

Taking to the streets: Dalit *mela* and the public performance of Dalit cultural identity

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ABSTRACT *This paper compares three manifestations of the Dalit mela, or festival; that is, the rural Dalit mela celebrated in Dalit neighbourhoods, the Dalit parade, and the civic Dalit mela now positioned in the city centre. In this way, it explores how the performance of Dalit cultural identity is influenced by the kind of public space in which the Dalit festival is held, arguing that the specific public nature of the street on which the mela is celebrated has an influence on the political performance of Dalit identity. This paper also examines the important connections between 'space' and 'debate' in Dalits' engagement with the public sphere by considering the distribution of a vibrant stream of Dalit literature at these Dalit melas; namely, Hindi Dalit pamphlets. This pamphlet literature is sold at the mela by members of the Dalit community as an act of social service, and is widely consumed by a significant Dalit readership. Through a consideration of the relationship between space and discourse at the Dalit mela, this paper also argues that Dalits use the mela to make a dual claim to a separate cultural identity linked to a self-contained counter-public sphere and, at the same time, to a position as equal citizens of the nation deserving of a place in the mainstream public sphere.*

Crowds gathered on Sansad Marg in the centre of Delhi on 14 April, 2004; men chatting in small groups, women snacking on various foods and children running up and down the street, their tee-shirts displaying pins depicting the colourful portrait of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. The street itself was lined with stalls selling framed pictures of Ambedkar of varying sizes, and tables or ground-cloths were laden with a vast number of Dalit literary pamphlets, printed on inexpensive paper by private Dalit presses and sold for Rs.5–40. It was Ambedkar Jayanti and the Dalit middle classes of Delhi were out in droves to celebrate the birth anniversary of their most beloved leader. What was most striking about this scene was its location next to the Parliament building at the heart of the nation's capital city. This location seems symbolic of the larger entrance of this historically

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marginalised Dalit community into mainstream national consciousness, and of Dalits' place at the heart of the Indian Constitution written under the direction of Dr Ambedkar, which outlawed untouchability and caste discrimination for the first time in Indian history.

Today, Ambedkar Jayanti and other Dalit *melas* (festivals) take many forms, and continue to be celebrated not only as large civic events, but as small localised festivals and even as parades. The Dalit *mela* remains an important site of the public performance and dissemination of Dalit cultural identity. This paper will thus compare three manifestations of the Dalit *mela*: the rural Dalit *mela*, celebrated in Dalit neighbourhoods;¹ the parade;² and the civic Dalit *mela*, now positioned in the city centre.³ It will explore how the performance of Dalit cultural identity is influenced by the kind of public space in which the Dalit festival is held,⁴ suggesting that the kind of street on which the Dalit *mela* is celebrated, its specific 'public' nature, has an influence on the political performance of Dalit identity. In particular, as this paper will argue, the shift from the Dalit *basti's guli* (neighbourhood lane) to the urban centre's *sarak* or *marg* (main street) is symbolic of a growing acceptance and incorporation of the Dalit *mela* as a civic affair. This, in turn, reflects a shift in the audience of the Dalit *mela* and represents the Dalit community's attempt to break the upper-caste hegemony over the street, pointing to important connections between *space* and *debate* in Dalits' engagement with the public sphere. Public debate at the Dalit *mela* does not only include speeches. A vibrant aspect of the performance of Dalit cultural identity has also been the widespread distribution of Dalit pamphlet literature in Hindi. This pamphlet literature is sold at the *mela* by individual Dalit writers or small Dalit publishers as an act of service where the literature is meant to raise a certain political consciousness among the Dalit community. Through a consideration of this pamphlet literature, this paper also argues that Dalits use the space of the *mela* to make a dual claim to a separate cultural identity that constitutes a self-contained counter-public sphere and, at the same time, to a position as equal citizens of the nation deserving of a place in the mainstream public sphere.

Theorising the public street

In response to Partha Chatterjee's well-known link between discourses of nationalism and physical space that reiterates the common binary of 'the home and the world' (the private/domestic space versus the public/outer domain), much work has gone into nuancing our views of public and private, particularly regarding how aspects of the public enter the domestic space.⁵ Other scholars have problematised conceptions of public spaces. For instance, works by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sandria B. Freitag and Katherine Hansen have discussed the public street as a place to meet strangers, often conceived of as a lewd, dangerous and untrustworthy space that needs constant surveillance and disciplining.⁶ Yet this public street is also a space with potential as it enables performances of public activities; it is a space of strangers but also a place where one can communicate with and influence people beyond one's immediate social network.

