DALIT CULTURAL ASSERTION AND ICONOGRAPHY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF TWO INDIAN STATES OF MAHARASHTRA AND UTTAR PRADESH

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Abstract

Dalit, one of the lowest rungs in the Indian caste society, has been historically marginalized on all fronts; social, political, cultural. The term Dalit is an identity of self-assertion, a political identity which has been chosen by the community themselves. In the article I want to highlight the contributions of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the greatest icons from the Dalit community in India, who fought for the rights of the oppressed communities, and sought their emancipation, and his influence which makes him not just a political figure or an anti-caste revolutionary and philosopher but which has also established him as an icon. There are many visual indicators to suggest the same, in terms of the numerous statues build all over India reflecting the socio-political assertion of the Dalit community and their belief in the struggles of Dr. Ambedkar and his ideologies. This assertion also gets attacked and vandalized by the upper castes forces which have always worked in the society to oppress the lower castes and keep the privileges of power and domination restricted to their own community. In the paper I will try to explore the Dalit visual culture and the use of Dalit imageries and iconography to assert a politically conscious Dalit identity. This paper will highlight the ideological basis of the socio-political and cultural movement of the Dalit communities, and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar and religious conversion over the same.

Keywords

Dalit, Cultural Assertion, Brahmanism, Iconography

1. Introduction

The historical marginalization (political, cultural, symbolic, psychological and material) of the Dalit community has succeeded in pushing them to the margins of the society, in every sphere, especially from the elite occupations such as media, the art and culture. These elite occupations fail to provide an equality of opportunity for the Dalits, creating monopoly and hegemony of the *Savarnas* in the same. The Ambedkar-led neo-Buddhist movement has helped the Dalit community to reject or challenge their pasts of oppression and Brahminical hegemony that has been prevalent not only since the colonial era, but much before that.

Studies about caste in the field of visuality have been fairly new, especially owing to the discourse in New Art history. Visual literacy in India is not only rare, it is also restricted to its political use in terms of political banners or even school text books that are politically inclined to teaching the young generation of selective history and politics (Mukherjee 2014). Every visual representation has politics of aesthetics, hence visual representation is equally connected to the political dynamics of a region, and thus the socio-political struggles of the anti-caste movement get reflected through the choice of imageries and iconographies by a community.

Religious conversion among Dalits plays an important role in shaping such visual representations; which will be the prime concern of this paper. Spectatorship or how imageries of Dalit representation are viewed is deeply impacted by the influence of hegemonic cultures. New art history comes as a critique to the traditional art history that has guided and restricted the understanding of art to a selective genre of works and could not address the political and the social that are involved in public visuality. Popular and minority cultures are given space within the mainstream, and new art history and the new visual representations in the art world aim at breaking those barriers and binaries between high and low, art and non-art (Alone 2015, Panniker and Achar 2012). Owing to New art history discourse many studies have also been done upon the new media and popular visual culture in India, reflecting the relation between politics, visual representation and identity, as well as the impact of class and gender on art works (Venkatraman 2017, Baker and Al-Abbas 2016).

The paper attempts to study Dalit visual culture to explore Dalit imageries and iconography that assert a politically conscious Dalit identity. The paper will explore instances where Dalit imagination has created architecture, visual symbols and statues, owing to the anti-

caste struggle in the post-Ambedkar era, and will offer a Phule-Ambedkarite critique of the Brahminical hegemony to the idea of 'aesthetics' that is commonly understood by using Ranciere's argument of aesthetics and its politics. Ranciere suggests an aesthetic regime of art where art has the capability for equality, where the viewer is not a passive onlooker. The act of representation and spectatorship are highly political acts. The Dalit visual culture created by Dalits speaks of such a representation of aesthetics and its political implications.

2. Dalit visual culture: A Phule-Ambedkarite understanding

Very few works have been carried out on the concept of Dalit art, aesthetics of the Dalit community or representation of Caste and Tribal issues in the visual field. It may be observed that marginally very few writings are produced from an Ambedkarite-Phule discourse in academia.

