

Politics of Symbols and Changing Religious Practices: Counter-Hegemonic Assertion of Dalit Migrants in Mumbai

Ajeet Kumar Pankaj

Introduction

Increasing globalisation, urbanisation, industrialisation and technological development have resulted in diversity of migration patterns, which in turn have led to heterogeneity among people, languages and cultures in any given area. Culture comprises people's thought, patterns of behaviour, lifestyle, values, beliefs, language and food habits. Hofstede (2001) has classified culture into four categories: symbol, rituals, values and heroes (p. 9-10). Whereas E.B. Taylor has conceived of culture as a complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law and customs acquired by members of a society (cited in Junghare 2015, 406). It is obvious that with the movement of people, various languages, belief systems, rituals and symbols spread throughout the world. In the era of globalisation, migrants retain their culture at the destination, which helps cities to develop the phenomenon of cultural pluralism (N.K. Bose 1968, cited in Singh 2015, 180). Studies have claimed that migrants belonging to a particular region, with shared cultural practices, knowledge, language, ideology, religion and caste, form a group and tend to live together in a neighbourhood of a city (Singh 1992, 180). It is seen that migration has disseminated cultural practices of different social groups, which travel from source to destination and vice versa. One result has also been an emerging cultural consciousness among migrants.

A recent study notes that 'increasing cultural consciousness and assertion of cultural difference have become prominent tools for those facing discrimination to assert their rights to fair treatment, if not equality' (Singh and Singh 2017, 376). In India Dalits are the most vulnerable social groups who have been historically subjugated, and have experienced prolonged discrimination and social exclusion (Kumar 2014, 38). Some studies about caste and Dalit assertion contend that Dalits have claimed a new cultural identity and assertion by creating rituals revolving around their own heroes, such as Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar, and Dalit politicians like Kanshiram and Mayawati. They celebrate events such as Ambedkar Jayanti, and create their own narrative of socio-political, and cultural consciousness in oral history forms. Such deconstruction of popular

Ajeet Kumar Pankaj is an Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Regional Campus Manipur, Imphal.

history is often a key method of empowerment and mobilisation, and it can also be seen as cultural assertion (see Narayan 2006, 40; S. Singh 2016, 357). Jaoul (2006) has argued that the process of installation of Ambedkar statues is a tool of Dalit assertion. The appropriation of Ambedkar through such symbolic means is a strategy of empowerment for Dalits, a means to assert themselves against various prejudices and oppression. Such symbols not only provide a tool of assertion but also work as a motivation to rewrite their history on various occasions.

Chaitya Bhumi and Golden Pagoda in Mumbai, for example, are now seen as cultural and political symbols of Dalits.¹ These symbols have been recognised and acknowledged by the Dalits of Maharashtra for long; in contemporary times Dalit migrants to Mumbai have also started embracing these symbols. Dalits visit Chaitya Bhumi on the death anniversary of Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the Golden Pagoda every 15 August, apart from observing various important days related to their icons, such as Ambedkar Jayanti and Ravidas Jayanti. When Dalits migrated to Mumbai from other parts of India, especially Uttar Pradesh, they developed a cohesive and reciprocal relationship with local Dalits, based on a shared caste identity. In the process of such socio-cultural exchanges, Dalit migrants began to visit Chaitya Bhumi with local Dalits. Political anthropologist Badri Narayan writes that ‘new narratives of Dalit politics, which appear as cultural narratives of identity and self respect are filled with memories of dissent against dominance and oppression’ (Narayan 2006, 40). He adds, ‘Installing statues of Dr B.R. Ambedkar in various places in UP was one of the most significant activities of the Dalit movement ... installation of these statues is a matter of great pride for all the Dalit communities ... that has gone a long way in constructing their identity’ (73). While symbols related to Ambedkar impart a sense of empowerment among Dalits, visiting places related to this iconic personality provides an opportunity to Dalits, locals and migrants alike, to meet, discuss and make attempts to rewrite their history of subjugation with a narrative that celebrates their identity and moments of pride.

