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Author(s): Pranoy Saha

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Politics of Performance: interrogating history, memory, and appropriation in *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*

Pranoy Saha, PhD Student, Performance Studies, School of Culture and Creative Expressions, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Kashmere Gate, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper takes a closer look at *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*, a theatrical production put together by the Delhi state government in 2022. The musical tells the story of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, one of India's most influential figures, who played a key role in shaping the country's Constitution. While the musical generated a lot of buzz and drew in large crowds, it also raises important questions about how Ambedkar's legacy is represented today. By analyzing the musical through frameworks of *popular aesthetics*, *popular culture*, and *cultural labor*, the paper argues that the performance sanitizes and depoliticises Dr. Ambedkar's radical legacy, reducing his multifaceted contributions to a non-threatening, dominant narrative.

The paper argues that the musical, while engaging, oversimplifies Dr. Ambedkar's life by focusing mainly on his work with the Constitution. It largely glosses over his critiques of Hinduism and his vision for a Buddhist India - issues that were central to his activism. Moreover the paper positions this appropriation within the broader context of hegemonic cultural practices that seek to domesticate subaltern histories for mass consumption. It contends that the state's co-option of Dr. Ambedkar's legacy in this manner reflects broader efforts to subvert and tame radical public discourse, ultimately serving as a tool for reinforcing the status quo. It underscores the significance of critically engaging with contemporary representations of subaltern figures in creative expression and highlights the potential limitations of state-sponsored cultural productions in representing marginalized histories.

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Introduction: Decoding the grand spectacle

In February 2022 the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi inaugurated the first show of a musical theatre production, *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*. It presented a theatrical portrayal of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar's life, politics, and struggle for the masses on a monumental scale. The 100 ft wide stage was propped with a 40 ft huge rotating platform, which with the aid of lasers and lights transformed into different locations as the story progressed. Columbia University and Yerawada Jail were among other locations portrayed in the theatrical biography of Dr. Ambedkar. The production was able to attract a lot of audience and its popularity was attested by the fact that the schedule of the performance had to be extended to 24th March, which initially was from 25th February to 12th March. This blockbuster audience turnover was maintained even with two daily shows running at the auditorium of Jawahar Lal Nehru stadium with a capacity of approximately one thousand people.

The production unmistakably came across as one with a hefty budget, which casted popular television actors like Rohit Bose (as Babasaheb) and Tisca Chopra. It incorporated a lot of dance pieces accompanying the numerous songs that were part of the production, with almost 150 artists working on stage. Director Mahua Chauhan made use of the popular element of *sutradhar* or *vidushak* used in Indian theatre tradition for this performance, who is more than just a narrator and one who constantly breaks the 'fourth wall' to get in a dialogue with the audience. The music was another highlight of the performance, which was designed by the fusion-rock band *Indian Ocean*. The main track for the performance was released



publicly before the inauguration of the performance.

The AAP government's commitment to the figure of Ambedkar was certainly on display. The sincerity of this commitment, however is a different matter altogether and will be discussed later in this paper. Before the curtain was raised for the play, the digital frame on the three edges of the curtain displayed some text on top and two images on the sides. At the top appeared the titles of Dr. Ambedkar's speeches and writings, 'Who were the Shudras?', 'Annihilation of Caste', 'Riddles of Hinduism' among others, on one side appeared Babasaheb Ambedkar and on the other Arvind Kejriwal (then chief minister of Delhi) the leader of AAP.

The message was clear, as he put it to words himself while inaugurating the performance, that AAP believes that Dr. Ambedkar is a highly inspirational figure and that creative representation is a powerful medium to impart that inspiration apart from formal education. However, it is extremely difficult to take these claims at face value under the scrutiny of the nature of the social justice agenda put forward by AAP. This paper aims to argue that the ideological fallacy of AAP apparent in their political trajectory is also reflected in the spectacle they produced for mass consumption. The performance *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical* was certainly a unique event in the Delhi theatre circuit, which is centered at Mandi House and primarily caters to a middle-class audience. Even though the performance broke the codes of status quo in terms of access, tickets were free, however, internet access was required. Through a close analysis of the performance, its music, and its content, this paper will argue that otherwise, the performance very much upheld the hegemonic ethos.