Jyotirao Phule was an anti-caste leader from Maharashtra, who started his struggle against Brahminism and caste oppression and paved way for the anti-caste struggles in India, inspiring Ambedkar in his fight against Brahminical oppression. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was one of the greatest anti-caste leaders, who worked for the emancipation of the Dalits or the erstwhile untouchable community. He is one such leader who not only picked up Dalit issues in the national discourse but also had an impact upon regional anti-caste movements across India. Ambedkar's writings and ideologies not just remain restricted for the Dalits but for all oppressed sections of the society. Both Ambedkar and Phule have given harsh criticism of the Brahminical structure or the Hindu social order prevalent in India which has been perpetuated by the upper castes through Brahminical scriptures and the caste system. Further this Brahminical oppression has a mutuality of caste and Patriarchy. While Phule strongly criticized the scriptures and religious superstitions in Hinduism, Ambedkar went a step further by criticizing the mythological history that was written by the Brahmins for their own benefits, and by rewriting history, creating alternate histories and therefore an alternate culture of the Dalits. Ambedkar did in depth study of Buddhist texts, juxtaposing them to the myths created by Hindu scriptures, giving the theory of Revolution and Counter revolution, bringing forth the establishment of Buddhism as a revolutionary doctrine in India much before the advent of Hinduism (Ambedkar 1987: 151).

Though the Dalits have historically been involved in various cultural activities they are always considered and reduced to being associated with traditional menial occupations, mostly

that of keeping the villages clean, skinning and disposing of dead animals, working as messengers of the community (Beltz 2005: 26-27). To escape the burden caste-based occupations, many Dalit youths who could get educated left their traditional practices of art and craft, which were considered to be polluting, and of lowly status, such as that of playing drums, which is made of skin and therefore a symbol of pollution or the traditional practices such as tamasha and lavani which are associated with begging, or entertainment of the upper caste viewers, where the artist is insulted and looked down upon (Pandey 2006: 1779-1788). These oppressive practices have been subverted by the Dalits by forming contemporary Dalit culture such as Ambedkari Jalsa, Doha, Palna (songs about the life and ideologies of Ambedkar), and thereby creating assertive Dalit cultures.

As Ranciere suggests, there is politics in aesthetics and aesthetics in the political, making the invisible visible, and the inaudible, audible. "Art is political and politics artistic because both are practices of contesting the historical transcendental factors that delimit the social and ascribe to individuals as a particular mode of subjectivity" (Tanke 2010: 6). Art therefore has the possibility to institute equality (ibid).

This aesthetic regime of art resonates with the Phule-Ambedkarite discourse that seeks equality of all individuals and communities, and the visual representation becomes a manifestation of the same. This can be clearly seen by studying the image representation found among the Dalit movement in India, and in context of this paper, the case of Maharahstra and Uttar Pradesh.

3. Dalit Cultural assertions in India

The Dalit cultural movement came as a reclaiming of the spaces that belonged to the Dalits, by asserting their identity in the cultural public spheres which had been dominated for long by the privileged castes and classes. Gopal Guru also calls this phenomenon the "re-emergence" of Dalit culture, claiming the authenticity of their culture which was misappropriated by the upper castes. The tradition of ancient India didn't have anything for the Dalits that they could own proudly, and thus they have to look at their own culture to develop myths, and reject religious texts to create their separate culture (Dangle 1992) and thus they created their own poetry, folk songs and musical instruments "to satisfy their cultural needs and aspirations" (Guru 1997).

This difference of power and the absence of public space for Dalits have led to increased identity assertion by Dalits, and collective action has increased political consciousness among Dalit communities, amongst other developments such as assertion of equality (Shah 2001). The cultural assertions made by Dalit communities in the post-Ambedkar period have increased the level of consciousness among the Dalit community, leading them to gain both social and political upliftment. Formation of national level Ambedkarite political parties, Dalit assertion by youths in the form of revolutionary movements, and stronger assertion by Dalit youths in student politics all over India are just some examples of this. The government and the mainstream parties, media houses and the various public arenas and institutions too have recognized the relevance of the Dalit community, owing to their large number, and thereby leading to vote bank politics. Although the Dalit community has been recognized as marginalized community there have been very few studies on Dalit cultural assertions of the Dalit communities and this paper aims at representing the contemporary works in the cultural assertion by Dalits in the visual arena.