The adoption of the Golden Pagoda as a Dalit symbol is related to the conversion to Buddhism of Dalits. Sociologists and scholars have noted that a large number of Dalits in Maharashtra have converted to Buddhism, rejecting the Hindu religion and the caste discrimination fostered by Hindu religious practices; conversion to Buddhism is significantly higher among Dalits living in cities (Contursi 1989, 447–448). The relationship of Dalit migrants with local Dalits in Mumbai has provided an opportunity for the former to understand Buddhism and its practices, which has resulted in religious conversion of many Dalit migrants from Hinduism to Buddhism. Those who could not formally convert to Buddhism follow some of the practices of Buddhism, rejecting

1. Chaitya Bhumi, located in Dadar, Mumbai, is where the cremation ceremony of Dr B.R. Ambedkar was held. For more information please refer to Zelliot (2011). The Golden Pagoda—officially known as Global Vipassana Pagoda—is a large meditation hall constructed for Vipassana meditation in Gorai, near Mumbai. It is shaped like the Shwedagon Pagoda (Golden Pagoda) in Yangon, Myanmar; hence its popular appellation.

various practices of Hinduism including celebration of festivals such as Diwali and Durga Puja. Religious conversion has been a predominant tool for Dalits to assert themselves against caste discrimination and counter the dominant forms of religion and culture. Dalits are making their own cultural space in the city by adopting specific forms of cultural practices in their everyday life and challenging the practices of Hinduism, and in this they are joined by migrant Dalits.

The emergence of a socio-cultural consciousness among Dalit migrants in Mumbai, and its manifestation in the form of symbolic places and important days (birthdays and death anniversaries) related to their ideologues, are highly significant from the perspective of subalterns living in various cities, on the one hand, and the making of their own sacred spheres in cities, on the other. The symbolic means contribute enormously to making such a culture, and hence their identity, visible in Mumbai. It is in this specific context that the paper explores the undercurrents of changing cultural dimensions and emerging socio-cultural transformations in Mumbai. It seeks to explore the role of symbolic means in the emancipation and cultural hegemonic assertion of Dalit migrants. The paper also captures the narrative around the relationship of Dalit migrants with native Dalits, and how it helps them negotiate with everyday forms of anti-migrant politics in the city of Mumbai.

The paper is divided into six sections. The section following the introduction provides a brief account of the methodology and fieldwork. The third section discusses the importance of emerging iconic places and days (*jayantis*) in the everyday life of Dalit migrants. The following section assesses the role of these symbols in Dalit assertion and emancipation as a counter narrative to the dominant culture. The fifth section emphasises the role of caste identity in the development of fraternal relationships between Dalit migrants and native Dalits, and explores how this contributes to their negotiation of the anti-migrant sentiment that prevails in the city. The last section explores the city as a space for Dalit emancipation and the politics of symbols in the development of a counter narrative to the dominant ideology and cultural hegemony of the upper castes.

Aims and Methodology

The paper aims to examine everyday forms of socio-cultural assertion among Dalit migrants in Mumbai. Dalits were formerly known as an ‘untouchable’ caste of India and the term ‘Dalit’ has emerged as an asserted identity with the emergence of the Dalit Panther movement during the 1970s (Kumar 2005, 516). ‘Dalit migrant’ in this paper refers to migrants from Uttar Pradesh belonging to the Dalit community who currently live in Mumbai. The observations and analyses are based on my direct engagement in the field. The ethnographic approach was used to capture existing narratives about everyday forms of cultural assertion from the field of qualitative methodology emerging from anthropology; it tends to the study of beliefs, social interactions and behaviours of small societies, involving participation and observation over a period of time and

interpretation of collected data (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 7). ‘Ethnography involves understanding the social world or culture—the shared behaviors, beliefs and values—of particular groups, typically via immersion in their community’ (Ritchie, et al. 2013, 13). Using this approach, I engaged in fieldwork from 2015 to 2017 in Mandala, a slum in the M-East ward of Mumbai.

The data for this paper was triangulated from the following sources: (1) field observation and documentation (including participation in various events observed by Dalit migrants); (2) in-depth interviews of Dalit migrants and local Dalits in the area of study; (3) informal discussions with key informants of Mandala, Mumbai; and (4) analysis of secondary literature such as reports in local newspapers, government policy briefs, and articles and books related to caste, discrimination, migration, Dalits, politics, culture and emancipation of cultural identity.

