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How does contemporary Dalit music reflect and transform the Bhakti tradition's use of music to challenge caste hierarchies?

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary Dalit music transforms the Bhakti tradition's use of music to challenge caste hierarchies. The Bhakti movement (13th–16th centuries) utilized vernacular languages and accessible worship to break Brahmanical dominance, offering marginalised communities a voice. Today, Dalit artists continue this legacy, using music to assert identity and resist oppression. The paper contrasts this with the rise of Hindutva Pop (H-Pop), a genre weaponizing music for exclusionary narratives. By tracing anti-caste music's evolution, this paper argues that Dalit music reclaims cultural agency and remains a powerful medium for social resistance and identity formation in contemporary India.

Keywords : Music, Dalit, Bhakti, Bhakti movement, Hindutva Pop (H-Pop)

Oral tradition challenges existing social conditions. Music producer and founder of the 'Casteless Collective', Tenma states that the world has evolved with oral discourse; music as a tool of discourse and communication is made powerful 'when the message being imparted is to do with root level issues' (Homegrown 2021). Music is touted as the language of the soul. This essay aims to explore the significance of music in shaping history beyond the subject of the spiritual. India's Bhakti Movement during the 13th to 16th centuries broke conventions of Brahmanical hegemony, through music, poetry, and dialogue. Brahmans, the highest members of the Indian caste system, considered themselves ritually superior during and after the Vedic times primarily due to their strict control over religious scriptures.

The impact of the Bhakti movement reverberates in Indian society through protest music in modern India. This is an excellent case study to explore the power of music, which became an integral part of Bhakti (devotion) and challenged social norms set by Brahmans. The power of this music allowed the challengers to ask for their own identity, thus shaping the course of history. The struggle has evolved over the centuries, with present-day performers inheriting the mantle of the past. However, another history is unfolding, albeit contemporaneously, where the power of music is

being used for division and social exclusion by genres such as Hindutva Pop (H-Pop). This history of the present requires a chronicler so that these symptoms of an age of anger can be challenged using the power of music.

Historical context of the Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement was critical in characterising medieval India. Bhakti, the act of "devotional surrender to a personally conceived supreme God for attaining salvation" (Dey 2024, 1), has been a religious concept in many Indian scriptures since the time of the *Rig Veda*s and the *Bhagavad Purana.* However, between the 7th and 10th centuries, and more specifically in the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the religious idea of Bhakti transcended from being a doctrine to a movement centred around the principles of equality, religious reform, and personal devotion over ritualistic practices. The notion of the Bhakti movement was disseminated by South Indian mystics, popularly known as *Alvars*, immersed in the experience of God. The Saiva Nayanar Saints (National Council of Educational Research and Training n.d.) were a group of 63 saints devoted to Lord Shiva (Sivananda, n.d.) and the Vaisnava Alvar Saint (acharyas) were a group of 12 Tamil poets dedicated to propagating Vaishnavism, the worship of Lord Vishnu. They were determined to promote religious egalitarianism by spreading Bhakti to various sects of society regardless of their class, caste or gender. The Alvars were able to begin a movement of protest, according to some historians, against the caste structures and dominance of the Brahmans. The Bhakti movement gave the people a voice against feudal oppression. These everyday men had developed "an averse attitude towards social evils," that is the monopolisation of religion, and hoped and attempted to reform this very system. These Bhaktas hailed from a diverse set of social strata, such as the Bhramans or the lowest members of the Indian varna system, the "Untouchables." Key figures of this movement range from its initial saints, *Adi Shankaracharya,* to female mystics such as Meera Bai and Janabai, to revered personalities such as Guru Nanak, Tulsidas, Sant Ravidas and Kabir.

In medieval India, a profound medium to disseminate this Bhakti was in the form of music. Music was often disseminated in the form of *Bhajans and Kirtans.* Bhajans are devotional songs with both music and lyrics, often sung to the audience. Kirtan, however, involves praising a deity and responding to various mantras; this is always a group performance that reaches a crescendo with the music. Through the instrumentalization of music, the Bhakti Movement transformed its purpose from being a source of entertainment to a medium of protest and social reformation. It allowed the masses to steer away from an esoteric, exclusionary meaning of religion and move towards pursuing a personal relationship with God. These *Bhajans and Kirtans* are types of devotional songs that have aided a "personal communication with the divine" (Srikrishna n.d.).