It will be more evident upon further deliberation that it is within this hegemonic ethos and ideology that the discussed performance limits the framing of Dr. Ambedkar, highlighting the complexities of state-sponsored cultural productions. The author takes up the analysis from a point of view of a spectator of the performance, using their presence and their engagement with the Ambedkarite identity enables an informed reflection on the following questions, how the performance engages with marginalised history and collective memory? and what is the nature of the appropriation that the performance marks? Furthermore, this paper will make use of broader conceptual frameworks of ‘popular aesthetic’ (Bourdieu 5), ‘popular culture’ (Hall 443), and ‘cultural labour’ (Prakash 3) to elaborate upon a particular bourgeois configuration of performance that enables curbing and limiting radical public discourse. By doing so, this paper also intends to engage with the broader discourse of ethics in the realm of cultural representation of subaltern communities in contemporary society.

Legacy of Babasaheb and his people

The Dalit community is often accused of hero worship or of deifying the figure of Ambedkar. This articulation lacks a position of empathy, which discourages a proper understanding of the significance of Ambedkar as a figure for the Dalit community. Moreover, the situation of continuous denial of control to the subaltern communities over their histories fails to find any resolution with such articulations. The history of this denial is long and complex, and one of the crucial aspects of Dalit identity has been to engage critically with this history. Dr. Ambedkar was a stalwart of the anti-caste movement in the twentieth century. He contributed immensely to the nation-building process and fought the hegemonic Brahmanical forces in different shades who dominated the process. The



contested history of the Poona Pact highlights the difficulty of his struggle towards autonomy and marks the treachery of the nationalists¹.

Dr. Ambedkar represented the ‘untouchable’ community at the Round Table Conference (RTC) (1930-32); they were classified as ‘Depressed Classes’ under colonial administration and post-independence as ‘Scheduled Castes’, according to the scriptural *Varna* hierarchy they are *ati-shudras* or *avarana* who are subjugated to perpetual caste slavery and their hereditary occupations were fixed to the most menial jobs. At the RTC Dr. Ambedkar convincingly argued that for the freedom of ‘Depressed Classes’, it was essential that they be granted a separate electorate, without which their struggle for political and social autonomy will not progress. The demand for autonomy was opposed by Mr. M. K. Gandhi, who accused that such a move would break up the Hindu society. But these concerns were meticulously critiqued by Dr. Ambedkar, arguing how the gain of political autonomy by ‘untouchables’ could break up a society that was itself divided by caste and treated the ‘untouchables’ worse than slaves. The award for separate electorate was successfully received; it was certainly a great victory for the ‘untouchables’, but it was not acceptable to Gandhi, and he opposed it with a fast until death. This ultimately forced Dr. Ambedkar to sacrifice his community’s rights to political autonomy and to settle for reserved seats in a common electorate in the shape of the Poona Pact (1932).

The ineffectiveness of the Poona Pact and its use as a political gimmick at the hands of Congress was pointed out by Dr. Ambedkar in his text “What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables?” (published year - 1945). This history though, has been suppressed by the State as well as the academia, which are controlled by the dominant castes.



The fact that until the 1970s the State had not taken the initiative to officially publish Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches, speaks loudly of the systematic marginalisation. In such a scenario, the Dalit community took it upon themselves to preserve this history, to learn from it, and to circulate it with very limited resources at their disposal. The role of intellectuals, activists, and artists from Dalit-Bahujan communities was essential in the proliferation of these histories while constantly dealing with hegemonic social and political forces. Post Poona Pact, Dr. Ambedkar declared at the Yeola Conference (1935) that he may have been born a Hindu, but he would not die as one. He proposed conversion as the only way out, a stance which was very much in line with his thesis of 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936) where he concluded that to destroy caste at its source, the vedic scriptures and its authority, must be made invalid.