This paper attempts to further nuance our understanding of the public street by exploring how Jürgen Habermas's notions of the public sphere as representing critical *debate* intersect with different kinds of public space.⁷ Here, a helpful concept is the idea of performance that involves both discursive speech utterances⁸ as well as behavioural performance. This is linked to Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualisation of *habitus* (a sum total of an individual's behaviours, actions or dress, for example, that reflects an individual's understandings about the way the world *is* and their place in it), which takes place in a physical space.⁹ This concept of performance not only helps us make important connections between public discourses and public spaces (by showing that much of debate occurs in a public space); it also illuminates another important way of conceptualising the public sphere as a realm where participants must hold the right to both perform and to be an audience to others' performances. For the Dalit community, marginalisation has habitually meant being denied the right to perform, and Dalits have consequently often been limited to the role of an audience of others' performances and speech utterances. The example of the Dalit *mela*, however, shows how different kinds of public spaces can shift levels of performances from a Dalit-only audience to audiences made up of multiple caste and class groups. This represents Dalits' efforts to maintain a space where performance is limited to members of the Dalit community while, at the same time, also reclaiming the right to perform for a diverse public audience.

The Dalit *mela*: forms and spaces

From as early as 1935, a Dalit *mela* has been held annually in Dalit *bastis* (localities) in rural Bihar to celebrate the Dalit hero Chuharmal.¹⁰ A 1976 account attests to the popularity of this rural Dalit *mela*, with a recorded attendance of 8000–9000 members of the Dusadh *jati* (one of the most numerous Scheduled Caste or Dalit *jatis* in Bihar after the Chamars) at celebrations in a village called Mor. Festivities included 4–5 days of dancing, songs and wrestling, as well as the recitation and dramatic performance of the tale of Reshma and Chuharmal.¹¹ Badri Narayan's study of the Chuharmal *mela* shows its continual growth in popularity among the Dusadh Dalit community, as it reached one lakh participants in 1981 and three lakh attendants by 1998.¹² In this sense, the Chuharmal *mela* of Bihar is representative of one form of the Dalit *mela*, in terms of its setting in the Dalit locality of the village, attendance dominated by a Dalit-only audience (or even more specifically, Dalits of a certain *jati*) as well as the long history and tradition of the *mela* itself.

Today, the most widely celebrated Dalit *mela* is Ambedkar Jayanti, held in honour of the famous Dalit leader Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar. According to a study by Owen Lynch, Ambedkar Jayanti has been celebrated in Agra since 1957 by Jatavs and, increasingly, by other Dalit communities, with a day of rest, feasting, games, political speeches and other festivities culminating in a 7-hour long parade. This Dalit *mela* developed from a small, locality-based festival and transformed into a parade that entered the larger public sphere of the streets of Agra.

Since then, the celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti in Agra have come to resemble Ambedkar Jayanti in Delhi, as both have become civic affairs located on the main street in the city centre and sanctioned and policed by the local and state governments. Similar civic celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti now occur across India. In the north, the strong political presence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit political party, has led to the organisation of other such Dalit *melas*, including Shahuji Maharaj *Mela*, Periyar *Mela* and Buddha Jayanti.¹³

The *mela* as public: questions of access, participation and struggle for the street

The low-caste invasion and reclaiming of the street during Dalit *mela* raises questions of participation and access. In other words, who is allowed to perform on the street during the Dalit *mela*, and who is placed in the role of audience observing the performance? Firstly, it is clear that the Dalit *mela*'s location on the public street does not mean it is open to everyone. Rather, participants are able to contribute to the performance of the festival through their caste identities and cultural codes, such as beliefs about purity and pollution. These factors often exclude the participation of the upper castes, even as a present audience. This is quite a shift from the habitual upper-caste hegemony over the street. Secondly, the various spaces that accommodate these Dalit *melas* highlight the multiplicity of 'streets' where the *gali* of the Dalit *basti*, or upper-caste locality, functions as a very different kind of public space from the *sarak* or *marg* of an urban centre, particularly as the basis of different kinds of audiences (Dalit, non-Dalit, and mixed).

For Dalit *melas*, such as the Chuharmal *mela* held in Dalit localities, Dalit identity is performed and celebrated to an all-Dalit, or even *jati*-specific, audience.¹⁴ The celebration of the Dalit *mela* in a Dalit locality signifies an important attempt by many members of this socially oppressed community to form their own self-contained counter-public sphere by celebrating the festival in a Dalit-dominated space (even if this is not entirely by choice). Here, participants may contribute social commentary and criticism of Indian society—even of upper castes—to members of their own community.

On the one hand, the 'localness' of certain Dalit *melas*, such as those held in *jati*-specific localities, emphasises the inter-Dalit divisions regarding participation in what we now group together as 'Dalit *melas*', according to contemporary notions of identity. On the other hand, the emergence of new notions of Dalit identity has meant that, in contrast to the local hero Chuharmal, Dr Ambedkar has become a pan-Indian/pan-Dalit leader, thereby allowing members of various Dalit *jatis* to participate in the Ambedkar Jayanti festival. However, class identity, for instance, also becomes a factor regarding participation among the wider Dalit community by both performers and members of an audience. These questions of access and participation have further implications for the production and consumption of Dalit cultural identity. For instance, while an upper-caste individual may feel comfortable buying a Dalit autobiography or short-story collection from

the bookstore at Mandi House's Shri Ram Centre in Delhi, buying Dalit literary pamphlets at a Dalit *mela* may be another matter entirely. In Delhi, the Dalit *mela* for Ambedkar celebrated on Sansad Marg is a Dalit middle-class affair and, due to both practical realities such as distance as well as social norms, celebrations among the Dalit urban poor remain confined to Dalit *bastis*.¹⁵

In Agra, Lynch describes how 'the Ambedkar Fair had burst out of ghettoised Kaji Para and added a parade publicly traversing the city's streets'.¹⁶ In situations where the *mela* is celebrated in the Dalit locality or on a main street at the city centre, activities are confined to a specific public area that can be avoided by upper castes and easily policed by the state. In contrast, the early efforts to celebrate the Dalit *mela* as a spontaneous parade shifted the occasion of Dalit re-appropriation of the public space to streets across the city and, most importantly, signifies the Dalit community's infiltration of the streets extending even to upper-caste localities.