Chanting evolved from a ritual directive of the Vedas to a method of personally connecting with the Divine. *Mantras* began to be practised with intention and awareness in daily life. *Bhajans* and *Kirtans,* therefore, gave the Dalits an alternative path to liberation and enhanced anti-caste aesthetics while also acting as tools to educate populations, thereby greatly impacting society and our perception of oppressive practices. The term 'Dalit' gained traction in the 19th century. It might be argued that the term is anachronistic for the timeline of this essay. However, in both centuries the essay refers broadly to the same stratum of society, thus it uses the term Dalit for clarity and as an

acceptance of the self-identity of this caste. This also helps in the transition from the 13th century to 21st century music.

During the Bhakti movement, there were two primary problems that the movement, by harnessing music, was able to solve, thus shaping history: 1) worshipping was class, caste and gender exclusionary, which meant that only the Brahmans were allowed to recite God's name. 2) devotion was expressed only in Sanskrit, thus limiting its access to the masses. The Bhakti movement was a reformative movement for Hinduism and actively changed the lives of the Dalits and women through its integration of vernacular languages and chanting. Conversely, while the Bhakti movement used music to help transform lives, in recent times, music genres such as Hindutva pop (H-pop) are weaponizing music to spread hate towards the Dalits. This essay aims to prove that Dalit music, during the time of the Bhakti movement and the 21st century, has significantly altered caste hierarchies.

Anti-Caste Music during the Bhakti Period

The Bhakti movement's close association with the Dalits stemmed from the caste discrimination that dominated the 13th to 16th centuries. Before the arrival of the Bhakti movement, religious music was severely limited to Vedic chants, which comprised the *saman chant* (Ramamurty 2022). Vedic chants had various pathways or patterns of recitation, such as the *pada, rathaa, jala* and *rekha* to name a few, which ensure faultless recitation and pronunciation (Kamakoti n.d.) However, this method of recitation inhibited the dissemination of these texts to the masses. This implied that the Dalits had been structurally locked out of their right, not only to formal education but also to spiritual texts such as the *Vedas.* In society, the *Brahmans* monopolised religious texts due to their exclusive understanding of Sanskrit (Chandra Sekhar 2021, 11), the language of the elite. Bhakti music, which was a product of a trans-local and linguistically diverse movement, through its power of musical devotion, created amongst the lower class a "shared identity of love" (Hawley 2017, 1–12).

Bhakti music prioritised vernacular languages which were spoken by the common people. This gave the masses the musical and religious voice they longed for in the form of *Bhajans, Kirtans,* chanting and *Sankirtan* (to sing or praise) as a form of religious worship that required minimal formal training and could be done as a group. Chanting meant that music and devotion would be cemented and seen as accessible in society which allowed musicians to use repetition of specific phrases or lines to emphasize the devotional message. *NmasaEkirtana* or "name chanting" had been developed during the movement to evoke deep feelings of love and passion. By allowing a group of people to sing together, chanting incited shared intelligence, thus enabling closeness with others and the divine.

The Bhakti movement, through its use of music, was instrumental in challenging and transcending caste hierarchies by emphasising bhakti, irrespective of social status, as the primary mode of spiritual liberation. Mystics such as Uttiranallür Nangai (Ramaswamy 1992, 145) voiced their concerns over the varna system and composed their songs in vernacular languages to transcend these hierarchies, making them accessible to a broader audience beyond the circles fluent in Sanskrit and other Brahamanical languages. This shift democratised spiritual discourse, enabling lower-caste communities to participate actively in religious practices. Saints used the power that music had at the time to challenge the caste hierarchies in society and begin discourse about them.

The movement put the Dalits in touch, socially, with the Brahmins and provided them with an avenue to reach God, thus integrating themselves into society through worship. A typical example of the lyrics is:

> "Look, Narahari (Krishna) dances daily
> in the courtyard of a cowherd,
> bound here to affection.
> Blessed are the cowherds.
> What [can be gained] from belonging to high caste?" (Mehta 1981, 135; Bhatt 2023, 28).

Anti-caste music during the Bhakti movement cannot be spoken of without mentioning Sant Ravidas. Ravidas was a 15th century Indian mystic poet born into a Dalit (untouchable) family, and was known to be Mira Bai's *guru* (teacher) as well. He has grown to become "the most popular saint in Northern India. He was so pious and god-loving that even Mother Ganga herself came to his aid" (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007, 2177). He was instrumental in challenging caste hierarchies and advocating for social change. He often sang:

> Do not give any importance to the caste of a person in which he/ she is born. Always give importance to the deeds (Karm). No one is Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra from the birth (The child when born has no caste). One only gets results in his life (sorrow or happiness) according to his deeds. Sant Raidas Says that there is no one lower because of his caste. Only the bad deeds (like a mud) of a person make him bad (Sharma 2021, 32)

