physicist Carl Sagan and how now he wanted to be one with them. The corrosive hierarchy of Brahmanism lay at the heart of this institutional murder as expressed in the song which highlights the horror and pain of those who

are expected to suffer the same pain as their ancestors did, serving the same servitude and suffering the same humiliations. This is the world view offered by the Manusmriti, an ancient Indian normative text which envisions a world where the Brahmins are the highest beings and the Dalits are the lowest of the low born only to serve the higher castes. Any desire for the Dalit to progress is seen as a challenge to the ancient order and can, as was seen in this case, lead to death. The song thus keeps his struggle in narrative. Words become a medium to revive memories of injustice. Such verse is more direct compared to the Bhakti poems of the past and is more emotive, with strains of anger and frustration.

Performative Modernities

The furore over Vemula's death died down after a while, the candle marches stopped, so did the protests, the nation moved on and yet, as we saw above, the voice of the protest has survived through the public performances and songs. Apart from the Dalit centric voices, Bengal and Maharashtra have a very strong culture of *nukkad nataks* which stands for plays at roadsides. These largely informal performances are led by the university students on the poignant socio-political issues of the day and they have also featured the sentiments the KKM has used in their songs. Their dialogues are conversational and often satirical with an emphasis on those which can be repeated and remembered as a slogan. These slogans are then repeated throughout the play leaving an impact on the audience. Most public universities in India are a microcosm of the Indian society; the writers and performers of these plays are university students who represent the diversity of India and often cut through caste and class barriers. Their usage of words and music usually tuned to simple musical instruments is also meant to be catchy and adapted from Bollywood tracks.

The KKM has emerged as a vocal critic of the constant violence experienced by marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits. Its performances show dissent against caste-based violence like rape and murder, and also draws public attention to socio-economic displacements of communities due to developmental projects, including Lavasa. While it may be commonplace in contemporary India to blame the current authoritarian regime, it is notable that the issues raised by KKM have a longer history and were around during India's ostensibly liberal governments too.

The Bhakti poets and KKM undid Brahmanical hierarchies through words, which not only reveals the common revolutionary potential of these movements and the power of music, but also the pervasive power of Brahmanism across centuries. While the power of music is

harnessed by both the Bhakti movement and the KKM, it is notable that their ends have changed over time. The Bhakti saints' imagination of egalitarianism was based on a moral and civilizational code, standing for equality across caste, class and gender. The KKM, on the other hand, fights for political space in a postcolonial democracy.

In comparison to the Bhakti movement, the collective consciousness of the people and societal accountability has increased wherein, even Dalits now have protection. The Bhakti movement paved the way for a more inclusive society as it leveraged the Dalit access to closed spaces. The impact of this newfound freedom can even be seen in modern times, too with projects such as the 'The Ambedkar Book Mobile' a project aimed at documenting smaller Dalit artists and providing them with a vocal platform. It has been conceptualized by Smita Rajmane and Somnath Waghmare, documented Maharashtra's long history of anti-caste resistance through the collection of 400-500-year-old traditions of songwriting, performances, and poetry. The project highlights contributions from historical figures like Saint Tukaram and Sant Chokhamela to contemporary artists such as Adarsh Shinde, focusing on rural singers who have long been overlooked in urban discourses. Such projects are transformative in providing marginalized communities with avenues to disseminate their narratives and musical traditions. By archiving these oral histories and political performances, the project is able to raise awareness and promote dialogue on Dalit identity and resistance thereby using music as a tool for empowerment.

Dalit-Pop has been able to use music as a corner and method of history. It has shown that music means more than just devotion. It becomes a performance, occupying space and demanding to be heard. Dalit-Pop showed that devotion is not restricted to merely the divine, such as Lord Krishna in the instance of Mira Bai; rather, but can be extended to gurus such as B.R. Ambedkar or Sant Ravidas. They have been able to use words and language for change, thus radically reimagining social structure and offering a platform for the marginalized voices to reclaim their pejorative labels. These contemporary genres, reflecting Bhakti tradition's spirit of defiance, confront the systemic violence and caste-based oppression that continue to pervade Indian society. The words used in music inspires collective action and advocates for an egalitarian society that Bhakti saints such as Ravidas envisioned centuries before.