During fieldwork, I documented narratives of Dalit migrants in order to assess the processes and forms of their socio-cultural assertion. Reflecting the experiences during fieldwork, this paper highlights that the city as a space has played a significant role in imparting a sense of liberation from caste and in providing space to Dalit migrants to be emancipated. I have used participant observation to understand unfolded narratives of Dalit migrants about their emancipation in the city through various modes of cultural practices. ‘Participant observation is a research method most closely associated with ethnographic methodology ... the central intent of this method is to generate data through observation and listening to people in their own settings, and to discover their social meaning and interpretation of their own activities’ (Gray 2004, 241). In the course of participant observation as a method of data collection, I participated in various celebrations related to Dalit ideology—such as Ambedkar Jayanti, Kanshi Ram’s *jayanti* and Mayawati’s birth anniversary—organised by Dalit migrants. I also visited Chaitya Bhumi in December 2016 and the Golden Pagoda in August 2017 with participants to understand and bring out the nuances in the processes and struggles to organise such visits and the significance of such programmes in their everyday life. ‘In undertaking participant observation one of the challenges is to maintain a balance between “insider” and “outsider” status’ (Gray 2004, 242). I strictly followed this directive during my fieldwork in Mumbai.

Drawing from fieldwork experiences, the paper traces the narrative of Dalit migrants in and around Dalit ideology, caste assertion and changing cultural practices in the city, and in forming a counter narrative against prolonged ‘cultural hegemony’. It also captures the role of caste identity in the social relationship between Dalit migrants and local Dalits of Mumbai under circumstances of intense ‘sons-of-the-soil’ politics (instigated by political parties in Mumbai against migrants).

Chaitya Bhumi, the Golden Pagoda and *Jayantis*

Dalits have developed the practice or custom of visiting places associated with Babasaheb Ambedkar and Buddha. Such places can be perceived pilgrimage sites for Dalits and Dalit visitors to these places can be seen as pilgrims (Zelliot 2011, 1). A large number of pilgrims come to Chaitya Bumi from many parts of Maharashtra on 6 December, Ambedkar's death anniversary, in an annual ceremonial honouring of Ambedkar's ashes; they usually have a quick *darshan* (to have a look at something that pilgrims or worshippers consider holy) of the ashes (1). In the last four to five years, Dalit migrants have also started visiting Chaitya Bhumi to pay tribute to Ambedkar. They do not merely seek a *darshan* of Ambedkar's ashes but organise a proper function and candle march from their locality to Chaitya Bhumi to pay tribute to Dr B.R. Ambedkar. Virendra, a Dalit migrant who is part of the group that organises such visits, narrated the process and programme for Chaitya Bhumi:

A week in advance, we organise a meeting at Buddha Vihar [Buddha temple constructed by Dalit migrants in Mandala where they also hold meetings] where we discuss the importance of 6 December and Chaitya Bhumi, and plan the candle march of 6 December ... We introduce whoever is new among us in the meeting to Babasaheb and Chaitya Bhumi, and motivate them to go to Chaitya Bhumi. We estimate the budget for this visit and distribute money among ourselves. We have been organising a candle march every 6 December from Mandala to Dadar, Chaitya Bhumi, for the last four to five years. We start from Mandala with lighted candles and march peacefully up to Mankhurd railway station, and then we blow out the candles and take the train for Dadar. After getting down at Dadar we again light our candles and march peacefully to Chaitya Bhumi (interviewed on 6 December 2016).

The above account reveals that despite their limited monetary resources, the Dalit migrants still manage to visit Chaitya Bhumi and pay tribute to Ambedkar by using public transport. Since Mumbai streets are very congested, they carry out a single-file candle march, with blue flags and *panchasheel* flag (the striped Buddhist flag with five colours); it is a silent march.