Dr. Ambedkar worked multidimensionally towards a religious identity free from the hegemony of Brahmanism, this culminated into the event of mass conversion into Buddhism in 1956. The event of conversion remains another difficult instance for the dominant mode of historiography and hence finds a lack of representation within it. Further marginalised is Dr. Ambedkar's vision of '*Prabuddha Bharat*' (enlightened Buddhist India) as it contains within it the blueprint of the demise of Brahmanical Hinduism. He argued that Buddhism was a revolutionary religion that has been in constant battle with counter-revolutionary forces of Brahmanism, and as people, not just Dalits, start understanding that, they will eventually embrace Buddhism. His relentless commitment towards Dalit-Bahujan communities against all the odds earned him the title of *Babasaheb* or the revered father. The community has fought with their sweat and blood to further the legacy of Babasaheb. One can observe this



commitment in the organised community efforts, of building the *Deekshabhoomi* - the site of 1956 conversion event (Sukhdev 15-21), in the sixteen years long struggle to rename the Marathwada university in Babasaheb's name (Sonpimple, *par. 2*); or in the instances of individual assertion where people continue to lose their lives for setting a ringtone dedicated to Babasaheb on their mobile (Gaikwad, *par 1*), for trying to put a board with Babasaheb's picture in their locality (Kumar, *par 1*).

Ambedkarite Cultural Revolution

Before we move ahead to critically analyse the production of *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*, it will be important to briefly look at the Ambedkarite cultural sphere, which has played a quintessential role in the proliferation of the Ambedkarite discourse and politics. But the brief legacy of Babasaheb provided above attests to the high emotionality that people have with the figure of Ambedkar, which works in favour of a production like *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical* to become an instant hit. For now, let us focus on the Ambedkarite cultural sphere to better understand the nature of this emotionality. *Ambedkari Jalsa*, the Lokshahri tradition, and other popular performance traditions have led the way towards the formation of a counter-culture, retained the marginalised history embedding it in their repertoire of performances, and continue to inspire contemporary Dalit-Bahujan activists and practitioners. Yogesh Maitreya, in his book *Singing/Thinking Anti-Caste* (2021), provides a historical account of anti-caste musical traditions and aesthetics. It was Bhimrao Kardak and his troupe that pioneered the genre of *Ambedkari Jalsa*. It borrowed certain elements from the performance tradition of *Tamasha*, which already existed, and filled its content with Babasaheb Ambedkar's thoughts and ideas.



Different performance traditions have been for long familiar to Dalit-Bahujan communities, they have been broadly categorised as ‘folk performances’. These traditions have long existed under caste and feudal relations, where the performers belonged to subaltern communities and caste elites were the patrons. Unlike the art practiced by the elites, which imparts them with a certain cultural capital, the practitioners of ‘folk’ traditions have been subjected to force, stigma, shame, and violence. The situation under the caste - feudal relations can be better understood through the concept of “cultural labour”. Culture and labour are intertwined, something that the Aristotelian aesthetic regime denies, but in the presence of caste - feudal relations, labour remained obligatory, exploited, and demeaned. In such a scenario, the performers from Dalit - Bahujan communities despite their enormous contribution of ‘cultural labour’, remained unrecognised and marginalised. While one can also find instances where ‘cultural labour’ of the performers have earned them recognition and a special status in their own society, but even in that case “cultural labour does not match the disseminative power of cultural capital and its relationship with the state's institutions”. Traditionally these practices had “enslaved its participants” into the social position of subjugation, but these practices also ensured a constant interaction of subaltern communities with different repertoires of performances. Hence ‘cultural labour’ along with its disadvantages, also provides the potential of being used for a transformative purpose but it “depends on the ideology employed” (Prakash 36).

