



AMBEDKARITE PROTEST MUSIC AND THE
CREATION OF A SUBALTERN COUNTERPUBLIC:
AN ANALYSIS OF KABIR KALA MANCH'S 'AYE BHAGAT SINGH
TU ZINDA HAI'

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Abstract

The problem with caste systems, that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar had identified more than eighty years ago, persists in South Asia in various forms and iterations to this day. To combat novel manifestations of the caste system and its evil, Ambedkarites—those who believe in the ideology of Ambedkar, the famed social reformist who campaigned against Dalit discrimination seek newer tools for dissent, one of which is music. Kabir Kala Manch (KKM) is a troupe of Dalit singers and poets that was formed after the Gujrat riots in 2002. Their music targets fascism, imperialism, casteism and classism, and the patriarchy. Employing Nancy Fraser's theory of a "subaltern counterpublic", this essay explores how Kabir Kala Manch has achieved the creation of such a counterpublic through their music. In particular, it studies their song, *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* (*Oh Bhagat Singh, You Are Alive*), focusing on the form it takes, and the themes prevalent in the song.

Keywords: *protest music, subversion, caste, subaltern counterpublic, Ambedkar*



Introduction

The problem with caste systems, that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar (1936) identified more than eighty years ago, persists in South Asia in various forms and iterations to this day. To combat novel manifestations of the caste system and its evil, Ambedkarites—those who believe in the ideology of Ambedkar, the famed social reformist who campaigned against Dalit discrimination—seek new tools of dissent, one of which is music. One such band, which has adopted and promoted Ambedkarite music is Kabir Kala Manch or KKM, a troupe of Dalit singers and poets that was formed after the Gujrat riots in 2002. Their music targets fascism, imperialism, casteism and classism, and the patriarchy. Employing Nancy Fraser’s (1990) theory of a “subaltern counterpublic”, this essay will explore how Kabir Kala Manch has achieved the creation of such a counterpublic through its music. It will expound upon this through the analysis of one of KKM’s popular songs, *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai (Oh Bhagat Singh, You Are Alive)*, focusing on its form and prevalent themes.

In 2011, Kabir Kala Manch was forced into hiding when, alongside other poets and musicians, the state labelled them as the publicly disfavored Naxalites—far-left supporters of Maoism. After coming out of hiding in April 2013, the lead vocalist of the band, Sheetal Sathe declared their appearance before the police an expression of satyagraha (holding onto truth). Rather than surrendering, they fought against state charges, finally receiving bail in June 2013 on humanitarian grounds. Following an atmosphere of state repression and surveillance, it was doubly necessary for the band to form a counter-discourse. This was only possible through the existence of what Nancy Fraser refers to as a “subaltern counterpublic”. This is a “parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourse, which in turn permits them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These spaces serve dual functions, as “spaces of withdrawal,”

and as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (p. 68). These spaces hence, work as counter-spaces to “dominant publics”, which are majoritarian and mainstream in nature. The band, since its inception, has created a space where it can reshape its identity and perform the dual functions of withdrawing from, as well as engaging in agitation, and this has led to the formation of a “subaltern counterpublic”.

This counterpublic has been possible because of the medium the band uses and the message its content propagates. This will be explained in light of their song *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai*, which is written, composed, and sung by Sheetal Sathe. It is a song full of zeal and promise. Sathe begins by calling upon Bhagat Singh, whose memory still fuels the revolutionary fervor today. She comments on the despotic conditions of Indian politics and the falsity of freedom that the masses are offered by the bourgeoisie, who exploit the peasantry and youth, going as far as killing citizens for the sanctity of religion, gender, caste, and creed. She ends by envisioning a different future—one that brings about an end to oppression. In the following sections I will take the example of this song, studying its form and themes to elucidate how protest music has allowed Kabir Kala Manch to create a subaltern counterpublic.