H-Pop

Hindutva Pop (H-Pop) is a genre of music that combines elements of popular music styles with Hindutva ideology. Over the last few years, as Hindu nationalism in India has rapidly increased,

musicians such as Kavi Singh are producing music aimed at spreading political propaganda. They have used speech for subordination, something Butler would refer to as formative which causes social exclusion. Singh has made music about the Pulwama attacks, a 2019 suicide bombing in Kashmir, and even released the song "Don't Dare Touch the Temple" with lyrics such as, "Even if you as much as look at the temple/My sword's edge will be ready/We will bathe this earth with blood/We will show you your place." Such charged music is not only played at Ram Navami proceedings but is distinct hate speech towards Muslims and the lower castes. Such violent music towards the lower castes, chiefly the Dalits, coupled with its everydayness and easy access, fuels passions of hate, anger, suspicion and aggression, evoking emotions and views people didn't know existed. The rise of H-pop is a flagrant misuse of music and the power of advocacy that comes with it. Kunal Purohit says that it is "part of a larger campaign to create Hindu consciousness among people, to make their religion an important part of their identity." Such anti-Dalit music reinstates discrimination towards minorities and shows Dalits their place in society as oppressed and 'untouchables.' The banality and accessibility of such music, played at festivals and circulated via social media give it its normative power. For Butler, the force of norms comes from repetition, which naturalizes the identity categories and social structures they produce.

Music has become a manifestation of social inclusion and is a source of identity formation, especially for oppressed members of society. The Bhakti movement allowed Dalits to form an independent identity, which angered their oppressors. While the Bhakti movement showed that music can act as a vehicle for change, there are instances in the course of our history where music has been weaponized in a way that punishes diversity rather than promoting it, seen through elitist genres such as Hindutva-pop in India. Music in recent times has been used to create hatred, abuse culture, dehumanize communities and kickstart a new 'religio-political movement.' In contrast to rising genres such as H-Pop that intrinsically propagate hate towards minorities, the Bhakti movement proves to be an example of inclusion. Music and its subsequent role in cultivating an identity through devotion and inclusion tries to erode the margin created for social discrimination.

Matua verses

Performance can be read in gathering, in the assembling of bodies, in the concentration of people from one community and when they express through words or action, that itself is an exertion of the right to live and gather and sustain the identity Matuaism as a distinct religion

came into being in the second half of nineteenth century in protest against “Vedic Brahminism” (Walker 564-5). Matua traces its mythological lineage to Namasmuni and his twin sons Kirtiban and Urban, who are said to have settled in Bengal and cultivated land under Sudra rule, forming the basis of a spiritually and socially distinct community that would later be associated with the Namasudras (Ray 2019). After the Partition, many people from the community migrated from East Pakistan to West Bengal, settling across various refugee camps and gradually uniting under leaders like Pramatha Ranjan Thakur to become a major voice in Lower Caste political movements in Bengal. In the state, they are ideologically divided, the first group following Thakur, the second following Jogendra Nath Mandal and the third, Ambedkarite (Halder 2020).

For the Matua, their performance arises through devotion, which is also a connection to land and space. The Hindu identity has been rejected by many people of the community (Biswas 2020) and a stronger Matua identity has been formed through culture. From Butler’s perspective, Matua ritual performances such as Matam enact identity through repeated bodily gestures, producing what it means to be Matua. The collective raising of hands, bodily shaking, and rhythmic movement with Dankha and Kashi instruments are not just expressions of faith but performative acts that constitute the community. V. Geetha and Rajadurai (1998)’s writings on caste and resistance also shows how cultural practices become important to reclaim agency and challenge oppressive hierarchies. Culture can disrupt normative religious hierarchies by centering communal joy over ascetic restraint. The sonorous rhythms from the Matua’s performance compels even bystanders to move, showing how performativity extends beyond the participants to create a shared affective experience.

Butler often engages with how marginalized communities negotiate recognition within oppressive conditions. The Matuas’ insistence on dignity in domestic life and rejection of caste hierarchies can be read through Butler’s lens of resistance to norms that are harmful for the wellbeing of certain marginalized communities. This paper analyses Biswas (2020)’s translation of the poems through the lens of Judith Butler’s performativity and V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai’s cultural assertion as Dalit counter-politics. It asses the words used in the lyrics to trace how identity is formed and withheld in the song.