This transformation of a ‘folk’ tradition can be observed in the tradition of *Ambedkari Jalsa*. It is ideology that transforms the performance tradition to impart a distinct kind of interpretation and significance. While these transformations retain the historical function of



performance as a reservoir of local memories, histories, values, and lived experience; they imparted a much greater autonomy to the practitioners over the form and content of the performances. Maitreya elaborating upon the beginning of *Ambedkari jalsa*, cites from Bhimrao Kardak's 1978 book "*Ambedkari Jalsa: Swaroop ani Karya*":

When Babasaheb's annihilation of caste movement started, all the illiterate men and women would come for his meetings, listen to his speeches with utmost concentration, in silence, and try to act according to his message. But they were unable to break free from their old habits, conditioned into them for years. They were clueless at times with 'satyagraha' and 'conversion' . . .

Whatever nectar of wisdom Babasaheb provided them from time to time, we narrated it in the language (of performance) understood in villages, in their spoken dialects. Their curiosity and longing increased as a result. Babasaheb also watched us perform jalsa twice or thrice in Dadar. He had said 'My ten meetings are equal to your one jalsa'. (18)

Subaltern performance genres like *Ambedkari Jalsa* became immensely popular, as its content gave space to everyday socio-cultural reality, and its form allowed for an engaged spectatorship. These genres could be better understood under the conceptual frameworks of "popular aesthetic" and "popular culture". For Bourdieu, "popular aesthetic" is "based on the affirmation of continuity between art and life"; it presents a contrast to the bourgeois aesthetic for which "detachment and disinterestedness" are necessary qualities. In terms of codes of spectatorship, "the popular aesthetic ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and 'vulgar enjoyment'", which is considered distasteful by the bourgeois



aesthetic. Encompassing such radical and participatory ethos, genres like *Ambedkari Jalsa* are not limited to merely expressing but rather work towards constituting a sphere of doing and social change. Therefore, it comes close to Stuart Hall's description of "popular culture", which according to him, "is not a sphere where socialism might simply be 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted" (Hall 453). The legacy of Dr. Ambedkar's political and social action and the popular culture that took shape around his legacy provides a pivotal position to critically reflect upon the state's efforts to produce a performance like *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*.

Subversion and appropriation of popular culture

Even though this state initiative of cultural production is part of the dominant cultural practices, it cannot be said that the "dominant culture" exists in complete separation from "popular culture". Rather, it engages in a continuous struggle to constantly "disorganise and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms" (Hall 447). This struggle is quite evident in the AAP government's grandeur efforts at the representation of Ambedkar. Even though AAP positions itself as committed to the cause of social justice and in lieu of this it invested in this grand production, but politically it exhibit a centre to right ideology. Their ideology was laid bare when they made to resign a sitting Dalit minister from their cabinet, as he had been a part of a public Buddhist conversion ceremony in his personal capacity ("Delhi", *par.* 5). Now, contrast this with their attempt to associate with the figure of Ambedkar; it surely raises doubts over the sincerity of their political motives behind such a move. Further analysis of the production itself will allow more ground to test these doubts.



The production provided a limited and trivialized biopic of Ambedkar in the name of presenting Babasaheb to a larger audience. The repertoire of genres like *Ambedkari Jalsa*, discussed above, contains a radical historiography of his life and struggle. They present the history of the important events like the Poona Pact and mass conversion with revolutionary fervor. Poona Pact is not remembered in these tellings as reaching an amicable position with Gandhi, but rather as an instance of treachery and deceit by the dominant caste politicians. The state-sponsored production contains and sanitizes this historical antagonism and presents a toned-down version of the Poona Pact, which better suits the dominant ideology. Similarly, the event of conversion does not find more than a trivialised mention in the State's production, focusing solely on the issue of untouchability rather than engaging with Dr. Ambedkar's categorical critiques of Vedas and other Dharmashastras. Neither did it provide any space to understand the event of conversion with relevance to the project of Buddhist revivalism in India and Babasaheb's vision of *Prabudha Bharat*. It is important to note that these nuances have been dealt with in much depth in the Ambedkarite cultural sphere.