The parade initiated by the Dalits of Kaji Para in Agra therefore made a bold claim over their community's legitimate right to inhabit any and all public streets, even those traversing upper-caste localities. Predictably, members of dominant upper-caste communities were not always so willing to give up control of the public space of the street and contested Dalits' right to perform in these streets with violent struggle. Based on his own ethnographic research on this *mela* in Agra, Lynch claims:

the parade was bitterly contested and participation in it was often dangerous... In reaction from the roofs of upper caste homes in those neighborhoods stones and insults were apt to be thrown at the statue [of Ambedkar]. But the stones occasionally missed their mark and hit Jatavs marching in the Parade.¹⁷

According to Lynch's study, on the night of 14 April 1978, the parade for the Ambedkar *mela* made its way through the streets of Agra as it had done every year.¹⁸ However, when bricks and stones were thrown at the parade, the Jatavs retaliated and, in the ensuing violence, a house and several small shops were damaged. The next day, the upper castes marched to the police station shouting slogans such as 'Change the parade route', 'Death to Ambedkar' and 'Doom to Jatavs'. In response, members of the Jatav community staged a peaceful protest and marched through the streets of the upper-caste localities such as Rawat Para and Pipal Andi.¹⁹ Again, stones were thrown at the marchers and the police made a *lathi* charge to dispel the protest, injuring many Jatavs.²⁰ The Dalit Jatav community continued their peaceful protest in front of the office of the District Magistrate, and many were incarcerated. On 1 May 1978, the police made another *lathi* charge on the protesters in front of the District Magistrate's office, and rioting between the Jatavs and police spread to many parts of the city—particularly to Jagdish Para and Loha Mandi, which had high populations of Jatavs. As many as nine Jatavs (including two women) were killed and seven Dalit homes were burned, allegedly by the police and upper castes. The army was called to Agra on 3 May to end the violence. The intervention by the state and national governments marked a new phase in the celebrations of Ambedkar Jayanti in Agra, as the state

legitimised Ambedkar Jayanti, pardoned many of the incarcerated Jatav leaders and declared 14 April a public holiday in Uttar Pradesh.²¹

In this sense, the 'street' itself became the object of a power struggle between the marginalised Dalit community and the dominant upper-caste communities of society. This emphasises the varying and often opposing perceptions of who owns the street. The Dalit parade along streets in upper-caste localities reveals another important level of the performance as Dalits are exclusively permitted to contribute to the performance of the festival, while the upper castes are forced into the position of the silent audience who must observe but cannot perform. Thus, the real radical nature of a parade along such upper-caste streets lies in the re-positioning of the upper-caste community as a powerless audience whose hegemony over the street has been effectively, if only momentarily, broken. The re-creation of the Dalit *mela* as a civic affair is representative of the way space is used politically to shift performers and audiences in ways convenient to the state, as we see in the Ambedkar Jayanti's metamorphosis into a civic festival in the city centre.²²

Since the reconfiguration of the Ambedkar Jayanti in Agra into a civic affair, the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti is comparable with celebrations now held in the centre of Delhi. Although the parade is still the central event of the festivities in Agra, it is now celebrated under intense state surveillance and, like the *mela* in Delhi, is contained within a pre-designated route.²³ Here, the state moves into the role of legitimate dispenser of space, cordoning off an area deemed appropriate for the use of the Dalit community on that particular day. Looking at this through Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of the carnival, however, offers a different interpretation: acts of the state to legitimise the Dalit *mela* may actually serve to reinforce social hierarchies by emphasising that Dalit control of the public street as an exception (which occurs only on one special day a year and must be policed), thus reinforcing the view that upper-caste dominance over the streets at the city centre is the norm.²⁴ The institutionalised status of Ambedkar Jayanti across Uttar Pradesh is certainly an important success for the Dalit community and the result of sustained political assertion. The Dalit community no longer has to struggle for the right to inhabit the street.