It is very common for Indians to go for an outing on Independence Day, 15 August, to a tourist site, park or mall. But for Dalit migrants in Mumbai, 15 August is an opportunity to visit the Golden Pagoda. In the last few years this has become a ritual. It is organised solely by Dalit migrants; local Dalits are usually not involved. They organise the visit the same way as they do other celebrations or observation of any other important days related to their ideologies. The meeting where they plan and contribute money is organised at Buddha Vihar. On 15 August, they gather at Buddha Vihar; flag hoisting is carried out and they head to the Golden Pagoda in a pre-booked bus; food is also arranged for the 'pilgrims'. On the bus there are talks on the Golden Pagoda and its

importance for Dalits. What I noticed was the variety of folk songs sung on the bus. Most of the people, including children, wore white clothes; *panchasheel* flags were tied on both sides of the bus, and the popular slogan ‘Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *cha vijay aso* (Victory to Dr. Ambedkar)’ was raised. This is a slogan used by local Dalits mostly at the time of political rallies or any other important public gathering of Dalits in Maharashtra.

Dalits observe or celebrate *jayantis* (anniversaries) and other days associated with Dalit ideologies; these include Ambedkar Jayanti on 14 April, the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar on 6 December, Ravidas Jayanti on 19 February, Kanshiram Jayanti on 15 March, the death anniversary of Kanshiram on 9 October, and the birth anniversary of Mayawati on 15 January. Two days especially—6 December and 14 April—have become occasions of annual celebration for Dalits (Jaoul 2006, 185).

Every 14 April Dalit migrants celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti on a grand scale: speeches about Ambedkar are delivered by local Dalit migrants leaders, songs and slogans in praise of Ambedkar are voiced. Importantly, the attire of Dalit migrants on Ambedkar Jayanti is very different from their usual attire; men, women and children are in white dress, which to them represents Buddhist culture (field notes of 14 April 2016). To celebrate such occasions they start preparations about a month in advance, collecting *chanda* (contributions) from each migrant family.

Ram Ji, a Dalit migrant, talked about the importance of celebration of various days related to their ideologies:

We have been celebrating 14 April, the birth anniversary of Dr Ambedkar, and organising a candle march on his death anniversary on 6 December for a few years. We also celebrate Buddha Purnima and the birth anniversaries of Behan Ji [Mayavati], Sahab Kanshiram, Ravidas, Savitri Bai Phule, Jyotiba Phule ... Recently we started celebrating a Constitution Day [26 November when India adopted its Constitution], *Dharmachakra paravartan day*² ... These are the occasions when we all come together and discuss the ideas of our great heroes; otherwise everyone is busy with their day-to-day struggle for survival. By discussing and learning about the struggles and contributions of our heroes, we become motivated to work for our community (interviewed on 14 April 2016).

Breaking the Dominant Cultural Narrative

To understand the nuances of these activities, one need to visits Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of cultural hegemony. Hegemony is:

2. *Dharmachakra paravartan day* refers to a day to celebrate the Buddhist conversion of B. R. Ambedkar on 14 October 1956 at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. Dalits of Maharashtra celebrate this as a grand occasion.

‘The ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production’ (Gramsci 1999, 145).

According to Gramsci hegemony involves power mainly exercised by coercion and consent. He determines hegemony as a means to maintain that state in capitalist society where the capitalists and ruling class dominate the working class. The notion of ‘cultural hegemony’ is very relevant to caste, class and power in India, where one group as a ruling class (upper castes) exercises power over a subordinate group (Dalits). Gramsci believes that the ruling group does not maintain their hegemony merely by an ambiguity of morality through coercion and perpetuation of legitimising symbols; they must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to existing social order (Jackson Lears 1985, 569). From the concept of hegemony flows its obverse: counter hegemony. Counter hegemony refers to any act of a subordinate or marginalised class to develop a counter culture to challenge the hegemonic way of life imposed by the ruling class. ‘Counter hegemony is a notion developed by Antonio Gramsci (1995) to define the way people develop ideas and discourse to challenge dominant assumptions, belief and established pattern of behaviors’ (Henry and Schilthuis 2012, 1).

