Article

Music as an Anti-Caste Counterpublic: Notes From North India

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This article aims to understand the acts of resistance in the everyday music of oppressed caste communities and the repertoire of anti-caste musical performances in specific moments in history. The everyday soundscape has the potential to bring together shared experiences of displacement, casteism, and social exclusion. For dalit–bahujan singers, an engagement with music is a resource with which to 'talk back' to the structures of caste and to recast their identity. The practices of such musical form have also been part of the cultural transmission of an anti-caste narrative. Using printed material and oral narratives collected during fieldwork in selected regions of North India, this article explores anti-caste musical practices. It engages with the concept of 'counterpublics' and the implications of the term 'anti-caste counterpublics' for an understanding of anti-caste movements.

Keywords
Anti-Caste counterpublic, anti-caste movements, music, resistance

Introduction

Popular culture in the form of anti-caste performances is an important site where caste experiences are contested, negotiated, and reformulated. An anti-caste performance typically re-centres oppressed caste identities within a performative space. This re-centring of marginalised identities within cultural performance brings together critical reflexivity by rethinking existing popular music and performance as well as the structures of powers and dominance that are embedded within these forms. The account of dissenting music, sonic expression, and performance gives critical insights into the social exclusion that has been faced by oppressed castes. The anti-caste music is embedded in the everyday sonic space of the community and it has an affective resonance that talks back to the structures of caste.[1]

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This article explores different facets of resistance in music that have emerged in specific moments of anti-caste consciousness. It delves particularly on the sonic counterpublics that are potentially created in the process of claiming alternative anti-caste spaces. It aims to understand how these forms of resistance interact with the dalit–bahujan community and the meanings that such spaces create in the everyday lives of the oppressed castes.[2] While exploring the concept of 'anti-caste counterpublic,' the article also looks at the historical trajectories that render this term meaningful. The emergence and the growth of dalit–bahujan popular culture are determined through the escape sought from the realities of caste-based violence and humiliation. This emerging popular culture develops an alternative worldview, based on the principles of equality and justice to oppressed caste communities.

The article engages with the multiple, scattered anti-caste counterpublics from North India by drawing on print material, the interviews and narratives collected during fieldwork (2016–2021) and visits to sites of musical performances in western Uttar Pradesh and the Delhi–NCR region. My sources date from the 1920s to the present. Through an engagement with secondary literature, this paper aims to locate discrete moments of anti-caste resistance, with specific reference to anti-caste dissonance coming through music. The paper also extends the existing usage of concepts such as 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' by engaging with Nancy Fraser's (1990) conceptual framework of strong counterpublics and weak counterpublics, and by looking at the sites of sonic counterpublics in North India.

Music as a 'Counter-Narrative'

Kant (1790) in his discussion on the aesthetics of melody argues that music is not merely pure sensation but instead an expression or sensation it wants to generate. It is entwined with a subjective expression of conveying a thought. Kant's argument, however, points to the very innate nature of this subjective experience. Music, for instance, is an art form that comes from a definite idea of sensations. While it is sublime it is not abstract or beyond cognition. The discussion on the politics of aesthetics is developed by Jaques Ranciere (2010), Jaques Attali (1985), Alan P. Merriam (1964), Simon Frith (2012), and others. Ranciere (2010) has emphasised the aesthetics of art that is derived from experience and not purely from the work of art. While Kant also placed emphasis on the subjective aspect of music, he proposes for transcendental aesthetics that belong to a priori sensibility. Scholars such as Adorno too depart from this very innate nature of music, rather he considers it to be located in the way it gets 'culturally performed' (Adorno, 1973 , p. 81).

Something that is 'aestheticised' is posited as a 'form of life,' thus both art and life can exchange their properties (Ranciere, 2010, p. 119). Ranciere has emphasised art not only as a form of expression of life but also as a form of self-education. This self-education art is a new sensorium that rethinks the originary idea of 'aesthetic state' (Ranciere, 2010, p. 120). He also discusses aesthetics to be at the core of politics, stating that 'Artistic practices are "ways of doing and

making" that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility' (Ranciere, 2010, p. 8). The work of art is not determined by pure aesthetics but by the experience of such art. The experiences of oppressed caste communities have generated an art form that is reflective of their caste experiences and how music has become a form of artistic expression to debunk caste structures. The embeddedness of such art practices in everyday life renders meanings to these existing art practices.