Although this spatial shift has opened up the Dalit *mela* to the wider Indian public, it has also shifted the possibility of who is able to contribute to its performance. While Lynch asserts that 'On Ambedkar Jayanti non-Dalits participate, at least as an audience of onlookers, in the booths',²⁵ it is important to tease apart the meaning of performers and audience. My own ethnographic work on the Ambedkar Jayanti in Delhi, for instance, reveals that it is in fact politicians, members of parliament and a few individuals from social welfare organisations working at booths who constitute the majority (if not all) of the non-Dalit participants. There is little evidence that the wider non-Dalit population, with no self-interested motivation in the Dalit community's electoral potential, participates in this Dalit *mela* as an audience celebrating this public display of Dalit identity.²⁶ Rather, most non-Dalits act as a non-present audience, and the public recognition of Dalit identity occurs due to official governmental allocation of

space in the city centre. No longer are the upper castes confronted with this radical Dalit identity on their own doorstep as we saw in the early Dalit parades. In other words, non-Dalits are no longer forced to be a present audience to the Dalit *mela*'s performance of Dalit identity. Furthermore, state-sanctioning also has meant that an increasing number of non-Dalit politicians enter the Dalit *mela* as actors, displacing at least a part of the Dalit community's own ability to perform their identity.

Performance as literary distribution: the Dalit *mela* and Hindi Dalit literary pamphlets

For the well-established Hindi Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki, the occasion of the Dalit *mela* represents an opportunity to participate in the performance and serve his community by distributing Dalit literary pamphlets. In an interview, Valmiki attests that:

I have received some pamphlets for private distribution on Ambedkar Jayanti. We distribute some booklets to children and people who are interested in order to create awareness. Sometimes we even distribute these booklets for free so that more people can read them.²⁷

Whether celebrated in a Dalit locality or in the city centre, this pamphlet literature remains a ubiquitous cultural product of the Dalit *mela* and integral to the performance of Dalit identity. Hindi Dalit pamphlets, particularly when sold from a ground-cloth on Sansad Marg in central Delhi, highlight the Dalit community's dual claim to constitute a separate counter-public and to participate in the wider mainstream Hindi public sphere.²⁸

Valmiki's participation and performance in the Dalit *mela* as a distributor of Dalit pamphlets is particularly interesting in light of his own early engagement with this kind of literature. In his autobiography, *Joothan*, Valmiki describes this political awakening that occurs while reading a Dalit literary pamphlet:

One day . . . Hemlal put a small book in my hand. As I was flipping its pages, Hemlal said, 'You must read this book'. The name of the book was *Dr Ambedkar: A biography* . . . The further I went into the book, I felt as though a new chapter about life was being unfurled before me—a chapter about which I had known nothing. Dr Ambedkar's life-long struggle had shaken me up . . . My reading of these books had awakened my consciousness. These books had given voice to my muteness. It was during this time in my life when an anti-establishment consciousness became strong in me.²⁹

Unlike literature aimed at pleasure and entertainment, or even social reform, Dalit pamphlet literature is written for the purposes of a new kind of unofficial, political education for the Dalit community. Here, a Dalit audience may read about their community's historical descent from the original inhabitants of India and their past golden age, which ended in a fall from glory by the violent Aryan invasions. Dalit pamphlet writers re-interpret India's national historical narrative by positioning Dalits as the true indigenous community in ancient India—the first Indians, so to speak.

Dalit *melas*, celebrated in both local Dalit *bastis* and in urban centres, have become the primary site for the distribution of these pamphlets. Sold by the thousands and costing a mere Rs.5–40, Dalit pamphlets are printed on inexpensive paper by small presses often located at the back of a writer's home. For instance, a pamphlet such as Chandrikaprasad Jigyasu's *Baba Saheb ka Jivan Sangharsh (Baba Saheb Ambedkar's Life of Struggle)*, which is published in print-runs of 1000 copies, had run into its 16th edition by 1995, and G.P. Prashant's *Moolvansha Katha (Story of the Indigenous Lineage)* has sold as many as 50,000 copies, according to scholar Narayan.³⁰ The vast pamphlet literature published by these small presses narrates social and cultural histories of the Dalit community and contributes to an alternative political education for Dalit readers, answering such questions as: Who are we? What is our history? Why are we discriminated against? And what can we do to fight back?

One such pamphlet, Umesh Kumar's *Bhartiye Achambha (Indian Wonder)*, attempts to document Dalit history from 6000BC to the present.³¹ Kumar's narrative is typical of the Dalit perspective of ancient Indian history, stemming from early Adi Hindu ideology of the 1930s.³² Here, Dalits are considered to have been the original inhabitants of India and to have experienced a golden age of peace, prosperity and, especially, social equality before they were enslaved by the invading Aryans (the ancestors of the Brahmins). Based on concepts of human progress and development, each historical time period marked by the pamphlet (e.g. before 6000BC, before 3500BC, before 3000BC, etc.) is assessed according to the quality of society's mode of living, food, social, economic and political conditions, special customs, great men, deities and inventions. In this narrative, the Aryans are linked with social regression. We are told that, before 3000BC, the indigenous society had already moved from nomadic to settled villages and begun animal husbandry and agriculture. But after the Aryan invasion in 1500BC, as Kumar writes, 'The condition of the non-Aryans was deplorable. They, leading a life of animals, were helpless and attributed the tyranny committed by neo-Aryans to divine curse'.³³