This critical framework of Gramsci’s cultural hegemony and counter hegemony is a lens for understanding the significance of the celebrations and emerging forms of culture being assembled by Dalit migrants in the city. The creation of counter hegemonies is an option for the subordinate class to assert itself against the ruling class imposition of hegemony (Jackson Lears 1985, 571). Locating the activities of Dalit migrants in the framework of Gramsci’s counter hegemony, their practice of visiting the Golden Pagoda on 15 August depicts a counter narrative against the hegemonic custom of spending this day of leisure to go shopping or an outing of some sort, perpetuated by the ruling class. Moreover, their actions during such visits can be understood as a beginning of counter hegemonic assertion of the subaltern. Dalit migrants’ visits to Chaitya Bhumi and Golden Pagoda, and their carrying of blue and *panchsheel* flags in processions associated with Babasaheb Ambedkar or the Buddha, signify the adoption of new cultural symbols. Simultaneously, this implies the rejection of the symbols and practices of the dominant culture, such as visits to Hindu pilgrimage sites, or doing *arti* or using *agarbatti*.³

The same is true of the celebration of the *jayantis*, organised on a large scale by Dalit migrants in Mumbai. Singh has recorded a similar way of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti among the Dalits of western Uttar Pradesh where he argued that such celebration constitutes ‘Ambedkarisation of Dalits’ (Singh 1998, 2611); his argument can be

3. However, they do use *agarbatti* in the Buddha Vihar.

extended to the notion of counter hegemony developed by Dalit migrants against the cultural hegemony imposed by the upper caste, whereby they no longer celebrate Navarati, Durga Puja or any other symbolic days associated with Hindu mythology or culture (Narayan 2006, 159–160). On Ambedkar Jayanti, explicit appeals are made to reject Hindu festivals (field notes of 14-20 April, 2016).

Sometime such iconic days are associated with religious and spiritual gurus of Dalits such as Ravidas; such celebrations can also be viewed as religious and spiritual means to assert against the dominant belief system. Wendy Doniger (1999) shows that Dalits worship Ravidas and celebrate his *jayanti* as a religious event (cited in Ram 2011, 32); this points to religion being used as a means to counter the dominant religion. Therefore, these celebrations and visits by Dalit migrants are not just forms of cultural adaptation; they indicate an emerging consciousness about culture and symbols, and are a means to deconstruct and break the dominance of hegemonic culture.

Interestingly, my discussion with Dalit migrants during the fieldwork suggested that they were not aware about Chaitya Bhumi and Golden Pagoda before coming to Mumbai. It is only after they moved to the city and began to interact with native Dalits that this knowledge about Dalit ideologues and places associated with them was shared. Dalit migrants and native Dalits of Mumbai have a fraternal relationship because of their shared caste identity, as can be seen in the following section.

Identity and Negotiation: The Politics of ‘Ours’

Migrations within India, both inter state and intra states, are often linked to the insecurity of employment and competition in the local market, and sometimes lead to violence and conflict between migrants and locals. Weiner (1978) has termed such conflicts between the original inhabitants of an area and more recent settlers ‘sons-of-the-soil’ conflicts. The term suggests that those who are native to a given state or region consider themselves prioritised in terms of access to resources, employment and other benefits of the region, and this leads to a sense of competition between the local population and migrants. This results in anti-migrant sentiments, which are often instigated with political motives. Mumbai has witnessed various conflicts between migrants from different states and the local population. It has been noticed that migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have experienced open aggression from locals on several occasions. Their vulnerabilities are not limited to experiencing aggression; they are also exposed to physical harm and losses (S. Singh 2015, 58–60).

However, the case of Dalit migrants is somewhat different. Their identity as Dalits has become a means to negotiate with locals and evade such aggression and violence. My fieldwork experience suggests that local Dalits of Mumbai are not only helping Dalit migrants escape such violence but also developing cordial relationships with them; this

results in empowerment and a feeling of safety among them. Syamjit, a Dalit migrant, shared:

We have a good relationship with native Dalits in Mumbai. We even attend their birthday parties and marriage ceremonies. I am a fruit seller. When I was introduced to some Dalits of Mumbai, they started buying fruits from my cart. One day a local Dalit leader even came to me and said, ‘You are a Dalit and I am also a Dalit. If you face any problem, please let me know.’ And after that I feel that people who are from our society (caste) are helpful, and it is because we belong to the same caste (interviewed on 1 January 2017).