Everyday Resistance

Everyday life is an important sociological concept to understand the social processes embedded in seemingly mundane activities. 'Everyday resistance' is an important constituent of everyday life. The works of James C. Scott (1985) and Michel de Certeau (1984) engage with everyday resistance through concepts such as 'infrapolitics,' 'off-Kilter resistance,' and 'hidden transcripts.' Johansson and Vinthagen (2020) have developed an analytical–theoretical approach to understand the complexity of the relationship between power and everyday resistance. Everyday resistance indicates how people through their seemingly mundane everyday acts demonstrate an ability to transgress existing power structures (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, p. 87). It might be quiet, dispersed, and disguised but is significant in terms of how it questions power structures.

The everyday resistance of dalit–bahujan singers is the act of questioning and resisting structures of power. The performance of dalit songs, poetry, and theatrical performances also reflect a critical take on existing upper-caste cultural practices. For instance, many of the songs are written and performed in a manner that highlights the flaws of the dominant culture. The performers engaged in such cultural productions are deeply embedded in the process of cultural production that has a sense of 'reflexivity' that allows them to critically assess dominant and hegemonic cultural practices. The 'everyday soundscape' has the potential to 'bring together shared experiences of displacement, racism and social exclusion' (Bennett, 2005, p. 118). For dalit–bahujan singers, their engagement with music and writings has been a source to 'talk back' to the structures of caste and also to recast their identity. The practices of such musical form were also part of cultural transmission of an anti-caste narrative. Narayan (2006) discusses, for instance, the *Jagriti Dasta* as an effort by folk singers, political poets, and artists to evoke anti-caste consciousness. It was part of the everyday acts of resistance witnessed in cultural performance.

However, besides the performative side of the acts of resistance that Narayan mentions, it is also important to see how the act of performance also generates a topography of meanings among the artists. While performative aspects such as loudness of voice and display of emotions are visibly present, the artist's performance also does more than that. The act of performance is also about ontological rethinking of caste structures, which is an integral part of the performance. In this regard, it is interesting to engage with singer–audience relationships beyond the staged singing.

The songs intend to engage with the audience through active presence rather than passive receptivity. This is evident when a singer repeatedly asks the audience to sing along. Some other techniques are singers allowing the audience to complete the stanza (of a song). Thus, the distance between audience and singers in a dalit–bahujan performance is minimised. This breaks from conventional norms where the singer sings on the stage while the audience are passive listeners. Anti-caste singers such as Hemant Boudh, Harnam Singh, Poonam Bala, Kasturi Baudh, Malti Rao, Kishor Kumar 'Pagla,' and others often mention such techniques in their conversations (Kalyani & Singh, 2023, pp. 121–125).[3] In one of his songs, Kishor Kumar 'Pagla' comes close to the audience and sings directly to them.[4] He also keeps referring to the audience in colloquial vocabulary so that the audience is conscious of the song's content.

One can term anti-caste musical performance as anti-caste sonic counterpublics that turn the gaze of a performance from being purely immersed in the moment of theatrics or performativity to generating hope that there lies something beyond the act of performance as well. Thus, to understand the nuances of such performances one needs to look beyond the immediate performative aspect. To elaborate, anti-caste singers often mentioned, during their conversations with me, the collective anti-caste sentiments that went beyond their scheduled performance time on stage. The musical performance was not just momentarily performative, it spilled over beyond the theatrical space into the everydayness of the singer and audience. Long-drawn anti-caste conversations, collective solidarity, and everyday practice became integral to the part of the selves of those associated with the performance.