Bhartiye Achambha also shows how Dalit popular histories serve to explain the origins of contemporary social realities. Within the paradigm of the Aryan race, caste as a system of social hierarchy was said to have been created by the Aryan-Brahmins specifically to maintain their own superiority and ritually define the indigenous people as inferior. Kumar uses the idea of the Aryan-Brahmin invention of the caste system as clear evidence of the Aryans' social backwardness, since social divisions based on caste run counter to modern concepts of the nation and the social equality of its citizens. This discursive identification of the Dalit community with progress is particularly effective when considered in the context of post-Independence obsessions with national development and social progress. The narrative also attempts to accommodate the current divisions among the lower castes (the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes communities) by explaining that when the Aryan invaders came to India: 'Some people ran to forests and started leading the life of primitive man and some accepted the slavery of the Aryans. Only a few

were engaged in fighting with the Aryans'.³⁴ Those who ran to the forests became the tribals, those who acquiesced in Aryan rule and acted as their henchmen became members of the Other Backward Castes, and those who stayed to fight the Aryans and were consequently the most brutally suppressed were the Dalits. This explanation is useful in giving Dalits alone an ancient heritage of political assertion. It also confirms the original unity of all lower-castes as non-Aryans; in other words, a people artificially divided by the Aryan invaders.

Many Dalit pamphlets reconsider ancient Indian history with reference to *Ramrajya*, the mythic rule of Ram as narrated in the epic *Ramayana*. Rather than a golden age of Hindu rule that has captured popular imagination in contemporary India,³⁵ Dalit writers such as Sundarlal Sagar have used literary pamphlets as a forum to subvert the prevalent discourse about the nature of *Ramrajya*. Sagar's *Ramrajya Kaisa Tha?* (*What was the nature of the Rule of Ram?*), for instance, contests the idea of *Ramrajya* as the ideal rule and, instead, argues that the Reign of King Ram spread superstition throughout society, destroyed egalitarianism and the rational religion of Buddhism, oppressed women with customs such as *sati* and instituted social hierarchy in the form of caste. In addition, Ram himself is criticised in *Ramrajya Kaisa Tha?* for eating meat and drinking wine. We see in this description a blatant provocation of upper-caste discourse, which idealises Ram as an *avatar* (reincarnation) of the god Vishnu. Furthermore, *Ramrajya* comes to symbolise social decline (ironically, according to upper-caste standards). Sagar's pamphlet also is critically engaged with the Sangh Parivar's re-appropriation of the concept of *Ramrajya*. He writes, 'I hope that all Shudras [lower castes] will become necessarily acquainted with the hypocrisy of the slogan of Ramrajya'.³⁶ Thus, discrediting the symbolic Hindutva ideal of *Ramrajya* becomes a discursive strategy for Dalit writers such as Sagar who use it to paint *Hindutva* as a feudal order contradictory to the interests of the Indian nation.

Dalit pamphlet literature becomes an important space for Dalits to re-interpret Brahminical Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana* or *Manusmriti* as a means of emphasising the Dalit community's separate cultural identity. None have done this more famously than K.M. Sant, whose series of eight pamphlets represent a strident critique of each of the most important Hindu texts, including the *Vedas*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *Manusmriti*. Sant himself states that 'I am trying to change the ideological thinking of people which is against society, the country and against the Constitution by analysing the thinking of the Hindus'.³⁷ Thus, these pamphlets engage directly and aggressively with dominant discourses such as Brahminical texts or theories of Aryan Race. Their aim is to challenge upper-caste claims to social authority gained from their upper-caste status and sanctioned by texts such as the *Manusmriti*, as well as claims to indigeneity (and, thus, authentic citizenship) via their status as Aryans. The overt political nature of this literature is reflected in upper-caste responses that have occasionally been violent, and have attempted to mobilise the state as an agent of censorship. For instance, Sant claims, 'When the first book [of the series] was published, there was a lot of protest... Then action started by the RSS

[*Rashtriya Swami Sevak*, a militant Hindu organisation]. So many times my family was in danger'.³⁸ Similarly, in his introduction to *Ramrajya Kaisa Tha?*, Sagar writes that, after publishing a booklet contesting the holiness of the *Ramayana* and *Manusmriti* in 1977:

The police and law courts directed [a case] against me and Brahmins put up a law suit. Jagat Guru Shankaracharya, Prime Minister Shri Morarji Desai, Chairman of the Ramlila Committee were witnesses against me. They practiced the law of superiority of Ramrajya's character and culture against me and were unsuccessful.³⁹

Within these examples, the great power held in the discourses of Aryan Race of *Ramrajya* is revealed by the extent to which caste groups struggle to maintain authority over their particular version of the discourse. Furthermore, the political education disseminated by these pamphlets, including those on the Dalit movement and life-histories of Dr Ambedkar, as well as the counter-histories, informs a growing Dalit readership of what it means to be Dalit in contemporary Indian society. In this sense, they are crucial in the formation of current Dalit social and cultural identities.

