India’s Untouchables: Reclaiming Culture in the Struggle for Community Development

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Abstract

Dalit activists in South India have successfully transformed key traditional cultural practices long despised by other caste communities into advocacy activities as part of the struggle against caste discrimination. In this process they use music and dance to fight not for a better position within the caste hierarchy but for an end to the caste system itself. This paper explores how ‘Untouchable’ or Dalit activists and others, through collective cultural action and the work of the self-help group movement, develop their communities. Self-help groups, committed to micro-credit and micro-entrepreneurial development, not only challenge the fixed notions of caste contained in orthodox Hinduism but also generate positive economic and other community benefits for participants and their communities.

Keywords

Hinduism, caste, Dalit activists, ‘Untouchables’, cultural practices.

Dalit activists transform key traditional cultural practices long despised by other caste communities into advocacy activities as part of a struggle against caste discrimination in which they use music and dance to fight not only for a better position within the caste hierarchy but for an end to the caste system itself. This paper has as its central focus the voices of ‘Untouchable’ or Dalit activists and others, recorded for an ABC Radio National program, expressing how through collective cultural action they challenge the fixed notions of caste contained in orthodox Hinduism.

This process of cultural action is partly facilitated through the work of women’s self-help groups, where women become ‘concientized’ to an awareness that their problems are rooted in an oppressive social structure. With this realization comes a new sense of self and community as they band together to fight for fair wages, access to clean water, electricity and other rights.

Central to the process of Dalits seizing control of the means of cultural representation is their ability to challenge the construction of their status by
Brahmanic elites. Brahmins are members of priestly castes and occupy a position at the top of caste hierarchies that still play a role in defining rural communities access to resources and status. Chatterjee holds that Louis Dumont fails to adequately challenge the implications of orthodox Brahminist claims that the Hindu caste system emanates from God. In a sense a belief in a divine Logos underpins Hinduism in a similar way to the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. From this viewpoint culture is viewed as a manifestation of divine principles. Brahmins cite the Upanishads and other texts to maintain the ontological primacy of caste. While the Aryan origin Brahmin priest caste may view themselves as springing from the head of the God Brahma, Dalit people are held to come from Brahma’s feet.

The ancient Sutras, Hindu religious texts, emphasize the primacy and timeless nature of caste though the concept of caste or ‘varna’, which has changed over time since it was first mentioned in the Upanishads. Rajeshkar explains in *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* how the concept of ‘varna’ has become a representation of a complex system of stratification imposed by Aryan invaders upon the indigenous people of India:

> The Aryans enforced the caste system on the Black population [the original inhabitants of India], with a cold-blooded racist logic with [w]hites on the top, mixed races in the middle and the mass of the conquered Blacks at the bottom.

Rajeshkar’s account of caste origins encourages the Western reader to reflect upon European correlates of caste-based discrimination. Race was and is constructed by ‘Social Darwinists’ and others as a site of meaningful difference that is determined by nature rather than culture. For the biological racist, cultural differences emanate from biological characteristics and so serve to compartmentalize people of different physical characteristics into a segmented hierarchy of being.

Similarly, some Brahminists and other Hindu traditionalists hold caste to be unchanging and immutable. The nature of people of low and ‘Untouchable’ caste is seen as being constituted not by socialisation but by innate, inherited, characteristics. Just as the racist abhors miscegenation, the supporter of casteism insists upon endogamous marriages within caste or casteless communities in order to maintain separation between communities of perceived different worth. Racism, casteism and sexism consistently seek to define difference in biological rather than cultural terms as a means of seeing difference as essential rather than constructed.