Bakhtin's conception of dialogism comes close to explaining this aspect of performance. Holquist (1990) explains that in dialogism, the social event itself is an 'expression' that derives its meanings through different signs and symbols. The meanings in these social interactions come through the constant dialogue between an individual's self and his shared social experience. The meaning derived through the process of dialogism is relative, that is, the meanings might vary across spaces and social situations. Thus, dialogic engagement is a way in which the experience of the self in a particular social situation is perceived. This aspect is important to understand the performance and practice of *Bhimgeet*, the genre of songs that includes evocation to B. R. Ambedkar and other anti-caste icons. Dalit–bahujan songs and music have witnessed immense change over time, through experimentation with genres, or the bringing in of newer aspects that appeal to the masses.[5] The social experience and effects of anti-caste movements on dalit–bahujan communities can also be seen in the changes in Bhimgeet, through attuning to popular rhythms or reworking with existing folk genres.

Sonic Counterpublics From an Anti-Caste Perspective

Music is what it does to those who perceive it. For subaltern communities, music has been a form of cultural expression that voices their desire to break the shackles of ascribed social status. It creates sonic counterpublics through which an alternative space of vocal expression is created. Carras (2020, p. 4) uses the term

'sonic counterpublics' to discuss how 'sonic practices in their materiality can be thought of in relation to commoning practice.'[6] He argues that sonic practice is not just about sonic content; the content itself emerges because of the broader network that the sonic practice creates. This network unleashes the possibility of solidified political subjectivity (Carras, 2020, p. 7). Furthermore, this sonic practice also creates the possibility of musical negotiation and dialogic process. His argument opens up the possibility of rethinking sonic space through the multiple other public spheres—political, cultural, and social—it negotiates with. Thus, what constitutes a sonic practice is not just the music, lyrics, and instruments but multiple public spheres coming together in a networked space to produce a set of discursive meanings. The very collective and dialogic processes or the creation of counterpublics allow for a complex network of sonic practices to emerge. Music has also been discussed (Bennett & Rogers, 2016; Frith, S. 2012) in terms of dialogue that actively engages with political and philosophical debates.

However, the idea of counterpublics gets more layered and complicated with reference to dalit–bahujan communities. This is because it not only refers to the network of materialities that surround this music, as many scholars on counterpublics have argued, but also reflects on the critical engagement with social structures of caste per se. Rege (2014) discusses the Ambedkarite public sphere that began emerging in the 1920s, particularly with reference to the Chavadar lake protests. She refers to 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' as a space that adopted a dual strategy by making new claims in publics in which they were previously invisibilised. The discussion of 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' is interesting as it appeared as a contestation to the existing Brahminical spaces that determined public discourse. Rege (2014) argues that the emergence of 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' was a response to the prevailing narrow basis of nationalism led by upper-caste men. The emergent non-Brahman spaces, such as the Satyashodhak Samaj, formed an alternative space, a counterpublic that thought about the caste question, which was missing from the mainstream nationalist narrative. Post-independence, the public sphere was likewise split along the caste axis but saw the emergence of alternative movements such as the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit Literary movement (Rege, 2014, p. 29). Pandian (2002, p. 1740), in his understanding of caste and public sphere, refers to the 'contradictory engagement' that lower-castes had with the modernist agenda, by having an 'antagonist dialogue' with the 'Indian modern.' Pandian contrasts the subaltern counterpublic with the 'national community'/ secular modern Indian—while the subaltern counterpublic is an act of mobilisation through the language of universal freedom, the secular modern (upper-castes), have been involved in the act of discarding lower-caste and creating an exclusive public sphere. Thus, from 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' to 'subaltern counterpublics,' the discussion on counterpublics has tried to encapsulate the different social movements and historical trajectories. This conceptualisation fits with Fraser's (1990) idea of subaltern counterpublics, which she discusses as a space of parallel discursive arenas. It becomes the space for withdrawal from pre-existing socially ascribed structures and regroupment into newer publics. With caste identity at the centre of the formation of the counterpublic, the very creation of such a space was an attempt to create a democratic and egalitarian space.