The Form

Use of Anger

Counterpublics are often characterized by their use of emotive rhetoric, or as Ryder (2007) calls it “rhetoric of anger” (p. 521). In fact, the yardstick for how invested one is in the subject they are talking about is the anger demonstrated. In a counterpublic, one’s anger is taken as a mark of their passion, eagerness, and/or attachment to the issue, which is starkly different from a dominant public space, where use of anger is discouraged. Hence, the norms of decorum and “respectful” etiquette become a tool of suppression in the dominant public space to quench voices of dissent, whereas, in subaltern counterpublics these norms are subverted, and emotions are openly employed to gain attention (Weisser, 2008, p. 613). In this context, where the use of etiquette become a tool of suppression in the dominant public space to quench voices of dissent, whereas, in subaltern counterpublics these norms are subverted, and emotions are openly employed to

gain attention (Weisser, 2008, p. 613). In this context, where the use of anger is not only encouraged, but seen as a necessity for the existence of a counterpublic, the choice of medium is crucial. The form the messages take must be malleable to the incorporation of emotion and frenzy in order to aid its function as a vessel of anger.

Regarding the uses of anger, Audre Lorde (1984) says, “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought the anger into being. Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (p.127). The anger experienced by KKM’s Dalit students is fashioned into a tool which they can use for the creative process of turning emotions into poetry and music that can reach greater masses. It is important to note that this anger is not genderless as it arises from a place of patriarchal oppression. This is better represented in another KKM song written and sung by Sheetal Sathe called ‘Ek Maitra Raangadya’ (So It Goes, My Dear Friend), which calls attention to the perils of the caste system. The song also draws parallels between the killings in Khailanji and the stories of the Sati and Ramabai, thereby commenting on institutional violence carried out against women. Hence, the anger underlying the lyrics in the music of KKM is a product of class, caste, and gender oppression. As per Lorde (1984), when used with precision, anger can be used to subvert oppressive institutions, thus it becomes an agent of its own as it is channeled through a creative force such as music.

Therefore, the use of poetry and music is necessary due to two reasons: firstly, they allow room for powerful emotions to exist and interact with one another, and secondly, they allow the creative transformation necessary to make anger useful against its perpetrators. A counterpublic is cultivated through this undiluted use of anger.

Poetry, language, and class

The form this creative energy takes, however, is not devoid of its own politics. According to Lorde (1984), it can become a class issue as poetry is the most economical, since:

It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.
(p. 116)

Thus, KKM's protest music is political not merely because of its content, that calls out the patriarchy, casteism, racism, imperialism, and social inequalities, but also because of the medium it occupies. At the time of conception, KKM comprised of Dalit students belonging to the working class. The most accessible creative form available to them was lyrical poems, which they then composed into simple music using a tambourine and ghungroo.

In addition to the practicality and ease that protest music production offers to working class individuals of KKM, the pro-democracy and anti-fascist messages of the troupe take the musical form because of their audience, which is comprised of the working class as well. Songs are also generally easier to consume in terms of physical and mental effort required. Consumption also takes less time and can be accessed by anyone despite age, education, class, etc. Additionally, the songs by KKM are often sung in Marathi. In fact, at a performance in New Delhi at Press Club in 2016, Sathe added a few verses in Marathi to the song *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai*. While increasing the accessibility and appeal of the music to Marathi speakers, this also grounds the politics of the band into the local context and history of the Maharashtra region. This aids in the creation of a counterpublic, as the use of Marathi performs the function of excluding the bourgeoisie public from interacting with the music produced. At the same time, it provides a safe space for Marathi speakers by using a universal medium, i.e., music. This medium can be integrated into the dominant sphere, thus fulfilling the dual function of semi-separatism and engagement. This means that while the music subverts dominant publics, it allows interaction with them as well since it makes use of the same mediums as they do.