The Dalit literary pamphlets stand in stark contrast to the literature produced by well-established, Delhi-based Dalit writers that is making an entrance into mainstream, commercial publishing via various Hindi journals. The latter privileges genres such as Dalit autobiographies, short stories, literary criticism and intellectual debates. It is quite telling that, while many of the most well-known Dalit writers attend the *mela* celebrations on Sansad Marg, they come only as observers and do not attempt to sell their own literary works there.⁴⁰ This suggests an intimate relationship between space and literary genre⁴¹ as Dalit literary pamphlets are one of the most important cultural products that construct and disseminate Dalit identity to the many participants of the Dalit *mela*. As the Dalit *mela* is the primary opportunity for distribution for the pamphlets, it becomes significant as one of the few spaces receptive to overtly political genres of Dalit literature. These find a place neither in the Hindi literary mainstream, nor in the elite field of Delhi-centred Hindi Dalit literature.

Shifting performers, shifting audiences: the new space of the Dalit *mela*

In the past decade, Dalit *melas* such as the Chuharmal *mela* and Ambedkar Jayanti have been exploited for new political purposes. Narayan argues that there has been an increase in the intervention of political parties (such as the BSP and Samajwadi Party) and political organisations (such as the Dalit Sena) in the Dalit *melas* in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These now use the space of the *mela* as an opportunity to deliver political speeches and to distribute party literature.⁴² The importance of the Dalit *mela*, in the eyes of these political parties, was most aptly demonstrated by the 1998 struggle between two politicians, Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan, over who would gain the honour and public prestige of inaugurating the Chuharmal *mela*. While Laloo Prasad Yadav had been the first politician to

inaugurate the fair in 1995, in 1998 the Baba Chauharmal Memorial Festival Committee gave greater visibility to Ram Vilas Paswan, inspiring a journalist from the Hindi daily *Aaj* to write: 'Thus Laloo Prasad lost one of the great opportunities to prove himself the patron of poor and down trodden and most vocal propagator of social justice'.⁴³ Narayan's study records the spread of political-party-inspired pamphlet literature at the Chuharmal *mela*, implying a new kind of political intervention into the literary field of the *mela*. In addition, parties such as the BSP, the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal have begun to use the form of the traditional Dalit *mela* to celebrate pan-Indian Dalit heroes such as Periyar or Shahuji Maharaj, consolidating a broad sense of Dalit identity useful in electoral mobilisation. Major Dalit *melas* have been organised by the BSP, particularly after the BSP Government in Uttar Pradesh came to power during the mid-1990s.⁴⁴ More recently, pro-*Hindutva* forces have attempted to appropriate Ambedkar Jayanti as a means of capturing the Dalit votebank.⁴⁵ In 2004, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) celebrated Ambedkar Jayanti in 24 locations throughout the state of Punjab,⁴⁶ and the *Times of India* reported BJP celebrations at the Kankerbagh Community Hall in Patna, Bihar.⁴⁷

While Narayan reports increasing involvement of political parties in the Dalit *mela*, both Lynch's work on Agra and my own fieldwork on the Ambedkar Jayanti in Delhi point to parallel trends of de-politicisation of the Dalit *mela*, now transformed into a civic affair. In *melas* that remain spatially confined to Dalit localities, members of the Dalit community retain control and ultimate authority over the space of the *mela*. This allows them to determine, for instance, what can be sold, who can give speeches, which version of a drama may be performed and even which big politician is permitted to inaugurate the festival. As the *mela* moves to the streets in the form of a parade, languages of resistance and confrontation transform the celebration, allowing Dalit communities to claim the right to inhabit all public streets. Here, the state (in the form of the police) becomes a key oppositional player. In contrast, where the Dalit *mela* is sanctioned by the state and transformed into a civic affair, Dalit cultural identity is represented by *mela* participants as a legitimate part of social discourse. However, it also leads to a kind of de-politicisation as the *mela* as 'civic affair' now becomes part of a dominant narrative where the state (as the local, state and national governments) becomes the legitimate dispenser of space.

Conclusion

In the relationship between space and discourse in the notion of the public sphere, we have seen how Dalit pamphlet literature serves as an important discursive counter-public for the marginalised Dalit community. The appearance of this literature in the city centre highlights the Dalit community's dual attempt to maintain a separate counter-public sphere while, at the same time, struggling to enter and participate in the mainstream public sphere. Furthermore, we have seen that, as the Dalit *mela* has moved from the Dalit locality to the city centre, the nature of the audience and performers has also shifted. The Dalit *mela* as a civic

function elevates Dalit claims to state sanction (dispensation of space) to the level of those made by other communities. At the same time, however, the Dalit community is forced to concede a significant amount of authority over the *mela's* performance in order to be part of this national discourse. The state's role as the legitimate dispenser of space creates a situation where more people outside the Dalit community can act as performers in the festival. This often results in the marginalisation of many Dalits in the performance. In other words, as the state holds authority over public space, priority is now often given to big politicians, members of parliament or even the President of India who want to pontificate before this gathering of the Dalit community. As a result, ordinary members of Dalit communities are often unable to make speeches about the issues they deem most important to their particular community interests. One might say that Dalits have symbolically lost their place on the *mela* stage at these civic events.