By outwardly rejecting the varna system presented in Hindu religious texts, Sant Ravidas was able to establish a framework for using music as a form of social protest and identity assertion. He emphasised on personal devotion as 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 (Sharma 2021, 16)

Baba Ramdev in Rajasthan

Baba Ramdev, born around 1352 CE, is often referred to as Ramdevji or Ramdeo Pir, is ostensibly one of the most venerated folk deities in Rajasthan. He was an integral part of the identity formation of a subsequent Rajasthani dalit community referred to as the 'Meghwal' community. They were lower-caste members who staunchly opposed Brahmanical orthodoxy. Ramdevji was a Rajput hero, while his origins are disputed – often between the identity of a Rajupti warrior-saint and an individual of dalit heritage – he was revered in his form of a lower caste deity. The preliminary impetus towards his veneration and glorification rose from the lowest community of *dhedhs* (Dhali 2011).

Ramdeviji's spiritual philosophy has been influenced by the Bhakti movement. Similar to his contemporaries, he advocated for a form of devotion void of ritualistic practices and caste distinctions.

More so, he is even said to have specifically had miraculous powers aided in the upliftment of the most marginalized – such as healing the sick. In fact, he is known to treat dalits not as members of lower castes, but as friends. One of the most famous legends associated with him is his interaction with the Meghwal community. According to folklore, on the day of Raksha Bandhan, Ramdev Ji whilst in a village stumbled upon a young girl, Dali Bai, an untouchable by caste, who had been crying over not having a brother to whom she could tie a Rakhi. Ramdev Ji being the selfless person he was, offered her to tie the Rakhi on his wrist, thus making an untouchable, his sister (Rajendran n. d.) He often disseminated his philosophies through forms of oral traditions such as *bhajans* and *kathas* (narratives).

Through these oral narratives, Ramdeviji would often emphasise on *seva* (service) and *samanta* (equality) which helped amplify his spiritual beliefs. However, his influence is not limited to such narratives. His philosophies have permeated through the cultural and social spheres across Rajasthan, and is expressed through ragas, bhajans and even folk dances such as the *ghoomar* and *kachhi ghodi.* The deification of Baba Ramdev has been monumental in institutionalising locally and nationally, a symbol of Dalit resistance and the reclamation of identity. His inclusionary form is not limited only to Dalits. He was seen as both an incarnation of Lord Krishna from the Hindu faith and Ram Shah Pir from the Islamic faith. The syncretism in his identity is able to reinstate and valorise communal harmony and solidarity. His temple *'Ramdevra'* even hosts an annual fair '*The Ramdev Mela*' invites Hindus, Muslims, and Dalits to celebrate his ideals of an egalitarian society.

It is evident therefore, that during the time of the Bhakti movement there is a flagrant disregard for societal evils such as caste hierarchies. We see mystics channel their suffering in the form of music – as a tool for narration and a vehicle for change – to propagate their views and stir hatred towards these societal evils. Music was able to break an entrenched culture of silence that had long been imposed on marginalised communities such as the Dalit community and has catalysed them into telling their stories in their own languages, thus refuting their conventional representation in society.

Dalit Music in Contemporary India

As musical defiance had been used as a weapon during the time of the Bhakti movement to fight discrimination today, in modern-day India, Dalit artists continue to do the same. They have historically, and continue to, use the power of music to fight against social and caste hierarchies, thereby, empowering a stronger movement which uses this power to defy deeply entrenched norms of today and yesterday.

A primary manifestation of this phenomenon can be observed through the emergence of Dalit pop, or locally in Punjab called "mission singing", singers who sing not to earn profit, rather propagate teachings for Ambedkar and Dalit saints, rose to popularity in 2009 (Singh 2017, 34). It proliferated specifically in Punjab as music was released in contrast to the popular genre "Jatt-Pop." These mission singers hoped to alter and bring reform to the socio-political milieu of Punjab and at large, India. A specific community that proliferated, and continues to do so, during this era is called the "Ravidassia" community who identify themselves as disciples and followers of century Bhakti poet Sant Ravidas. Members of this community continue to release music such as, "Fighter Chamara", "Putt Chamara Da" (Son of Chamars), "Jago Ravidassia" (Awake Ravidassia), "Hummer" (The

Famous Vehicle), and "Sadda Haq" (Our Right) amongst many songs. Each of these songs have powerful lyrics such as,

> When Chamars walk out with weapons in their hands
> Friends, watch the fireworks that follow
> Then we shall see who can cross our paths?
> To create loud noises and ruffle feathers
> Ravidassia da,
> Is what the followers of Ravidas do
> It is not for nothing that the Chamars are the talk of the town (Singh 2017, 34).