Butler’s focus on the body as the site of power relations shows how the Matua through their songs transform the devotee’s bodily and affective states and how this transformation resists social regulation. The Matuas gather at public meetings to worship Harichand and his wife

Shanti Devi, where songs are sung in the Hari Sangeet, which can be seen as a collective gathering to share identity, where words sung become one belief, one strengthened position in society against the injustice of the hegemonic order. Just like the songs of the KKM are broadcasted and shared via new digital media, the Asur culture and festival which is a part of the Matua communities acts of resistance are also telecasted via YouTube channels like Mulnivasi TV and Dalit Camera, which shows that digital media is become an essential record of how words, occupying space and claiming culture work come together to challenge the norms of caste.

This movement, rhythm and protest culture are also seen in the verses of songs. Biswas (2020), while completing her research was given the book *Chetana Sangeeter Swarolipi* (2016) which had fifty Chetana songs. Two of her translations have been analyzed here in the context of this research. Below is a part of the song, "The protest of the marginalized is Sri Lilamrita":

> The protest of the marginalized is Sri Lilamrita.
> Ignored, deprived, and exploited--- their religion they lost,
> Curved out with the flame of fire, Matuas got their Lilamrita.
> Crafty and diplomatic, composed by great Tarak",
> Hurt of the dharmo-hin,?' gospels of the work force--- all are represented.
> Like a swan sipping the milk, the path of love and truth
> Will do Matuas all these.
> What is lost is restored, so wake up Matuas, wake up,
> With the flame of Harichand in this very morning.
> Let the jat-pat perish forever with the rhythm of dankha,
> Let the world get decorated anew.
> Abolish bedachar," hail the humanity
> With the protestant voice of Sri Lilamrita (Biswas 2020).

The verse positions *Sri Lilamrita* not as a passive scripture but as an active, insurgent voice. The *Sri Lilamrita* is a compilation of hymns, songs, and narratives of life centered around the lives, teachings, and spiritual acts (lila) of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. In the above verse, "The protest of the marginalized is Sri Lilamrita" is not simply a declaration; it is, through Judith Butler lens, a performative text, a protest through words. In uttering the word

“protest,” the song produces the Matua community not as victim but as agent. Words here are not descriptive but constitutive. To name is to perform, to inscribe resistance into being. When the Matuas sing of “what is lost” being restored, and of waking up with the flame of Harichand, they are not merely invoking memory, they are gathering the community into a moment of collective action. Speech becomes both archive and future.

This becomes more apparent when we consider V. Geetha’s formulation of Dalit consciousness as one that is historically mindful and morally alert. The song encodes that moral alertness: “Let the jat-pat perish,” “abolish bedachar,” “hail the humanity”, these are not abstractions but direct affronts to the structures of caste, purity and Brahmanical order. The use of devotional language and familiar imagery “like a swan sipping milk” is neither ornamental nor naïve. It is a deliberate re-signification, a poaching of dominant semiotics to fashion a counter-world. What the song offers is not just resistance to exclusion but a proposal for a new order, one that is egalitarian, affective, and rooted in the laboring body and spiritual dignity of the oppressed. Butler’s understanding of counterspeech, where the very norms that injure are turned against their origin, is enacted in the song’s refusal to conform to either caste hierarchy or passive religious action. The flame of Harichand is not a gentle metaphor; it is inscribed as a cleansing fire bringing a new order into being. The song performs and preserves dissent.

Another song is “Two greats reside in my mind, one is Harichand and other Guruchand” with reveres the great men Harichand and other Guruchand who are said to have changed the lives of the marginalized. Pabitra Biswas is the composer and singer. The following is the English translation of a part of the song by Biswas (2020):

> The savior gives us courage to fight back,
> Guruchand gave us knowledge,
> The resource of hatred and the fantasy of racism--- all are demolished.
> Any rights they don’t have for thousands of years.
> The duo drove away all of darkness by lighting the fire of revolution.
> Demolished the wicked authority of the Vedas so as the barrier of division.
> Filled up they the empty pot of this race
> Who are suffering from ignorance.
> Let us come together following the steps of truth, and loving kindness.