Does the spatial shift of the Dalit *mela* celebrations from the Dalit *basti* to the city centre mean that Dalits have effectively broken upper-caste hegemony over the public street? In order to answer this question, we must consider that two parallel changes have occurred. On the one hand, the spatial shift forces upper castes to be a non-present audience that must recognise the performance of Dalit identity through the state's allocation of a main city street. On the other hand, the fact that the *mela* is confined to certain appropriate streets means that upper castes have the ability to remain a non-present audience. In addition, as Bakhtin's contemplations on the carnival suggest, the transformation of Dalit *melas* such as Ambedkar Jayanti into a civic festival also serves to reinforce rather than disrupt or break existing social hierarchies, and reveals that the Dalit community may still have to struggle to gain true social equality on the street.

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Notes and references

1. The Chuharmal *mela* is celebrated locally in areas of Bihar; see a detailed analysis of it in Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: contesting fables, contested memories and dalit political discourse* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).
2. Ambedkar Jayanti continues to be celebrated as a parade in Agra. Owen Lynch's work on the Ambedkar Jayanti parade in Agra, U.P. includes 'Ambedkar Jayanti: Dalit reritualization in Agra', *The Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol 55, Nos 2–3, 2002, pp 116–120; and 'Rioting as rational action: an interpretation of the April 1978 Riots in Agra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 November 1981, pp 1951–1956.
3. Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated in central Delhi on Sansad Marg. Information on this *mela* is based on my own field research there on 14 April 2003 and 14 April 2004.
4. Throughout this paper I will refer to all three forms of low-caste celebration as 'Dalit *melas*' while acknowledging that Dalit identity is itself a recent self-ascription.

5. More recent works include Amineh Ahmed, "'The world is established through the work of existence'": the performance of Gham-Khadi among Pukhtun Bibiane in Northern Pakistan' (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cambridge University, 2004); and Stephen Legg, 'Gendered politics and nationalised homes: women and the anti-colonial struggle in Delhi, 1930–47', *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol 10, No 1, 2003.
6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Open space/public place: garbage, modernity and India', *South Asia*, Vol XIV, No 1, 1991; Sandria B. Freitag, 'Introduction: aspects of "the public" in colonial South Asia', *South Asia*, Vol XIV, No 1, 1991; and Katherine Hansen, 'Sultana the Dacoit and Harishchandra: two popular dramas of the Nautanki tradition of North India', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 17, No 2, 1983.
7. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (translated by Thomas Burger and Fredrick Lawrence, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). See also Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
8. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (translated by Richard Nice, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).
10. For a detailed study of this Dalit *mela* as well as an analysis of the Chuharmal narrative, see Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1.
11. Ram Roop Chaudhary, 'Mela-tyohar' (Unpublished manuscript, Patna, 1976). Quoted from and translation from the Hindi by Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1.
12. According to an article in the Hindi daily *Aaj* (Patna), 12 April 1998, as cited in Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1.
13. Sudha Pai, *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002).
14. See Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1, p 35; and Lynch, *op cit*, Ref 2, 2002, p 117.
15. We may assume that the situation in Delhi is similar to that in Pune, where the *Times of India* reported a young Dalit woman describing Ambedkar Jayanti there 'marked by (a) variety (of) entertainment programmes in our community temples (viharas), games such as musical chairs and a procession in the evening'. The article claims that 'wearing new clothes, preparing special meals with sweets like srikhand and kheer, inviting relatives and well-wishers for meals and exchanging dishes is part of the traditional festivities on April 14'. See *Times of India*, 14 April 2004.
16. Lynch, *op cit*, Ref 2, 2002, pp 116–117.
17. *Ibid*, p 117.
18. Lynch, *op cit*, Ref 2, 1981, pp 1951–1956.
19. Although they had requested permission for the march from the local authorities, their request had been denied, and members of the Jatav community decided to continue with the illegal march.
20. A debate between the Jatavs and the upper castes over this incident was recorded in the local Hindi daily *Amar Ujala* on 16 and 18 April 1978. The bloody scene in Rawat Para after the police lathi charge was also reported in *Amar Ujala*, 24 April 1978. See Lynch, *op cit*, 2002, Ref 2.
21. The status of Ambedkar as a national Dalit leader made the riot and repression of the Dalit community in Agra on the occasion of Ambedkar's birth anniversary celebrations significant for Dalits across India. As Lynch records: 'Food, money, medical help and untouchable leaders from as far away as south India poured into Agra'. See Lynch, *op cit*, Ref 2, 1981, p 1954.
22. Work by Stephen Legg on the colonial administration in Delhi shows that policing communal festivals such as Bakr-Id, Muharram and Dusehra was also a common practice of the colonial state. Using Michel Foucault's work on state surveillance practices, Legg suggests that several communal riots at religious festivals motivated the Delhi police towards increasing surveillance over the street in an attempt to discipline this chaotic and unpredictable space. Both Lynch and Legg locate the growing urge of the state to exert control over and thus 'tame' the street in the violence of communal riots. See Stephen Legg, 'Colonial governmentality: spaces of imperialism and nationalism in India's new capital, Delhi 1911–1947' (Unpublished dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2003). Prashant Kidambi has done similar work on the colonial state's efforts to police the Muharram street festival in Bombay. See Prashant Kidambi, 'The ultimate masters of the city: police, public order and the poor in colonial Bombay, c. 1893–1914', *Crime, History and Societies*, Vol 8, No 1, 2004, pp 27–48.
23. Lynch records a total of 3910 officials involved in the process of surveillance including police, inspectors, constables, and companies of special forces. See Lynch, 2002, Ref 2.
24. See M.M. Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (edited and translated by Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (translated by Vern W. McGee, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986). See also Ronald Knowles (ed) *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998).
25. Lynch, *op cit*, Ref 2, 2002, p 119.
26. This statement is based on my interviews during the Ambedkar Jayanti in Delhi in 2004.