Srinivas’s analysis of caste is consistent with a constructionist view of meaning in which the world is not laden with meaning in any a priori sense. Meaning is created by human minds that ‘project’ it onto and into the world that they experience. Crotty acknowledges the importance of culture as a kind of shared resource that individuals draw upon in their construction of the world. Culture in this sense provides the raw materials that individuals and groups modify as they create new meanings through their engagement with the world. Giddens notes that this process is the mechanism that creates cultural change.
While this view of the changeability of culture contains revolutionary implications for Dalits who challenge the primacy of Brahmanist hegemony, it does not suggest that the world can be made into anything an actor may wish it to be. As Gramsci explains, ideology is a complex set of beliefs that people hold about the nature of the world, an ideational framework that shapes their world view as well as self-perceptions. For Gramsci a key concern is the way ideology is shared not only by the elites whose interests it serves but also by the bulk of the community, who internalize its concepts and values and so support the social order. This moral construction of the world, shared even by the oppressed, usually means that cultural continuity rather than cultural change prevails.

**Music as a Potent Weapon in the Struggle for Human Rights**

Many ‘Untouchables’ are fighting against what may be termed a ‘casteist’ ideology. Some, driven to desperation, take up arms as Maoist guerrillas who kill to create a society free of distinctions based on hereditary caste or social class. Other ‘Untouchables’, such as those of Tamil Nadu in South India, deploy their traditional music as a potent weapon in their struggle for human rights. ‘Untouchables’ are by far the largest group amongst the fifth of India’s population that live precariously, yet Mendelsohn and Vicziany note the historically problematic nature of organizing diverse Dalit communities into a single movement or co-ordinated group of movements.

The unique music of the ‘Untouchables’ has long been viewed by high-caste elites as a degenerate culture born of a degenerate and essentially impure people. Their presence and cultural practices are frequently viewed as polluting by people of high status. Professor Subramanium dismisses all music not made by people of high caste. During a Carnatic or classical music recital at Chennai’s Academy of Music, he says:

> There is folk music and classical music. Carnatic music is scientifically organized, folk music is not so... people who are not properly trained just sing out of emotion, enthusiasm. Folk music can be sung by any child. Quacks! Carnatic is not like this, you need a talent.

Despite the prejudice of people of high caste, those that starve and suffer within the Hindu hierarchy are reclaiming Untouchable music. It is becoming a source of powerful resistance, the basis of new and empowered identities. As Untouchable women come together to share and find solutions to their problems at meetings of self-help groups in villages throughout India, they learn that they are not to blame for their individual problems. These people become ‘concientized’ in the term coined by Paolo Freire, the Brazilian thinker, to the fact that their problems are rooted in an oppressive social structure. With this realization comes a new sense of self and community as they band together to fight for fair wages, access to clean water, access to electricity and other rights. The discovery of common issues is a primary step in the community development process. When the ‘personal becomes the political’, individuals are better able to recognize that their life problems are not rooted in their unique situations but are part of a collective set of circumstantial limitations.
Ambu, a charismatic woman activist with an NGO called the Village Action Group, describes how the women use the power of song:

The women are used to singing on agriculture work ... on suffering, temples, gods, but sing here about problems and on solutions. We sing songs about the problems of women: dowry, chastity, about who will change these problems. We sing songs at women’s meetings. The power of the songs is that they help women to pick up meanings fast.¹⁹

Mr. Arokiasamy, an ‘Untouchable’ and a leader at another nearby grassroots organization, the Peoples Multipurpose Development Society, describes the many village teashops in which ‘Untouchables’ are still forbidden to drink out of the same glasses used by people of high caste. In certain villages they are prevented from ritually contaminating entire streets by being forbidden from walking in shoes or riding bicycles.

Arokiasamy may have been born into the wrong end of the Hindu caste ladder but, like Professor Subramaniam, he is critical of Gandhi’s position on caste. An intensely religious man, Ghandi believed that the caste system of the Hindu scriptures is divinely ordained and should remain in place.²⁰ However, untouchability was, he felt, a recent perversion of Hinduism and must be done away with.