The above narrative suggests that the caste identity of Dalit migrants is emerging as a means to negotiate with various issues and concerns in the city. Erzo Luttmer’s theoretical depiction of racial group loyalty suggests that individuals belonging to the same group will be more willing to support each other than members of another group (cited in Spies and Schmidt-Catran 2016, 35). Hence, Dalit migrants are able to receive help from the native Dalits of Mumbai as they both share the same ‘Dalit’ identity. Caste identity is vital in the relationship between native Dalits and Dalit migrants.

The relationship between native Dalits and Dalit migrants is based on shared caste oppression, stigmas and discrimination; thus, they unite and treat each other with dignity. There has been case of verbal and physical assault to migrants by several political parties in Maharashtra, particularly Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, but Dalit migrants has dealt to this situation very carefully with help of native Dalits. The caste identity becomes means to negotiate such assault. One participant, Ramesh, narrated:

Irrespective of ideology and party politics there are many people from our caste who show us respect and treat us equally and do not discriminate against us because we are from UP. Even some party members of the MNS [Maharashtra Navnirman Sena], when they come to know that we belong to their caste, treat us with respect (interviewed on 1 January 2017).

‘*Jai Bheem*’ is the greeting used by Dalits and political parties sympathetic to Dalits, and it is creating a sense of fraternity among local Dalits and Dalit migrants in Mumbai. My fieldwork suggests that ‘*Jai Bheem*’ is not merely a greeting but is also an identifier used by upper castes for Dalits of Maharashtra. The term ‘*Jai Bheem wala*’ is often used by upper castes to refer to Dalits in Maharashtra. Govinda’s assertion that ‘collective identity needs to be constantly constructed and negotiated’ are relevant to understand cultural meeting points of native Dalits, and Dalit migrants in Mumbai. In this regards, ‘*Jai Bheem*’ is as profound in the context of caste and politics in northern India, as it is in the context of interaction between Dalit migrants and native Dalits of Mumbai (Govinda 2008, 430). Sumedh Kamble, a local Dalit leader and native of Mumbai, spoke of the violence and conflict triggered by some native Mumbaikars against migrants:

People from Shiv Sena and MNS only create trouble for poor; they do not dare to create any issues for rich businessman, or rich migrants from UP who are engaged in small enterprises in the railway stations. The MNS people gain fame by creating trouble for migrants. I am from Maharashtra, but we try to help all people from UP who face problems in Mumbai, because we feel that the majority of people are *Jai Bheem wale* [Dalits] (Interviewed on 1st January, 2016).

A range of scholarship in India has discussed the term ‘Dalit’ as a broad umbrella for lower-caste groups to unite under and exercise their social and political agency (see Kumar 2005b, 516; Ghose 2003, 84–85). Bharati (2002) argues that Dalit is a constructed identity that encompasses all those considered to be either similarly placed or natural allies. The two terms—Dalit and *Jai Bheem wale*—are helping Dalit migrants and native Dalits unite against anti-migrant politics in Mumbai. The native Dalits offer help to Dalit migrants largely because they share the same caste identity; they are also opposed to the anti-migrant sentiment because they admire the philosophy of Babsaheb Ambedkar. Referring to Ambedkar’s key role in the drafting of the Indian Constitution, which proclaims that any citizen of India is free to settle in any part of country, Vijaya Thorat, a local Dalit, observed, ‘All citizens of India can go anywhere in the country. Babasaheb has said that any citizen of our country can move anywhere and can engage in any livelihood activities’ (interviewed on 1 January 2017).

But what is crucial here is not so much the sympathy towards migrants but the feeling of ‘ours’ because of the shared caste identity. The local Dalits of Mumbai fraternise with and help the Dalit migrants, contrary to the prevailing anti-migrant sentiment among large sections of the society in Mumbai, because of this feeling of ‘ours’ that arises from their similar subjugation and marginalisation in society. However, detailed treatment of this is beyond the scope of this paper; further investigation is called for to uncover the various layers of this feeling of ‘ours’ and identity politics in a city largely derived from shared caste identity.