To say in Eva-Maria Hardman's words, "(the) subaltern counter publics…signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of the subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Habermas 1992: 123, in Hardtrman 2009: 88). She further states that the Indian public sphere has historically remained Brahminical and hegemonic in sidelining and invisibilizing the Dalits from the public sphere, leading to a complete absence of Dalits from mainstream media or the public sphere. The Dalits have asserted their identity to form a counter public, challenging this hegemonic suppression (Hardtman 2009: 3). This is evident from the counter cultures that Dalits have created in the form of contemporary cultural practices, creating a parallel discourse of the commons, alongside the mainstream. In order to understand the developing counter culture by Dalits there is need for a contextual understanding of the regional anti-caste movements in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

4. The anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh

The religious conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, as advocated by Dr. Ambedkar, has had an enormous influence upon the Dalit movement. Religious conversion has been used as a tool for emancipation, to get protection from the violence of the upper castes, for institutional support, to attain dignity and social status, as well as to use it as a tool to change the Hindu social order. There have been instances of religious conversion of the ex-untouchables into other

religions such as into Islam, Christanity and Sikhism as well as to Bahaism and Jainism in some states (Beltz 2005: 34-36, Hardtman 2009: 89). But the conversion of Dalits into Buddhism is worth noting because of the mass movement it has created; not just a religious movement but also a social (and cultural) movement, which has a vision for changing the Brahminical unjust social order, and to gain equality of all citizens. Beltz considers the untouchables not as victims but as agents capable of action (Beltz 2005: 15). The assertions of identity as Dalits, and the socio-political movement of the Dalits only affirms her claims.

For Dalits in Maharashtra, Ambedkar has been a "stepping stone to respect, dignity and social justice" (Beltz 2005: 82-83). After conversion to Buddhism during the period after 1956, the Dalits found a new cultural life (Dangle 1992).The Dalit movement was not only a moment of political awakening for the Dalits; it brought the culture of education and the adoption of Ambedkar as an ideal in their daily lives. There were huge changes in the lifestyles of Dalits, their cultures, food habits in terms of mannerism, speech, rejecting beef[1], changes in the dressing/attire by dressing up well, many times in Western clothes, imitating the iconography of Ambedkar in a Western suite. This change was also starkly visible through the Dalit community's development and adoption of new cultural symbols such as the image of Ambedkar and Buddhist symbols in their daily lives. Development of cultural codes such as "Jai bhim" as a revolutionary greeting is another example of cultural assertion (Guru 1997).The existing studies of imageries used by Dalits show an extensive use of images of Ambedkar and Buddha, which also points towards the lack of any other imagery among the Dalits (Tartakov 2012: 1-12). The images of Ambedkar and Buddha are being used by the Dalit community to assert a distinct cultural and political identity. But these symbols, images and life practices are an organic part of the Dalit movement which is as much spiritual and emotional as it is cultural and political. Such visual indicators of the Dalit cultural assertion are not only specific to Maharashtra but also other parts of India.

Apart from the Dalits' conversion to Buddhism as step to assert selfhood and against Brahminical hegemony, there has also been political movement in the state. Dr. Ambedkar formed the Scheduled Caste Federation of India, and later on the Republican Party of India (formed posthumously) as a step to access political space and opportunity for the oppressed communities. Even though the RPI saw a decline over time, it did lay the foundation for political

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[1] The ex-untouchables had been forced to eat dead animals like cows, owing to utter poverty and the oppression by the upper castes, which didn't allow the untouchable to eat good food, fresh meat etc.

engagements of the Dalits, and an organized activism in the Dalit movement. The Dalit panther too has done some credible work in the region of Maharashtra, for the upliftment of the Dalit community. This has led to emergence of numerous small Buddha Viharas all over Maharahstra. The logo of Dalit Panther was one of the first images to be associated with the the Dalits, and which initiated the discourse on Dalit art and imageries of the Dalits.