Arokiasamy, like his hero the great Untouchable leader Dr. Ambedkar, feels that there will be no end to caste discrimination unless the entire caste system is overturned. During the dying days of British India Dr. Ambedkar challenged Gandhi’s position on ‘Untouchables’, insisting that they be recognized as a separate constituency with their own representatives in parliament in a soon-to-be independent India. Gandhi, appalled at this attack on the caste system, promptly commenced a hunger strike to the death to force Ambedkar to back down from his demands. Ambedkar did so, but not before he succeeded in writing a provision into the future national constitution that guaranteed ‘Untouchables’ as well as tribal people 18 per cent of all positions in government at central, state and local levels.²¹

Although Arokiasamy works with Hindus, Muslims and Christians from ‘Untouchables’ and other communities, the Pariyar ‘Untouchables’ are amongst the most downtrodden. When the British colonialists observed how miserably the Pariyar were exploited and excluded from the Hindu mainstream, they applied their community name to all in the world who were rejected and despised. They became known as ‘pariahs’.²²

The Pariyars’ low status is continually emphasized through association with one of the most impure and contaminating phenomena of all in Hinduism—death. Required in the past to clear away dead cattle from the fields of their strictly vegetarian landlords they were forced through starvation to furtively eat the putrefying carcasses of sacred cows. This intimacy with death perhaps was the factor that compelled Pariyar to develop yet another stigmatising cultural practice.²³

During funeral celebrations for other castes Pariyar are expected to play the distinctive ‘pari’ drum of their caste community from which their name derives.
Its skin of dead cow is ritually impure. They are required at the funerals of all castes to play for hours on end as part of a mourning process that involves processions and public dancing.

**Inverting Cultural Meanings**

I think it’s a punishment for our caste. We have been forced to play this drum for other communities. That is why I consider it a punishment. Though they looked down upon us we had to help them with the funeral process. We had to or no one would dance.\(^\text{24}\)

At a meeting of ‘Untouchable’ activists on the grounds of the Peoples Multipurpose Development Society, Mr. Savera, a master pari drummer, holds and beats the instrument to provide a stirring virtuoso performance. The rhythm builds in intensity as the listeners break into a spontaneous dance of Dalit pride as they celebrate the drum’s message—that theirs is a culture and a political force to be reckoned with. Once it was a symbol of the degradation of the Pariyar. Today the Pari drum has become a potent weapon in the struggle against casteism.

In the olden days we were ashamed of performing music in their houses and also our wages were very low ... but now our situation has changed. Because they wanted us to play the drum for their funerals they thought badly about our culture but now we are proud ... It’s not funeral music anymore. It’s a music of our own.\(^\text{25}\)

Many young Pariyar, however, prefer to play modern brass-band drums covered with synthetic skins. The deeply internalized shame about the degradation associated with cow skin still remains amongst those who have not adopted the pari as a symbol of cultural resistance.

There has been hesitation amongst young people to use traditional drums. They use modern drums, but now Dalit leaders make propaganda: ‘this is our culture, our music; young people should come forward to play the pail drum’. I find a lot of improvements. We young people play this music.\(^\text{26}\)

Arokiasamy does not dance with the younger men but is delighted at how Pariyar traditional culture is being used to reshape their identity into an active and positive force. Like all followers of Dr. Ambedkar he rejects the insulting caste name of ‘Untouchable’ along with Gandhi’s name ‘Harijan’ or ‘children of God’. The terms have condescending and stigmatizing connotations. He prefers the name ‘Dalit’ which means ‘oppressed’ and contains within itself the possibility of an identity based on a drive for liberation.\(^\text{27}\)

**Cultural Practice and Activism**

Sitting quietly, Arokiasamy reflects on the gradual process of awakening that enabled him to recognize that his traditional culture is a more useful force in the development of Dalit consciousness and commitment to social change than the more militant activity he promoted in the past:

In early days we were revolutionary... objected to high castes, priests and politicians. We organized youths, we fought landlords, hunger strikes... jail... Then we realized it was not the right way to proceed.\(^\text{28}\)
Pariyar still use their traditional drums at funerals. It is a key means of Pariyar for earning a livelihood. However they are increasingly being used to lead processions of villagers campaigning to win local elections for their own candidates in democratic victories just as Dr Ambedkhar once envisaged. Sagamarie is a Dalit and leader of the Liberation Movement for Women. She works closely with Arokiasamy in assisting women to work collectively towards their economic empowerment through self-help savings groups so that they can start small businesses.