Conclusion: The City as a Site for Counter Hegemony

A significant aspect of the Ambedkar Jayanti celebration I witnessed was that it was organised in the locality where the migrants live and this caused no tension among the non-Dalit migrants of the area (field note of 14 April 2016). Such celebrations in different places of India are often reported to trigger caste tension/clashes between Dalits and upper castes. Cultural assertion and expression of political identity of Dalits through installation of Ambedkar statues and celebration of his *jayanti* lead to antagonism which results in caste clashes (J. Singh 1998, 2611). But Dalit migrants in Mumbai have never experienced such opposition or caste conflict, which shows that the city as a space provides scope for a sense of liberation and emancipation against caste prejudices and oppression. Ramnaresh, one of the participants, observed:

I feel liberated from caste discrimination and *chhua-chhut* [untouchability] in Mumbai compared to my village. It has given me freedom to choose whichever occupation I like, and I also receive a lot of support from local Dalits. This is possible because we belong to the same caste and we all believe in Babasaheb and Buddha. When I came to Mumbai from village, I was not very sensitised and aware about the ideology of Babasaheb, but after mingling with local Dalits I was introduced to Ambedkar, Buddha, Phule, Sahoo Ji Maharaj, and learnt about Babasaheb's contribution towards changing our lives. We started celebrating Ambedkar *jayanti* here itself; gradually the migrants from the Dalit community united and now, along with Ambedkar Jayanti, we also celebrate *jayantis* of our other ideologues. As far as concern about caste discrimination in a city like Mumbai goes, I would say that compared to the village there is no rigid form of caste discrimination but wherever there are people from UP in Mumbai, there is strong caste consciousness (interviewed on 28 December 2017).

There is a mixed response about discrimination and liberation from caste in the city, with some participants in the study sharing stories of upper-caste discrimination, but I documented more narratives of the city as an emancipatory space compared to tales of discrimination. This finding validates the appeal of Dr Ambedkar to Dalits to move to cities in order to escape from caste; 'so long they would not leave the villages and settle into the cities, there will not be any change in their lives' (as cited in Cháirez-garza 2014, 46). 'The cities for Ambedkar were liberating, as he did not have to carry his identity with him' (46). In the city the Dalit migrants experience liberation from caste prejudices: the notion of caste discrimination is prevalent in the city as well, but not in the very harsh form as it is in the village (Gooptu 2001, 151). However, in the case of the Dalit migrants, while their caste identity is obliterated in some situations in the less discriminatory urban space, in the main they continue to carry their caste identity in the city—but this identity can be seen as acting as a liberating force in the city.

To reiterate, the common 'caste identity' of migrant Dalits with local Dalits in Mumbai becomes the prominent tool to engage in the cultural activities of the native Dalits, share the feeling of 'ours', and develop a cohesive and fraternal relationship that helps tide over the city's well-known anti-migrant sentiments. From the local Dalits they have gained knowledge about sacred places related to Dalit ideologues and iconic days, about Buddhism, and have adopted an alternative culture. Their celebration of *jayantis* of their heroes, their visits to sites seen as sacred for Dalits, and their simultaneous abandonment of rituals and festivals of the dominant castes are a counter to the dominant cultural narrative.

The city as a space thus provides liberation for Dalit migrants from caste discrimination, prejudices and exclusions. Moreover, the move to the city has led to the emergence of caste and identity consciousness among Dalit migrants through symbolisation of iconic

places and days associated with Dalit heroes; they are now able to claim and write their own cultural history. The city, with its acceptance of their caste identity, has thus contributed significantly in the assertion of Dalit migrants.

The everyday cultural practices by Dalit migrants in Mumbai demonstrate a new epistemic understanding of the existing forms of cultural hegemony, particularly in terms of sacred places and the celebration of various events. Dalit migrants are setting up their own icons, symbols and myths using Buddhism and Ambedkar as ideological tools to counter the upper-caste narrative. As we have seen, this can be considered a process of counter hegemony to challenge the dominant ideology, belief, life style and culture (Pathania 2016, 270). By developing this ‘counter hegemony’, Dalit migrants challenge the dominant way of life and culture, and assert and rewrite their culture or a way of life for themselves; thereby, they claim liberation from persisting discrimination and subjugation by upper castes.