Through such empowering lyrics, it is evident that Saint Ravidas from the Bhakti movement proves to be an archetype of a Dalit musician. He has been able to, through his poetry and lyrics, empower artists of the 21st century to celebrate their identity while also asserting defiance, much like the mystic did himself during his era. His influence is seen through the emergence of songs such as "Begumpura Shehar" which venerate his idea of a Begumpura; but also, through festivities such as Ravidas' Jayanti, celebrated in January/February (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007, 2178) which acts as a common identity for Dalit's from various subsections to unite through music, drum beating and singing, and celebrate a collective identity. In addition to his role in establishing a collective identity, Saint Ravidas specifically is pivotal in the moder-day Dalit movement and was during the Bhakti movement because he was able to rise above his identity as a Chamar and embrace personal devotion.

The Ravidassia community's ethos lies deeply intertwined in ideas of resistance and powerful political narratives. They have slogans such as "Babasaheb, we will protect and defend your legacy by becoming its shield. Let us see who will stop us" and "Those who revere Ravidas have nothing to fear" (Singh 2017, 34). They are distinct in owning their past rather than shying away from thus being able to venerate and valorise their disjointed history and gain confidence as they "exhibit themselves publicly" (Singh 2017, 34). Further example of this can be seen in the work of musician Ginni Mahi, who sings "Neither are we scared, nor do we worry / For Sant Guru Ravidass is our saviour," She then further sings, "Not scared of sacrifice, we are forever ready / Because Chamars are more dangerous than weapons." Chamars, previously referred to as untouchables, (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) are a major caste group among the scheduled castes in Northern India (Lata 2019). Mahi even released a song called "Danger Chamar," which has garnered over 4 million views on YouTube (Merchant 2019). This protest music aims at reclaiming the derogatory slur 'Chamar' and transforming it into a symbol of pride and honour. Mahi says, "People use the word 'chamar' in a derogatory and discriminatory way. I want to sing about equality and breaking down barriers as much as possible" (Desai 2018). Furthermore, the band "The Casteless Collective" uses politically charged music to raise awareness and fight against the oppression faced by Dalits in Tamil Nadu (Kirpal 2020). Their song, titled 'Quota' references reservation, a right that all Dalits are entitled to is a manner of affirmative action. They musicalise this as they sing (Maitreya 2020) the following lyrics, opposing the abolition of reservation and promoting an upper-caste meritocracy:

> Your forefather kept mine oppressed
> Isn't that why we are given our quota?

Don't be so proud because you get all you want
Unlike our ancestors we won't remain calm (Quota Song).

It can be inferred that similar to modern day Dalit music, women during the Bhakti movement, were able to use music and devotion (this time to Ravidas and Ambedkar) to develop a cultural consciousness and newfound self-confidence. Moreover, as the Bhakti movement provided women with the opportunity to carve out open spaces for themselves, its effects can be seen in modern day India as well. The Bhakti movement, historically was one of the first times music, bhajans and kirtan were used to write one's own personal reflection, story, and historiography. It popularised writing your OWN songs. The same way, with the increase in Dalit music, members of the lower strata of society were able to create their own music, and as Shital Sathe, an activist and musician, says, "their own poetry reflection– a reflection of their lives. Our music is the only thing appropriated and sensationalised by the contemporary mass-mediated Brahmanical capitalist culture. But our words are significant to understand the history of aural cultures and caste groups at the margins. We cannot imagine anything without words", adding "what do we have? We have only words. Our revolt is founded on words" (Ajotikar 2018, 157).

Owing to their radical stance, these artists have historically been subjected to violence from opposing nationalist organisations. One such example of fierce opposition and physical violence is seen through the case of Rajni Thakkarwal of Hoshiarpur (Singh 2017), who had been attacked by a group of Jatt boys. Thus, this violence has also given rise to militant groups such as Sri Guru Ravidas Force Punjab and Begampura Tiger Force Punjab, who surround these 'mission singers' when they perform. Such militant groups are a prime example of increased unity within the community and social groups. In comparison to the Bhakti movement, the collective consciousness of the people and societal accountability has increased wherein, even Dalits now have protection – even if it means from their own community.