Sagamarie campaigns on her own and the Dalit community’s behalf. She describes how she mobilized Dalit voters through staging a procession led by Pariyar drummers. Gathering crowds as it travelled through dusty streets and laneways, the procession united Hindu, Muslim and Christian Dalit villagers on the way to the voting booth. As the procession passed by the well-built or ‘pukka’ houses of the rich, upper-caste families of the more salubrious quarters of the village, the musicians, men and boys threw themselves into energetic, spontaneous dances in front of ever-growing crowds. The frenetic dance of defiance is a display of Dalit identity, pride and strength. Excitedly she recounts the triumphal march:

A big procession... house to house to collect the votes, then vote time! I have a feeling inside me that I will win!

Dalits are working to claim political power at the local village level through being elected to the local ‘panchayat’ or councils. Watching with great amusement a performance of ‘Popular Theatre’, Arokiasamy describes how he and Sagamarie began to employ this and other forms of Dalit traditional culture to raise people’s awareness about how together they could struggle to reject the feelings of helplessness that are part of ‘Untouchability’ as a precursor to this and other processes of political participation:

... we started mobilising the people by various means, by popular theatre, by drama, everything, what not... We will go there, we will not care for anybody, we will start singing loudly and finally people will come together. We used to express all our thoughts to them. Pour out everything.

The Koothardias, a so-called ‘backward community’, though not Dalits, are accorded a position at the near bottom of the caste hierarchy. Their cultural practices have also been adapted to the struggle for social change and human rights. This phenomenon provides some means of understanding their resistance to casteism from their own perspective. The Koothardias are allied in some senses to Dalits due to their proximity at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and increasingly in Villapurum District, Tamil Nadu, by their shared efforts in creating new cultural and political meanings. These acts of cultural transformation oriented towards political change may be examined in terms of how actors engage together with the processes of forging new meanings.

The Koothardia community of dancers traditionally work with the Pariahs to present a theatrical form known as ‘Popular Theatre’. While ‘Popular Theatre’ is a rich tradition that reflects both its own caste origins as well as referring to the classical or Brahmanic dance styles of South India, proponents are by no means staid or purely didactic in their approach. Like the Pariah processions
that celebrate the power of their movement for social change, their performances are adapted to a form of consciousness-raising of members within local village communities.

During ordinary village celebrations, Koothardia and Pariah drummers entertain the crowds. Two Koothardia, usually a married couple, are dressed identically in short skirts, tight bodices and wear on their heads a green lovebird crafted from wood. Perched on top of the dancers’ heads these little birds’ wings flap harder and harder as the dancers proceed. The woman dancer sashays across the space one or two times before pausing in the middle of the space to dance.

The cross-dressed male dancer enters the scene, sashays across the circle a couple of times and, grabbing his partner in a loose embrace, stands by her, bells on his ankle ringing as they grind their hips together in an exuberant act of mock intercourse. There is little in this dance that resembles the classical Brahmanic cultural dance forms such as Bharat Natyam. Its earthiness represents a separate knowledge that exists in opposition to Brahmanist values and practices.

The art of the Dalit musicians and low-caste musicians and dancers may be apprehended in two senses. From a traditional orthodox Hindu point of view it evokes, but does not rewrite, the Brahman hegemonic narratives of caste relations. In this sense the artist may add his or her own personal style to the performance, yet the story told is perhaps largely primordial and unchanged. Well may the Brahmin concur with Plato that art resembles a poor child born of poor parents. Plato describes art which is imitative of life itself. The world in turn is only a mere imitation of the Divine immutable Forms that serve as cosmic blueprints of the world. In this view, art thus maintains the social order as a manifestation of Divine order.

Adorno, on the other hand, identifies the revolutionary potential of art. The consciousness-raising role of performances by Dalit activists ‘defy every pre-established universality’. Such art is, as Crotty maintains, able to be ‘subversive and redemptive’ in its social role.