The context of Uttar Pradesh (UP), even though similar in terms of its engagement with the anti-caste movement, differs from the context of Maharashtra. UP constitutes 22% Dalit population in the state (Pai 1997: 2313), which is a considerable strength, and hence a strong Dalit movement can be expected from the same. The Dalit movement in the state did not have the history of organized activism as states like Maharashtra has shown (Singh 1998: 2611-2618), but there have been much endeavors to raise voice against the caste inequalities, both socially as well as politically.

UP is one of the states where Dalit movement has been most visible in party politics since the 1980s (Hardtman 2009: 124). The anti-caste movement in UP is also impacted by the Ravidasi movement and saints like Ravidas and Swami Achutananda. There has been extensive community level work; cultural, political, social as well as ideological under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and later on Mayawati. Organizations like BSP (Bharatiya Samaj Party), BAMCEF (The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation), DS4 (Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti) have been the political, and cultural groups that have been active in the state of UP helping in bringing the Dalit-Bahujan into political power, and been giving shape to anti-caste politics in the state (Singh 1998: 2611-2618). Today, UP is has one of the fastest growing anti-caste movement, both socially as well as politically, with Ambedkarite ideology reaching its pockets.

Dalits in Uttar Pradesh have shifted from venerating Ravidas, and Kabir during the 1870s to embracing Buddhism by the 20th century. Dalits from Agra (a small town in UP), following Ambedkar's conversion in 1956, joint the process of mass conversion in 1957. After which many Dalits in UP chose to convert to Buddhism, rejecting Hinduism and Hindu deities were removed from many Hindu temples, converting them to Buddhist temples. However in many parts of UP, even though the Dalits had chosen Ambedkarite ideology politically, socially they still followed Adi Hindu notions. Many Ravidasi temples sprung in the state, which found veneration of Hindu deities alongside Saint Ravidas, Ambedkar and even Buddha. For instance, in the temple in the house of Girdhari Lal (a rich leather merchant and a close associate of Achutananda), the statues

of Kali and Hanuman can be found beside a separate cell having statues of Ambedkar, Buddha and Ravidas. The imagery found in such temple also represent the importance and power that each icon holds, and are positioned accordingly. For instance, Ambedkar and Ravidas are put in center stage, Ravidas, succumbing to the modern Ambedkar, while Buddha is seen elevated (Schempp 2007: 232).

Conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh is more of a political act than social (Moudgil 2017). There have been criticism of the Hinduistic ritualism found among Dalits, such as finding alternative idols to the Hindu gods and goddesses, such as Valmiki, Ravidas and Ambedkar in temples, but such criticism looks at the socio-cultural protests as absolute and not as a process that reflects the anti-caste struggle (Singh 1998: 2613). This amalgamation of Hindu deities and Ambedkarite imageries raises questions upon the social change that the movement has been able to bring among the community, but breaking the shackles of hinduism doesn't remain easy for the Dalit community in Uttar Pradesh. A society that is highly Brahminical, and a society that has been historically oppressive, conversion to Buddhism, even though a political step, is the first step towards emancipation. Both Buddhism and Ambedkarite philosophy speaks of equality, and breaking the chains of oppression and are a stepping stone to gaining social upliftment, education and thereby emancipation.

5. Iconography and Statues of Anti-Caste Leaders

There are more statues of Ambedkar in India, across villages and urban residential areas, than of any other historical person of the last millennium. Such statues have played a major role in political assertion in recent India, and help Dalits to reclaim their pride and public space (Omvedt 2004: xiii). This assertion in the public space also comes as a rejection of the past oppressions faced by Dalits, and a reclamation of the spaces that are denied to them even today. This kind of community built statues can be found most in numbers in Maharashtra, which saw a strong anti-caste movement owing to the struggles of Dr. Ambedkar.