27. Interview in Hindi with Omprakash Valmiki, 9 September 2004, Dehra Dun.
28. For a discussion on the development of the Hindi public sphere, see Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
29. Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan* (Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1997). Quoted from the excellent English translation by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (Calcutta: Samya, 2003), pp 71–72.
30. Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1, p 107.
31. Umesh Kumar, *Bhartiya Achambha* (Allahabad: Kushwaha Publishers, 1996). From the English translation by Badri Narayan and A.R. Mishra in *Multiple Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writings* (Delhi: Manohar, 2004).
32. The Adi Hindu (Original Hindu) movement, founded by Swami Achutanand, was based on the notion that Dalits were the indigenous inhabitants of India, enslaved by foreign Aryan invaders and oppressed by the imposition of the caste system. While Achutanand's ideology was largely influenced by the works of Jotiba Phule written approximately half a century earlier in Maharashtra, this was the first moment in the history of North India when disparate Scheduled Caste *jatis* conceptualised their identity as united and as separate from the majority of Hindus. For a historical analysis of the Adi Hindu movement, see Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Ramnarayan Rawat, 'A social history of "Chamars" in Uttar Pradesh, 1881–1956' (Unpublished dissertation, Delhi University, 2004).
33. Kumar, *op cit*, Ref 31, p 48.
34. *Ibid*, p 48.
35. See Romila Thapar, 'The Ramayana syndrome' and 'A historical perspective on the story of Rama', *Cultural Pasts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
36. Sundarlal Sagar, *Ramrajya Kaisa Tha?* (Manipuri: Sagar Prakashan, 1981, 2nd ed 1988, 3rd ed 1992), p 4.
37. Interview with K.M. Sant, Lucknow, 15 March 2004.
38. *Ibid*.
39. Sagar, *op cit*, Ref 36, p 6.
40. Writers such as Surajpal Chauhan, whose autobiography *Tiraskrit* (Disregarded) and various short stories, as well as his senior position within the Dalit Writer's Association (Dalit Lekhak Sangh), has made him a well-known Dalit literary figure; or Mohandas Naimisharay, who has been an active writer and editor of several Hindi Dalit journals since the early 1970s and has become increasingly well known after the publication of his autobiography *Apne Apne Pinjare* (My Cage) in 1995. This disinclination to use Ambedkar Jayanti as a space of literary distribution was also true of other Dalit writers of the same Delhi-based circle who continue to privately fund the publication of their books and distribute through personal networks due to lack of a publisher.
41. The largest stall at the Ambedkar Jayanti in Delhi in 2004 was Gautam Book Centre, which Sultan Singh Gautam set up in his own home in Shahdara to collect, preserve and distribute Hindi Dalit literature. However, books at his stall consisted mostly of sociological studies of the Dalit community and related issues, as well as several academic studies of the BSP. The academic studies in both English and Hindi overshadowed the few works by these Dalit authors available that day, and some of the most popular literature of this sphere, the Dalit autobiographies, were not available to purchase at all.
42. Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1, p 95.
43. *Aaj* (Patna), 12 April 1998, as cited in Narayan, *op cit*, Ref 1, pp 79–80.
44. The BSP has formed four governments in Uttar Pradesh by aligning with the Samajwadi Party in 1993, and thrice with the BJP in 1995, 1997, and 2002. See Pai, *op cit*, Ref 13.
45. The attempt by the Sangh Parivar to reappropriate the image of Ambedkar, however, is not quite as recent, as can be seen from Gopal Guru's excellent series of articles in *Economic and Political Weekly* that inspired a heated debate on the subject. See Gopal Guru, 'Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16 February 1991; S.H. Deshpande, 'A matter of definitions' (response to Guru), *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 April 1991; Dhammachari Lokamitra, 'Ambedkar and Buddhism' (response to Guru), *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 May 1991; Gopal Guru 'Appropriating Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6–13 July 1991; and Gopal Guru, 'Misreading Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 October 1991.
46. *Tribune of India*, 15 April 2004.
47. *Times of India*, 15 April 2004. While this particular discussion centres around an understanding of 'political character' as one defined by political parties, it must also be remembered that, from their earliest days, Dalit *melas* have been 'political' in their re-asciption of Dalit identity in positive cultural terms, and that the performance of this identity in a public setting such as the street is in itself a politically assertive act.

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