Gender

Lastly, it is essential to note that the mastermind behind *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* is a woman. Not only is the song written and composed by Sheetal Sathe, it is also performed by her. Being a Dalit working class woman, the act of owning one's own voice by lending it to the creation of purposive art like protest music,

is quite powerful. In the documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* (Long Live Comrade Bhim), before singing *Maji Mai* (My Mother), Sathe comments on how within the anti-caste movement, there still persists a lack of women in leadership positions. In such communities, where people support female liberation only as long as the women of their own families do not participate, taking a leading role is still equal to defying norms (Patwardhan, 2011). In fact, later in the documentary, Sathe's mother comments on how her daughter's political work is the reason for the rift between them, saying that she is the world's, not her family's. In a world where familial expectations and restrictions govern the decisions a woman makes, the decision to become the face of a movement is met with suspicion and discouragement from those close to her personally and the larger society. In the face of all this, Sathe taking up the role of lead singer becomes a subversive act that helps formulate a counter-strand to gender norms in both, the dominant public where Dalit women are rendered invisible as well as the counterpublic where gendered preconceptions still dominate, albeit in different ways.

Thus, the form that Kabir Kala Manch's art takes, aids in the creation of a subaltern counterpublic. This is done through the assertion of their own identity as working class Dalit activists, and the use of anger, language, as well as gendered expressions, to create spaces that provide refuge from the dominant public sphere. This aids in the construction and dissemination of anti-hegemonic discourse that exists outside of the mainstream, but also sometimes engages with it. It is this dialectic between the two functions of a subaltern counterpublic—the distance and the proximity with the dominant public space—that creates “emancipatory potential” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68) and allows for various institutions of oppression to be contended with.

The Content

The Past and the Future

The song *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* brings together the various representations of Bhagat Singh that exist in popular memory: namely that of a revolutionary freedom fighter, a martyr-bridegroom, and a warrior against caste.

Bhagat Singh was an Indian socialist revolutionary whose acts of spectral violence against the British in India led to his execution at the age of twenty-three and

turned him into a folk hero of the Indian independence movement. He is referred to by Ishwar Diyal Gaur (2008) as a martyr-bridegroom in the following words, “Bhagat Singh’s martyrdom begot the motif of ‘wedding with death’ in the literary culture of Punjab. The image of Bhagat Singh, as constructed in Punjabi literature, is a form of literary resistance to imperialist hegemony” (p. xiv). Gaur places Bhagat Singh in the greater literary-cultural landscape of Punjab where non-conformists such as Baba Farid and Guru Nanak are hailed as heroes, specifically for their fight against the dominant strands in society. The song, *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* remembers him in a similar fashion. Instead of being regarded as a regional hero, however, Bhagat Singh is known as a martyr belonging to the culture of revolution, hence sharing the vision of all those who shed blood for the cause or rose against fascist socio-political regimes with the chants of “Long Live Revolution”. His death is regarded as martyrdom and respected as such, and is taken as a source of inspiration for all those who walk his path.

Moreover, it is imperative to explore the role of caste in the choice of Bhagat Singh as the champion of rights for a group of Dalit activists. By doing so, Ambedkarites are paying reverence to his anti-untouchability stance and laying claim to a history not explored comprehensively in popular discourse. Bhagat Singh (1923), in his essay, ‘*Achoot Samasya*’ (Problem of Untouchability) writes, “It should be decided that all human beings are equal and neither a different one was born from birth nor by division of work” (para. 10). He identifies the capitalist bureaucracy as the oppressor of the low castes and urges them to organize themselves for the purpose of achieving liberation. He refers to the untouchables as the “real proletariat” (para. 15), calling upon them to bring the revolution. An incident that can shed light upon Bhagat Singh’s views regarding the caste system took place during his time at Central Jail, Lahore. Bhagat Singh developed a relationship with the sweeper of his death-cell, Bogha, whom he started referring to as *bebey* (mother). When Bogha asked him not to refer to him as a mother-equivalent due to his own lowly status, Bhagat Singh responded by saying that only two people in his life had ever cleaned his excreta—his mother and Bogha; hence, he referred to him as *bebey*. Before his execution, he asked Bogha to make him roti prepared by his hands. However, when Bogha reached the cell with it, Bhagat Singh had already been executed (Gaur, 2008). This story further underscores Bhagat Singh’s views on purity and its relation to caste.