Ambedkar reconstructed Buddhism by radically re-actualizing various details of the Buddhist texts, by reinterpreting them, with the aim to revive actual Buddhism, to rewrite histories, mythologies and creating Dalit historical cultures. He used the Pali term *Dhamma* over the Sanskrit word *Dharma*, describing it as principle of morality and social justice; as a way of life (ibid: 60-63, Beltz 2005: 62, 138, Kamble 2003: 4307). Ambedkar's Buddhism is fundamentally different to any other "orthodox" religion and also different from the Buddhist

schools such as Hinayana, Mahayana or Theravada (Beltz 2005: 41, Hardtman 2009: 94). This is also visible by the existence use of Buddhist imageries in the contemporary use by Ambedkar, and more so in post-Ambedkar period. For instance, Ambedkar used a lot of Buddhist imageries when building the colleges such as Milind College in Aurangabad, one of the first colleges built by Dr. Ambedkar. This use of Buddhist iconographies and imageries was a conscious and political step, where the Buddhist imageries have also been modified in some manners to suite the contemporary needs and ideologies in line with the Phule-Ambedkarite discourse. For instance, in an incident described by a head monk, he mentions that Ambedkar wanted a walking Buddha, with open eyes, in opposition to the one lying or with closed eyes, which is more popular among Buddha's images or statues (Hardtman 2009: 147). Ever since, use of Buddhist imageries in contemporary times has been very common by dalits. These imageries take influence from historical Buddhist imageries found the Buddhist caves of Aurangabad. Such imageries can also be found in Uttar Pradesh.

The popularization of Dalit iconography began with fervor after Manyawar Kanshi Ram, when he established small Buddha statues in various Dalit *mohallas* (Schempp 2007: 238). Further, after Mayawati's (the student and follower of Kanshi Ram, and currently the President of BSP, the only National level Dalit party in India) coming to power, many Ambedkar villages, Buddha parks and Ravidasi *ghats* were created by her. Symbols and heroes of the Dalit movement were put in important crossroads "Dalit-ness had moved out of the segregated wards into the open society as large" (ibid: 239). Mass conversion in the years 1995 and 2001 served political ends in the movement, and mass Buddhist weddings were conducted, communal meals were thrown, mainly by rich patrons of the Dalit community, thereby reflecting an amalgamation of social-political-religious movement of the Dalits in UP (ibid 2007: 235-239).

Some studies have been done on the statues built by Mayawati, which explain the new politics of 'size' by the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, creating a new discourse in the state by reclaiming the public spaces through life-sized statues of Dalit-Bahujan leaders and herself at the Ambedkar Memorial Park at Lucknow and Dalit Prerna Sthal at Noida, asserting for a politics of recognition in the public sphere (Jain 2014, Jaoul 2012: 117). Mayawati's huge monuments are a claim to history by forming modern identity for a community that was earlier shunned and excluded. The Brahmins have used a politics of scale over politics of number (Bahujan, literal translation of which means the community which is large in number) by

creating large structure and claiming public spaces. But Mayawati's large monuments have challenged such a politics of scale by claiming larger public space (Jain 2014).

Though she has been criticized heavily, especially by the dominant caste groups and the elite educated middle class, it did affect the balance of power in the state, bringing tangible symbolic/iconographic success through the statues and monuments. The Ambedkar statues testify to the rising consciousness of constitutional rights among the underprivileged, therefore, the state gets imagined and even "tamed" by popular minds through the same (Joaul 2012). BSP has changed the 'Indian culture of politics' by challenging the cultural values that have historically kept the Dalits invisible in the state (Hardtman 2009: 128). There has been considerable improvement in the conditions of Dalits in terms of the economic and political, owing to efforts by political parties, socio-cultural movement by civil society and selective developmental programs by the state from the above (Pai 1997, 2313). The Dalit movement in UP has thus created political consciousness and cultural assertion of a distinct identity by celebration of festivals like Ambedkar Jayanti, Periyar Mela, establishing statues of Ambedkar and other Dalit-Bahujan leaders within the BSP regime (ibid). These cultural celebrations mark a unique and distinct Dalit culture of the post-Ambedkar era not only in UP and Maharahstra but all over India.