Such power of protest has been possible in the modern day only due to Bhakti music, which paved the way for a more inclusive society as it leveraged the Dalit access to hitherto closed spaces. The impact of this newfound freedom can even be seen in modern times, too with projects such as "The Ambedkar Book Mobile", a project aimed at documenting smaller Dalit artists and providing them with a vocal platform. It has been conceptualised by Smita Rajmane and Somnath Waghmare, who seek to document 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 marginalised 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. And if so, it has shown that devotion is not restricted to merely the divine, such as Lord Krishna in the instance of Mira Bai; rather, devotion can extend to one's gurus such as B.R. Ambedkar or Sant Ravidas. They have been able to use music for change,

thus radically reimagining social structure and offering a platform for the marginalised voices to reclaim their pejorative labels. These contemporary genres, deeply rooted in the Bhakti tradition's spirit of defiance, confront the systemic violence and caste-based oppression that continue to pervade Indian society. Music thus is able to transcend its artistic boundaries to become a vehicle of resistance and redefinition. It has been used as an avenue to inspire collective action and strive for an egalitarian society that Bhakti saints such as Ravidas envisioned centuries before.

H-Pop

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 has understandably angered their oppressors. While the Bhakti movement shows us that music can act as a vehicle for change, there are instances in the course of our history where music has been weaponised 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 foster hatred, abuse culture, dehumanise communities and kickstart a new 'religio-political movement.' (Purohit 2023, 234)

Over the last few years, as Hindu nationalism in India has rapidly increased, musicians such as Kavi Singh are producing musical tones aimed at spreading political propaganda in the form of music. She has released music about the Pulwama attacks and even has a song titled 'Don't Dare Touch the Temple' a song aimed at reinforcing bias where Kavi sings 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 product of the times we live in and 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" (Bhandari 2023). Such anti-Dalit music reinstates discrimination towards minorities and shows Dalits their place in society as oppressed and 'untouchables.' It has even been noted that by demonising some figures, such music is "conditioning the psychological climate necessary for genocide" (Purohit 2023, 24). While the Bhakti movement linked citizenship to faith in a manner that provided the marginalised to uplift themselves and achieve social integration, in recent times, this link has been exploited as a means for hate crime and mass violence.

With 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 narrows the margin created for social discrimination. As lower castes, such as Dalits, are slowly included in society, we must work towards active change that fights for a new Dalit positionality. The same can be achieved through:

1. Collaboration with Dalit artists and internationally recognised musicians.
2. We use the democratic power of social media to translate lyrics from different languages and use AI to spread dialects, too.

3. Use publishing houses to ensure verses and chanting texts are compiled and disseminated.
   (a) For instance, the Bhajanavali can be disseminated further along with Dalit literature.
   (b) Literature can be replaced with musical biographies of prominent individuals like Sant Ravidas. This harnesses the power of music to promote inclusive literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that music, through the course of history, has been used for more than just *bhakti.* The Dalit community has used music to carve narrate their own stories, embrace their personal histories and fight against caste prejudice and the current socio-political milieu.

We look at the evidence put forth in front of us in a very different light as it becomes increasingly clear that not only has music been able to transform the most marginalised groups of our society, instead it has also been used as a vehicle to challenge the social and caste hierarchies that corrode the fabric of our society. Contemporary Dalit music genres, while rooted in the Bhakti belief of using music as a tool for egalitarianism, extend this legacy by actively challenging modern-day caste hierarchies and, thus, reclaiming the Dalit or Chamar identity. While this narrative proliferates, it also raises questions if contemporary Dalit music can use its entrenched spirituality to question the caste system's moral standing within today's religious beliefs?

Following a comprehensive analysis of both music from the Bhakti movement and more contemporary genres, it has become evident that music historically is being used as a tool for unity, assimilation, and a weapon to fight discrimination. While the sentiments associated with music remain largely similar, its modalities have long evolved. During the time of the Bhakti movement, through the works of saints such as Ravidas, Ramdev and Uttiranallür Nangai, members of the lower caste were unified under the common precedent of fighting against caste discrimination and used *bhakti* to assimilate groups from various castes, classes and genders. Conversely, during more recent times, as seen through the works of Dalit artists such as Ginni Mahi and Hindutva Pop musicians such as Kavi Singh, it has become clear that while music is still a tool for societal unity, assimilation is now restricted to within communities as opposed to within society at large. For instance, music such as H-Pop unites nationalists who share the same anti-Muslim sentiments, and Dalit Pop unites those advocating for caste reform. More contemporary genres of music are ideologically uniting within communities while simultaneously fragmenting society by reinforcing divisive identities and exclusive affiliations. These contradictions inspire us to ask, how much is Dalit music an answer to Hindutva Pop and vice versa? The emergence of contemporary genres in pluralistic societies like ours today leaves us with many questions, such as how identity-based music genres reflect broader societal shifts towards polarisation? And what implications might this have for art as a unifying cultural weapon?

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