

SHAHIRI JALSA AS A MEDIUM OF ANTI-CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF COUNTER-HEGEMONIC CULTURAL PRACTICES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAHARASHTRA

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I. Introduction

Through this research paper, the researcher has tried to shed light on how the Satyashodhak and Ambedkari Jalsekars create a sense of solidarity and shared identity among the downtrodden communities while inspired by the struggle of Mahatma Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar establishing social justice and equality in an adverse situation when the downtrodden were kept far away from the mainstream society and formal education system.

Shahiri Jalsa was one of the powerful weapons to create awareness among the illiterate downtrodden classes of Maharashtra. Apart from these Lavni, Bharud, Gan, Gavlan were the popular traditional performing art forms which were used to entertain the rural masses and also to create social awareness among the downtrodden classes.

The style of performance of Satyashodhak Jalsa by the artists was unique. While beginning the Jalsa programme, the Jalsa artists opened their performance with 'Gan, an invocation to deities, Ganpati, Powada of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and finally gratitude expressed to the British Govt. Thereafter the actual performance of 'Jalsa' used to take place.

Satyashodhak Samaj was a social organization was founded by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in 1873 at Pune. The main goal of Satyashodhak Samaj was to improve the life of underprivileged classes in Maharashtra, especially Dalits, women and peasants. These classes were the most neglected sections from the mainstream

society. Mahatma Phule came forward to raise awareness about social rights and civil liberties through education, which was the main objective of the Satyashodhak Samaj.

The following activities were carried out by Satyashodhak Samaj to eradicate the evil customs and traditions of the society and thereby providing equal opportunities to the underprivileged classes of the Maharashtrian society. Other forms/activities of reaching out to the masses were to organize social conferences for the peasants, to hold Tamasha (regional folk drama/musical concert) and Jalsas. In a way, Satyashodhak used Jalsa as their medium of preaching. Satyashodhak Jalsas were different from Tamasha. The teachings of Satyashodhak doctrines was carried through the medium of Jalsa. The Jalsa performance aimed at both entertaining and educating the common masses against the various form's injustices. The popular themes of such concerts included the deplorable condition of the peasants, exploitations of common people by moneylenders and Brahmin priests, social inequality, the evils of caste system and so on. They composed songs to enlighten the masses. The prime motif of Jalsa was the importance of education as a tool to change one's life and fate. Its motto was there is no true life without knowledge. Knowledge is obtained through education. They also explained how the Bhatji (Brahmin priest) took undue advantage of peasant's ignorance and deceived them. The Satyashodhak concerts were performed by the popular artists like Bhimrao Mahamuni, Bhaurao Patil, Tatyaba Patil, Kasegaonkar, Shankarrao Patil, Yelurkar, Ramachandra Ghadge, Kalekar, Abasaheb Sabale, Shivatarkar etc.

Tamashas and Jalsas were the popular folk drama of Maharashtra, often organized to convey social messages to the masses. Shri P.B. Salunkhe aptly narrates the relations of Shahu with Satya Shodhak in following words, "After the demise of Mahatma Phule, the social work of Satyashodhak Samaj was paralyzed due to the absence of eminent leadership, Shahu Maharaja came to the rescue of the Samaj and revived it. He by extending every help including monetary aid spread and propagated, Kolhapur became a powerful center of Satyashodhak Samaj and its activities owing to the free educational facilities including Boarding houses and various others a large number of students from outside flocked at this Centre, after completing their throughout Maharashtra, this is how Shahu encouraged the activities of Satyashodhak Samaj in Kolhapur though he never became an active member of the Samaj.

Satya Shodhak used Tamashas as their medium of preaching the masses. Satya Shodhak Samajist had already used poetry, religious style Kirtans and singing performances to spread their message and overcome the communications barrier felt by upper-class non-Brahmins, but even this was felt to be insufficient, our literate masses understand tamashas better than do in understanding Kirtans, they do not like lectures. Tamashas were the popular bawdy folk drama of Maharashtra, whose traditional form contained an opening invocation to the God Ganapati a great deal of byplay in dialogue centering around a Krishna theme, clowning with a man dressed as a woman and a final main play or vag. The traditional tamasha opened with an invocation to Ganapati, with an implication of support for this traditional Brahman deity, however, Satya Shodhak leaders, according to one, counteracted this by explaining that the actual meaning was from *gan* or people and *pati* or leader and that it thus represented an invocation of the people as the source of rule.

During 19th and 20th century the Satyashodhak and Ambedkari Jalse had played pivotal roles in socio-cultural movements in Maharashtra. Krishna Kirvale, a prominent critic comments on their difference. He notes that if Marathi Tamasha compared with Satyashodhak Jalse and Ambedkari Jalse, it is clear that both Tamasha and Jalse share many common features, except for their intrinsic structures and thematic subjects. In other words, Satyashodhak Jalse and Ambedkari Jalse can be seen as evolved forms of Tamasha (Thakur, 2005). The origin of Jalsa was from 'Tamasha' a folk art popular during the period of Peshwai in Maharashtra. The aim of Tamasha was to entertain the rural masses and the aim of Jalsa was to create awareness and consciousness among the downtrodden classes. Later on, 1930 onwards Ambedkari Jalse became more popular.