6. Ambedkar Statues and Their Iconographic Representation

Figure 1: *Ambedkar Jayanti celebration in UP, Azamgar*

Figure 1: *Dr. Ambedkar statue in Nagpur, Maharahstra*

Figure 3: *Statue of Dr. Ambedkar, Mayawati and Manyawar Kanshiram at Dalit Prerna Sthal*

The many statues of Ambedkar as well as other anti-caste leaders found in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh points towards the use of iconography to reclaim public spaces that impart a certain ideological belief system. The statue of Ambedkar mostly shows him with a raised finger, a book in hands, signifying the Constitution of India, and pen in his pocket. He is portrayed as an

educated man, a leader, and one who is giving his teachings to the people (Tartakov 2012: 13-35, Komnath 2017). Also to note is the fact that since most community built statues are built by the people, they are often made of concrete and cement, and often characterize certain crudeness. They are mostly made by local artists, and use of bright colours, mostly the colour blue (which was colour of Ambedkar's party and now has become a symbolic colour of all Ambedkarite groups) is also common, unlike many modern sculptures of other leaders found in India. Even though these statues do not resemble Ambedkar in the real sense, they have been successful in creating an imagery of Ambedkar, the idea of Ambedkar as a leader of the oppressed. Public representation is essentially the manifestation of the idea of the person rather than the person in the real sense, hence giving an iconic imagery. Thus the statues of Ambedkar are not only a representation of the leader but also his ideas, the belief that the Dalit community has upon him, but also recognition to the entire movement itself. The visual culture created by these statues are not done through the intention of creating art works, rather it creates an aesthetic of its own, having a distinct language to it, that of Dalit aesthetics.

Another thing to observe is the location of the statues. Most of the Ambedkar statues can be found in Dalit localities, evidently because most of them have been built by the community. But the absence of Ambedkar's imageries from other public places also raises the question of visibility and recognition of Ambedkar as a leader of all. While Ambedkar remains a national leader, recognizing him as a Dalit leader becomes more commonly accepted, and therefore his visibility more in Dalit populated areas than the common public spaces. The willfulness of accepting Ambedkar as a Dalit leader rather than a national leader further presses upon the untouchability practiced in the modern society, the marking of people and objects as touchable, untouchable, Dalit, which is only reflection of its Brahminical mindset. These community-built statues often have a history, a history of struggle to attain that space, the land, raw materials for that statue, which reflects the struggle of the entire Dalit community. Furthermore even the small children in these Dalit *bastis* know about the contributions of Dr Ambedkar to the lives of the Dalits, and to the nation. Thus, this political consciousness of the Dalit community gets manifested through visuality in public arena and vice versa.

The statues built by Mayawati, in Uttar Pradesh (both Dalit Prerna Sthal and Ambedkar Memorial Park), on the other hand have a magnificence to them, a majestic beauty, and the massive size of the statues further gives the iconography an authority and power. The statues built by Mayawati are state sponsored, built while the BSP was in ruling in the state of UP.

These statues challenge the lack of visibility given to not only Ambedkar but many other anti-caste leaders as well. This move to create a memorial of dalit-Bahujan leaders is an effort to access these erstwhile restricted public places, which were alien to the Dalit-bahujans. It is also a conscious move on part of Maywati to recognize the various anti-caste leaders from different caste groups, both Dalit, Adivasi, as well as the OBC (Other Backward Caste) communities, thereby giving the message of a unified community comprising of the oppressed sections.

Both the cases of community-built statues and government monuments created during BSP's regime manifest different kind of visuality, yet the visual culture and aesthetics is the same. It represents ideas of the Dalit community and the anti-caste ideologies, the intension and politics behind both is that of reclaiming spaces, and asserting their rights to public sphere. The Dalit visual culture hence created is not an attempt to create a cultural movement, rather it becomes part of a cultural movement as these visual symbols and imageries are an organic part of the Dalit community and their politics of assertion and identity.