Srinivas notes a tendency amongst lower caste communities to mimic the practices of the Brahmanic elites in a process he terms ‘sanskritization’. This phenomena sees lower caste communities adopting practices such as dowry. However, the sexualized performances of the Koothardia reflect a set of values independent of a casteist cultural hegemony. They express what Gramsci in his work *Prison Notebooks* terms as ‘common sense’, a kind of knowledge that non-elite groups possess about their existential situation.

The ‘Popular Theatre’ performance entrances children and adults alike in its telling, through music, dance and theatre, stories of the Dalit gods. These deities, like Dalits themselves and unlike high-caste Gods, eat meat. The lustily sung epic stories of the non-vegetarian gods combine with items of a more contemporary nature featuring female impersonators, and a range of comedic sketches continue all night long, keeping the audience in paroxysms of laughter. Says Arokiasamy:

I danced all these things. I had some roles. I enjoy this music like anything... Like that we wrote songs and stories... Traditionally they would sing songs about the Gods but we would convert them to social issues... the problems
of the people... how can we come together to solve the problems. We will never play kings and Gods roles. But we will act like Gods and kings. We will speak revolutionary thoughts. It is the way we bring awareness to the people.34

Conclusion

In villages all over India, Dalits are reclaiming their music and culture and transforming them into powerful tools of activism. With these new identities—built on a rejection of an ‘Untouchable’ status foisted upon them by high-caste elites—they are succeeding in challenging upper-caste interests in a myriad of new ways. Through collective action they attain credit from bank managers, develop small businesses, petition government officials for access to services and even run for local government.

The challenges are great, and opposition to Dalit culture and rights means that activists like Arokiasamy, Sagamarie and Savera have a long and painful journey towards social equality. People like Professor Subramanium, the retired scholar, are unlikely to change chauvinistic beliefs borne of their high caste identity, and resent and inhibit any advances made by Dalits. Subramanium complains:

The other castes have taken the upper hand everywhere. Pariyar have got position ... they are brought up in immoral ways, illiterate! ... They don’t know what morals are! Like that the lower communities want to become leaders.35

Lakshmi, a young Brahmin woman studying singing at the prestigious Music Academy of Madras, embodies hope for an India of the next generation where caste and cultural difference is celebrated rather than despised. Standing outside the Academy’s auditorium, her eyes sparkling with pleasure at the music escaping from within, she murmurs:

They say this classical music is a divine music.36

Lakshmi, challenged by being asked if classical music is divine for Dalits as well as Brahmins, laughs in embarrassment:

India is like that. Some things we can’t say openly. The people have to change mentalities and get a broader mind. Otherwise we can’t save India. Brahmins have to... we must allow them near us... Brahmins will not accept them to come near... I can’t explain... I am Brahmin but I am not like that... My parents they will think they are all backward classes.37

Asked if she can imagine a concert with Dalits and Brahmins playing together, she answers:

It would be nice... 38

Caste, the Hindu system of social stratification, though presented as a fixed social structure by some western commentators39, can be characterized by its fluidity40—a reality not lost on the Dalit activists seeking to overthrow the caste system as a whole. Dalits utilize their traditional culture to transform their sense of their social status. Their music and dance, long despised by other caste communities, is used as the basis of a revolutionary culture in which they fight for an end to the caste system itself. Central to this process is the work of
women’s self-help groups, where women become ‘concientized’ to the fact that their problems are rooted in an oppressive social structure. Their meetings are accompanied by music and dance that reflect these new and powerful identities as they work together to fight peacefully for their human rights.

Endnotes


7 ibid.


9 D. Rajshekar, *Dalit*.

10 A. Giddens, *Sociology*.

11 M. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*.

12 A. Giddens, *Sociology*.


14 ibid.


16 ibid.

17 J. Silverman, *Food, Music*.


19 J. Silverman, *Food, Music*.

20 O. Mendelsohn and M. Vicziany, *The ‘Untouchables’*.

21 ibid.

22 ibid.
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Julian Silverman works with local and international groups to develop projects that celebrate the role of cultural identity and evolving cultural practice as part of building strong communities. He is currently engaged in the development and delivery of training planned in partnership with Indigenous Australian participants as well as with Australian volunteers and their local counterparts in East Timor and other nations.