Shahir Bhimrao Kardak, who is known as the pioneer of Ambedkari Jalsa, said that, "Mahatma Phule created Satyashodaki Jalsa to convey the thoughts of Satyashodhak movement to the downtrodden society. Similarly, Ambedkari Jalse was created to convey the thoughts of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to the untouchable society¹. Jalse is considered as the second stage of Dalit theatre. In the words of Bhimrao Kardak, who is referred to as the 'Adya Jalsekar', "Jalsa is a systematic history of the human rights of the untouchables". This is how Jalsa was described. On 14 January 1931, 'Nashik District Youth Sangh Sangeet Jalsa Mandal was established by Bhimrao Kardak to make aware about the Ambedkari movement and

1

Babasaheb's thoughts effectively to the masses within his lifetime. ultimate aim of Ambedkari Jalsa was to make aware the downtrodden people about their history, religion, custom, tradition, similarly the suffering and suffering of the untouchables were presented through this Jalsa. Similarly, Shahir had tried to give a message through Jalsa that if we follow the path as per Babasaheb's thought to end the poverty of the untouchable society, then the future will be happy.

The song performed by the Jalsa was mesmerizing in its sweetness as it was bound to the Shahir Bhimrao Kardak says in his Shahiri that ..

“अस्पृश्य बांधवानो! वडिलांची चाल सोडा IIधृII
आढीस लावूनि खांदा, म्हणे रोग आळा यंदा I
हा वडिलोपार्जित धंदा, कसा सोडू रे गोविंदा II धृII
करडक भीमराव विनंती करी, सोडा सोडा ही माधुकरी I”

Here, the shahir appeals to the illiterate masses to abandon their ancestral profession of removing dead animals from the village. This shows how Shahir conveyed the message of Babasaheb to the uneducated common people. Because of Shahir's song Ambedkari thought remained alive after Babasaheb and continued to flow from generation to generation. Prof. Datta Bhagat says that, “When power and law were acquired, the objective of obtaining justice for Jalsakaras ended, the need for Jalsakas seemed to be over, but it was not. Even today these Jalsa need to do the work of social awakening.” This shows how the importance of Jalsha is still intact today. Apart from this, the statement of a Dalit writer R.K. Tribhuvan says, “Unity among Dalit brothers is the need of the hour. For that It is necessary to do it today as it was done during Dr.Ambedkar's time and the way he did the work of social integration and public awakening".

Another prominent Dalit writer Yogiraj Waghmare expressed that, ‘Jalsa was a powerful tool before the Dalit literature for social awareness’. These scholars emphasize the importance of social awareness among the downtrodden.

Shahiri Jalsa became cultural movement during the period of Dr. Ambedkar for social awareness and to create consciousness among the downtrodden. Later on, in the post-Independence period the Lokshahirs Sahityaratna Annabhau Sathe and Shahir Amar Shaikh used this tool to create awareness amongst the labourers in Mumbai and through it originate the Sanyukt Maharashtra Movement which was started after

1950 for creating independent state of Maharashtra along with Mumbai. In Sanyukt Maharashtra Movement, Anna Bhau Sathe became a popular Lok Shahir through his powerful songs and Powadas for labourers and downtrodden.

Similarly, Shahir Amar Shaikh another prominent Dalit Shahir focused on the struggles of the Dalits and labour classes in Mumbai through his songs and Powadas.

The another well-known Shahir Gavankar addressed the social issues like poverty, inequality and social justice through his songs to aware the common masses.

Apart from these Vamandada Kardak was one of the prominent Dalit Shahir who spread Ambedkari movement from village to village in Maharashtra through his songs and created major awareness amongst the untouchables in Maharashtra through his powerful songs which became a source of inspiration for the other Dalit Shahirs and Jalsakars like shahir Vilas Ghogare who is famous for his inspiring song, ‘जळतोय मराठवाडा रे, असा जळतोय मराठवाडा’ it means how Marathwada was burning by riots during the name change movement of Marathwada University, Aurangabad, now renamed as Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar in Maharashtra.

Later on, Atmaram Salve, Pralhad Shinde, Vitthal Umap, Pratapsingh Bodade have done tremendous work to create awareness among the downtrodden in Maharashtra. Now presently, Shahir Sambhaji Bhagat, Shahir Ganesh Chandanshive, Dadarao Mhaske, Dr. Shamal Garud(Academician), Dr. Anil Sapkal (Academician), and many others performing well against the feudalism, Injustice, Capitalism, Casteism, corruption, unemployment and for other social issues in Maharashtra as they share their experiences in the personal interview about the present burning issues in the society and how they are trying to create more awareness among the common masses through their Shahiri Jalse.

In conclusion, Shahiri Jalsa has been a powerful tool for awakening the downtrodden and combating casteism in India during pre- and post-independence period in Maharashtra. Its impact can be seen among the downtrodden classes in the raised consciousness about social issues through the inspiration of Mahatma Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Dr. Ambedkar in social movements to uplift and empowered of the downtrodden communities in Maharashtra.

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The Following Interviews were Conducted by the Researcher in the month of Sept/October,2024 to generate the data as a primary source:

- [16] Shahir Dr Ganesh Chandanshive, Director, Lok Kala Academy University of Mumbai,
- [17] Shahir Sambhaji Bhagat, Mumbai
- [18] Shahir Dadarao Mhaske, Mumbai
- [19] Shahir Nandesh Umap, Mumbai
- [20] Dr. Shamal Garud, an Academician, Dept of Marathi, University of Mumbai