The invocation of these conceptualizations of Bhagat is an act of constructing and rewriting one’s own history and identity. *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* calls upon the memory of Bhagat Singh alongside the memories of deception

faced by people in the name of freedom and the atrocities carried out against the powerless. To paraphrase hooks (1989), the struggle of these people is also a struggle of memory against forgetting. By laying claim to Bhagat Singh in all his varied representations as well as the horrors their own ancestors have faced, KKM is declaring ownership of not merely a revolutionary inheritance, but also one full of pain, humiliation, and degradation. However, while there is an acknowledgement of this past, there is also admonition of it, i.e., there is a simultaneous acceptance of one's own history and rejection of said history as fate. The song regards the present as a site of hopelessness, destitution, and clamors for a future where things are different.

As detailed earlier, a counterpublic is essential for identity-formulation. The Marathi Dalit troupe reimagines their own history and future by creating associations between their own struggles against caste, class, patriarchy, and the struggles of Bhagat Singh. In writing their past, they are taking ownership of their own present and future, refusing to let the dominant groups of society narrate their tales. Moreover, by using a figure that resonates with many groups in the society—even some that are in power—the song fulfils the function of broaching an engagement with the dominant public in order to disrupt the hegemonic ideologies and discourse, interspersing it with subversive interpretations. By employing Bhagat Singh's memory as an anti-caste revolutionary, KKM is adding more layers to the popular image of Bhagat Singh above that of merely a militant or anti-imperialist fighter.

Politics

Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai makes use of communist ideologues and revolutionary sentiments. The song remembers how Bhagat Singh had rejected the freedom which people are deluded by today. The same, false notion of freedom that cages peasants and the youth, under the guise of which the reign of marginalization and exploitation continues. By recounting the injustices faced till date by the subaltern, the song establishes KKM as oppositional to bourgeoisie politics, as well as the Hindu right-wing that kills under the name of Raam. The end of the song is hopeful—with Sathé wishing to join the line of martyrs who vowed to bring the 'laal subah' (red morning), a new beginning that promises a communist utopia. There is a shift from lamenting the failed vision of freedom to making a vow for its

achievement.

Thus, through its lyrics and openly anti-fascist and communist symbols, the KKM establishes its own progressive politics. This is essential in the creation of a counterpublic as the purpose of such a space is first and foremost the formation of an identity set on one's own terms rather than based on dominant ideologies and interpretations. Especially in a political atmosphere writhing with elements that are quick to label dissent as anti-state, this elaboration of KKM's own political outlook is necessary in defining themselves and averting false associations.

Conclusion

Therefore, through its themes of invoking the past to establish one's future and clear political stances, KKM's music enables it to establish its own values and identities. However, these are not set in isolation from the dominant public. Both, their politics, and the use of symbols speak to a larger discourse surrounding bourgeois political activity in the country. They do not adhere to the dominant framework, but rather try to establish ground from where they can speak against it.

In conclusion, *Aye Bhagat Singh Tu Zinda Hai* is a piece of art that merges the memory of a revolutionary past with a disdainful present to produce hope for an emancipatory future. It is one of the many songs written and performed by Kabir Kala Manch that opens up "spaces of radical openness" put forward by bell hooks (1989), retooling the margin from a locus of victimization to a site of resistance and collective reckoning (p. 19). These sites take the shape of counterpublics and offer opportunities for the assertion of self-identity as well as interacting with and shaping dominant discourse in stratified societies. Such forms and themes that can be used as part of subversive movements are especially necessary in today's time, when fascist regimes are on the rise and marginalized voices are under threat of erasure.

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