Judith Butler's notion of performativity is again relevant here because recalling Harichand and Guruchand is not about ancestral remembrance alone, it is an act of seeing clearly the past and the future. Their names, when sung or invoked, bring forth a social world that has always been denied presence in dominant narratives, the barrier of division is very much existent till now. The words, in repetitive emotion, keep the cause alive. "The duo drove away all of darkness by lighting the fire of revolution" is a line that performs the very thing it speaks of. It folds time, pulling revolutionary action into the present tense. The performance of the verse transforms spiritual icons into political actors, and in doing so, invites the listener to join in the fire, to become part of the demolition of "wicked authority" and caste barriers.

In V. Geetha's understanding of caste, this song participates in what she calls the "moral universe" of Dalit consciousness a space where ethics and struggle are inseparable. The phrase "the fantasy of racism" being demolished gestures towards a radical unveiling: what Brahmanism projects as sacred (the Vedas, hierarchy, purity) is revealed to be fantasy, artifice, and violence. The verse does not articulate rights through the language of legalism; but says that is has denied them the spirituality needed for the survival of human life; the emptiness is critiqued.

Words as counter-narrative

'The words we use in everyday conversation and the language that animates our practices of ritual and custom are neither innocent nor given' (Geetha 2007, 133). Words have historicity due to the way they are used across time, and words used for power-play make deeper wounds in society. Brahminical hegemony in Bengal has demonized the Dalits posing them as slaves and criminals and created a strong narrative (Biswas 2020). The word 'caste' has been used by such hegemonic communities across time to maintain a kind of stronghold over other people, posed as something that cannot be questioned. Repetition can solidify the way one thinks about the world. Hence, there is a need of a new narrative to counter the narrative of hegemony. Language as performance becomes a means to purposefully change the historically unjust use of words and also bring awareness. In the case of Bhakti literature, words emerge as a means to revive and maintain a consciousness that divinity was always accessible to everyone and ethical action was more important in the path to divinity that the hierarchy of the caste system. In the Matua verses, there is a direct call for abolishment of injustices and words are used creatively to show that a majoritarian mindset is ultimately not going to bring in liberation. Words are used to cultivate identity, to look up to people who have fought against injustices in

the past and transform reality. Dalit-Pop has retained the memory of institutionalized violence though words in their music, musicians have begun to observe and bring to light the problems in modern society, showing how hegemony has affected education and society has failed to give the Dalits a proper chance at making their place in the world. Pop-music and its broadcast on digital media has made words performative through consumption. Words in music have emotional qualities linked to memory, and they become a means to break one-sided histories and carve out a space for diverse identities, cultures and rights of belonging. The sentiments against cast in the verses analyzed in the paper show that words become a means to exist in society, a performance that is conscious, planned and with a purpose to change the way power, identity, and social roles are structured and perceived.

Conclusion

Words have been an important means of anti-caste resistance in Bhakti music, Matua songs and contemporary music released by the Dalit community. Group performances have provided a space of identity and recognition of livability of marginalized communities who have vocalize resistance and advocate for social reformation. During the Bhakti period, saints like Ravidas disrupted Brahmanical hierarchies by asserting that sanctity is not inherited but enacted through devotion and public action, accessible to all regardless of caste. Ravidas's emphasis on chanting in vernacular language democratized spiritual access and challenged the notion of divinely ordained caste. His vision of Begumpura, a sorrow-free, classless society, provided a powerful alternative imagination for the marginalized. Female Bhakti poets such as the maiden of Uttirnallūr, Janabai, and Auvaiyār, used language and storytelling to dismantle caste distinctions, redefine notions of "low" based on action rather than birth, and challenge patriarchal and ritualistic norms.

While music and words have historically empowered anti-caste movements, its potential for harm is evident in the rise of Hindutva-pop that has used performance to further casteist ideology and violence. This tradition demonstrates that music and language are not merely reflections of society or parts of culture, but they are political and pose a sense of unity and aggression against dominant narratives of power. The legacy of performative resistance is present in the words used in twenty-first century Dalit music, which continues to use language to its strength, transforming derogatory terms and using musical forms like Shahiri and Dalit-Pop to show protest and collective identity. Groups like the Kabir Kala Manch (KKM) directly confront contemporary issues of caste oppression, displacement, and institutional violence

through rebellious songs that bring awareness to a shared reality of injustice. These modern expressions have similarities to the Bhakti spirit of defiance and their use of words to reclaim divinity. Words are a means to dismantle an established system by changing their historic meanings born from oppression and using them performatively, to change the course of reality.

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