When comparing the visual imageries, differences in regional use of icons can also be seen. While images of Ambedkar along with Buddha is more of a universal phenomena, there are many other icons can be found along with the image of Ambedkar, depending upon the local politics and religious developments of the region. For instance, Ambedkar's images are often put along with Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule in most regions of Maharashtra, while images of Ravidas can be found in regions of UP and Punjab. Several other regional anti-caste leaders like Periyar, Ayothidas, Guru Ghasi das, Dharti Aba Birsa Munda, Kabir have been recognized as national leaders by the anti-caste movement, as it can also be seen by the monuments built by Mayawati in an attempt to do so.

There also have been numerous examples where Dalits have been attacked for their assertions in public spaces. The attacks of Ambedkar's statues, Ambedkar Jayanti processions, on artists showing works on caste reality, and therefore ridiculing of the political assertion by Dalits by upper castes has been very common in the recent past of this nation (Tartakov, 2012, Komnath 2017). The attacks on these claim to public visualities is an evidence of the potential that visual culture has in terms of accessing public spaces, asserting identity and in claiming equality. This assertion and claiming of public spaces is a threat to those in power, and caste privileges, and the attacks on Dalits is just a backlash that comes when their power is at risk.

As Ranceire suggests, aesthetics has no reference to art; it is what comes from sensible experience or experience of the common world and therefore the political is also aesthetic and

the aesthetic is political (Ranceire 2009). The manner of representing political stands through visual representation is political because it challenges the hierarchies in the social structure, visibilizing that which was made invisible, and making the erstwhile untouchable into the public sphere. Ranciere further suggests that there is a change in the cultural perception and function of art as he observes a shift from representative to an aesthetic regime of art, wherein he defines the movement from representative to aesthetic as a shift from an art caught up in socially mandated hierarchies of subject and genre to a detached art of disorder, which seeks equality of human potential (Holm 2010: 3). A similar shift in the manner of studying image objects from the perspective of the "common", the "popular" or the "other" can be found in the discourse of New art history. New art history has thus opened paths for the study of art other than the mainstream, recognizing the art of the popular and common.

7. Conclusion

The discourse of New art history has opened up new avenues for research and academic discussions upon issues that were never given much academic attention by considering them as popular and not worthy of art historical engagement. Recently many studies have been done upon visuality found among Dalit communities, Dalit visual culture and even the possibility of Dalit art. This paper has been one aspect in the larger understanding of Dalit visual culture that has developed in the post-Ambedkar period. While this paper holds the possibility of looking at the Dalit visual imageries and iconography from the political and cultural context of the anti-caste movement in India, it also holds the scope for further studies, in terms of detailed study and analysis of the imageries found. The contexts of each and every statues of Ambedkar build in Dalit localities have a history of struggle and assertion of their own. And every region and their political contexts affect the visuality of the region heavily. The paper looks at the visual iconography of only Ambedkar, but the political histories of both the states are much more complex, with many regional anti-caste leaders who have had a strong impact upon the anti-caste movement. Also, the paper covers only two states of India, which may not reflect the reality in other states, especially the north-eastern and southern parts of India. Hence these pose as limitation as well as leave scope for further studies in the area.

The building of statues or putting up symbols in public spaces (or even private spaces for that matter) is an assertion of an idea by the Dalit community that those imageries represent. When such imageries are put in public spaces they are an attempt to assert a certain idea or

ideology in public, an attempt to claim the public spaces. When the Dalit community was denied the basic rights such as accessing water from community water bodies, or when they were prevented from entering temples, challenging such discriminatory practices was the one of the first attempts by the anti-caste movements, among many other struggles. Similarly, Dalits have been denied the public spaces for much too long. And reclaiming these public spaces through visual symbols is an effort towards the same.

Cultural engagement of the Dalit community is organic, and a part of the movement. Politics can be used to support artistic engagements and artistic engagements add on to a political movement and therefore art is as much political as it is cultural and social. The many statues of Ambedkar found all over India only point towards that. On one hand these statues are just public imageries, but the fact that many times these same statues get pulled down or get attacked prove that there is more to these public imageries than mere cement and concrete; it's a political statement by the community, it tries to say something, assert an idea, an ideology. And that assertion is important because it gives voice and space to a marginalized section of the society; it's an attempt to claim equality in this unequal society.

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