The state's efforts to tame history and present a non-threatening discourse in favour of status quo is evident in these omissions from the production. It even included one of the most popularised myths about Ambedkar, which clearly intended to serve the dominant narrative, that his last name, Ambedkar was given to him by his Brahmin teacher. The music of the production also needs to be scrutinised against the charge of appropriation. The music design by fusion-rock band *Indian Ocean* carried an uncanny resemblance to the contemporary production *Bhimgeets*, like the ones produced by Adarsh Shinde. *Bhimgeets* have had a history and journey of their own. In contemporary times, it has co-opted the introduction of



technology into music. It has been popular among the masses for decades. For the band *Indian Ocean*, this certainly seems like a new experiment, as their prior productions have been very distinct in flavour and feel of music; moreover, it was certainly their first time to engage with the figure of Ambedkar as a music band. It is natural to question the choice of the band, given that the production certainly wanted to make use of what was popular among the masses.

Why not collaborate with artists who have been associated with the Ambedkarite cultural sphere? The answer to that question hides behind the motives of subversion and containment. While the genre of *Bhimgeet* has been looked down by scholars and critics as merely hagiographic accounts, “but they are really accounts of history that were never written by this country’s historians” (Maitreya 26). The *Bhimgeets*, as the naming itself suggests, are songs about Babasaheb, but they present the radical history that the dominant narrative wants to subdue. In these songs, he has been imagined as a Bodhisattva, the one who brought Buddhism back to people; his vision of a *Prabuddha Bharat* and his aggressive critique of Hinduism have found ample space in these songs. But in the songs by the band *Indian Ocean* and also in the narrative presented through the performance, the figure of Dr. Ambedkar was primarily limited to that of the constitution maker; his ideas on religion and critique of Hinduism, his radical ideas of annihilation of caste and social transformation find hardly any elaboration.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical* marks the efforts towards



depoliticising the Ambedkarite cultural sphere and appropriating it suitably into the dominant narrative. For a long time, Ambedkar remained untouched by the dominant sphere of cultural representation, but at present, it has become sort of inevitable to deal with him due to the continuing upsurge of Ambedkarite politics, more so in the age of the internet. This inevitability has forced the dominant to come up with tactics of subversion and appropriation. This situation can be compared to Sara Beth's analysis of the yearly Dalit gathering, which takes place in the heart of Delhi at Sansad Marg on Ambedkar Jayanti. She argues that as the state provides a dedicated space for this gathering, it allows the state to create a controlled environment within which the Dalit gathering can be restricted. "*Dalit melas*" have a history of confrontation with the population of dominant caste, these gatherings have brought Dalit assertion to common spaces, but the intervention of the state leads to a "de-politicisation as the mela as 'civic affair' now becomes part of a dominant narrative where the state becomes the legitimate dispenser of space" (Beth 407).

In the case of the production *Babasaheb: The Grand Musical*, the control of the state goes even further, unlike the yearly Dailt gathering in Delhi, here Dalits have no autonomy over the content of the presentation. Moreover, as the production was intended for a common audience, it became necessary for the state to present a narrative suitable to the status quo. The purpose of elaborating upon Dr. Ambedkar's political trajectory and the history of the Ambedkarite cultural sphere in this paper is to pose critical scrutiny of the initiatives by the state and dominant cultural sphere aimed at representing subaltern histories. The tall claims of portraying Babasaheb or other anti-caste figures by the Brahmanical state should not be taken at face value. Moreover, the contemporary use of performance as a tool to subvert and



appropriate subaltern histories and narratives remains a matter that needs serious engagement from scholars in the field of creative expressions.



Endnote:

¹ *Chamcha Age* by Kanshi Ram provides an elaborate account of the history of Poona Pact and its significance in shaping Dalit-Bahujan politics in contrast to the Nationalist politics.



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