References

- Cháirez-garza, J.F. 2014. ‘Touching Space/ : Ambedkar on the Spatial Features of Untouchability’. *Contemporary South Asia* 22, no. 1: 35–50. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2013.870978>.
- Contursi, J.A. 1989. ‘Militant Hindus and Buddhist Dalits/ : Hegemony and Resistance in an Indian Slum’. *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 3: 441–457.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ghose, S. 2003. ‘The Dalit in India’. *Social Research* 70, no. 1: 83–109.
- Gooptu, N. (2001). *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Govinda, R. 2008. ‘Re-inventing Dalit Women’s Identity? Dynamics of Social Activism and Electoral Politics in Rural North India. *Contemporary South Asia* 16, no. 4: 427–440. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09584930802472772>.
- Gramsci, A. 1999. *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. In *ElecBook*, vol. 73, edited by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey, 120-150 London: ElecBook. <http://doi.org/10.2307/479844>.
- Gray, D.E. 2004. *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: Sage Publications.
- Henry, R. and A. Schilthuis. 2012. ‘Hegemony and Counterhegemony’. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization*, edited by George Ritzer, 1–4. New Delhi: Blackwell.

- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Jackson Lears, T.J. 1985. 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony/ : Problems and Possibilities'. *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 3: 567–593.
- Jaoul, N. 2006. 'Learning the Use of Symbolic Means'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 40, no. 2: 175–207. <http://doi.org/10.1177/006996670604000202>.
- Junghare, I.Y. 2015. 'Language, Culture and Communication: India'. In *International Conference Redefining Community in Intercultural Context* (pp. 21–23). Brasov
- Kumar, V. 2005. 'Situating Dalits in Indian Sociology'. *Sociological Bulletin* 54 (December): 514–532.
- Kumar, V. 2014. 'Inequality in India: Caste and Hindu Social Order'. *Transcience*, 5, no. 1: 36–52.
- Narayan, B. (2006). *Women heroes and Dalit assertion in north India: Culture, Identity, and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage.<http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004>.
- Pathania. Gaurav J. 2016. 'Food Politics and Counter Hegemonic Assertion in Indian University Campuses'. *South Asia Research* 36, no. 2: 261–277. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0262728016638732>.
- Ram, R. 2004. 'Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness, and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38, no. 3: 323–349. <http://doi.org/10.1177/006996670403800302>.
- Ram, R. 2011. 'Guru Ravidas: Prophet of Dalit Liberation'. *Voice of Dalit* 4, no. 1: 29–47.
- Ritchie, Jane, Jane Lewis, Carol Mcnaughton Nicolas and Rachel Ormston. 2013. *Qualitative: A Guide for Social Science Students*. In *A Qualitative Guide for Social Science Students*. (pp. 1–25). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Sikka, S. 2012. 'Untouchable Cultures/ : Memory, Power and the Construction of Dalit Selfhood'. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19, no. 1: 43–60. <http://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2012.672837>.
- Singh, J.P. 1984. 'Distance and Pattern of Rural to Urban Migration in India'. *Genus* 40, no. 1/2: 119–129.

Singh, J. 1998. 'Ambedkarisation and Assertion of Dalit Identity: Socio-Cultural Protest in Meerut District of Western Uttar Pradesh'. *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 40: 2611–2618. <http://doi.org/10.2307/4407245>.

Singh, J.P. 1992. 'Migration in India/ : A Review'. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 1, no. 1: 168–192.

Singh, S. 2015. *The Emergence of the Migrant as a Problem Figure in Contemporary Mumbai: Chronicles of Violence and Issues of Justice Simpreet* (No. 73). Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. Retrieved from <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP73.pdf>.

Singh, S. 2016. 'Dalits in Punjab/ : Cultural Assertion and Heritage'. *South Asia Research* 36, no. 3: 356–376. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0262728016663272>.

Singh, S., and J. Singh. 2017. 'Deras, Dalit Assertion and Resistance: A Case Study of Dera Baba Bhure Shah Sappanwala'. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 9, no 2: 148-158 <http://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X17721548>.

Spies, D. and A. Schmidt-Catran. 2016. 'Migration, Migrant Integration and Support for Social Spending: The Case of Switzerland'. *Journal of European Social Policy* 26, no. 1: 32–47. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0958928715612170>.

Weiner, Myron. 1978. *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zelliot, E. 2011. 'Pilgrimage in the Structure of the Ambedkar Movement'. *Voice of Dalit* 4, no. 1: 1–6.