However, there is a need for a re-evaluation of Rege's (2014) discussion of counterpublics. Jaffrelot (2003) notes that in North India, along with the Ambedkar-led movement, there were also other anti-caste movements. He discusses the anti-Brahmin stance taken up by the Arya Samaj, as the book *Sathyarth Prakash* [Light of truth] by Dayanand Saraswati discussed 'sectarian and selfish Brahmins' (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 190). However, with reference to the Arya Samaj, one also needs to critically evaluate whether such an anti-Brahminical stance was also anti-caste. The indictment of brahmins by Dayanand (the founder of the Arya Samaj) did not amount to a rejection of the caste system (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 191). Nowhere did Dayanand question dietary preferences or the ban on inter-caste marriages. One can see the emergence of the Arya Samaj as a counterpublic, but rather than fit with anti-caste sentiments, it focussed more on reorganising caste groups like the Yadavs and Kurmis through sanskritisation (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 189). Rege's (2014) conceptualisation of counterpublics largely accrues to the emergence of 'strong counterpublics' centred on significant anti-caste movements, as pitched by Phule and Ambedkar. In this article, I focus on the creation of anti-caste counterpublics in other discrete spaces.

One of the significant forms of anti-caste counterpublic from North India was the rise of the Adi-Hindu movement led by Swami Achuthananda. Gooptu (2001) discusses the Adi-Hindu movement as an important turning point that evolved new social and political development. The Adi-Hindu movement gave historical explanations to the identity of 'untouchables;' hence, it attracted a lot of people. Swami Achuthananda organised many cultural events particularly to attract the masses. Kanwal Bharti (2011) refers to *loknatak* (drama/play) as a way of creating anti-caste consciousness that gained popularity during Swami Achuthananda's time. Achuthananda wrote a play *Ram Rajaya Nayaya Natak* [Justice in the state of Ram] in 1926 which was the story of Shambhuk.[7] The play was published by Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan. He also used songs to attract the masses, such as his song *Mayananda Balidan* [The sacrifice of Mayananda], which were published in 1926 by Adi Hindu Press, Kanpur (Bharti, 2011, p. 256). His speeches also included songs so that in 1928, in one of his speeches in Punjab, he started with a couplet and ended with *Kundali* (a form of poetry). Music was equally part of Achuthananda's theatre, and one of his major plays *Ram Rajya Nayaya Natak* contained couplets. He also used *Aalha*, a popular folk form, as the genre of singing (Bharti, 2011, p. 112).

There were other parallel counterpublics led by Santram B. A. in the form of the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal* [society for the abolition of caste] that was formed in 1922 and which discussed anti-caste sentiments (Gupta, 2017). His autobiographical work *Mere Jiwan ke Anubhav* [My experiences of life] discusses anti-caste sentiments and the anti-caste struggles that he led. There were some other literary works like *Humara Samaj* [Our community] that foregrounded anti-caste sentiments and were popular among the people.

The important point is that the formation of anti-caste counterpublics, in the form of alternative anti-caste spaces, was multifaceted and used diverse historical, social, and cultural spaces to flourish. They might have been more localised in contrast to the grand nationalist discourse. One can refer to such disparate, volatile

counterpublics as 'weak counterpublics' (Fraser, 1990). However, the very emergence of such anti-caste counterpublics created the possibility of critical engagement with the caste question. Given that counterpublics strive to eliminate social inequality and establish a public that is 'differentially empowered,' their emergence was a significant moment in anti-caste history. Thus, instead of bracketing anti-caste counterpublics as Ambedkarite counterpublics (as Rege [2014] proposes), it is better to have a broader concept like 'anti-caste counterpublic' that can include strong as well as weak counterpublics. The 'weak counterpublics,' which were multiple and disparate, played an equally significant role in generating anti-caste narratives in discrete moments of history. I suggest that 'anti-caste counterpublics' refers to an umbrella term that amalgamates distinct histories of anti-caste movements that created disparate, multiple forms of anti-caste consciousness and whose presence was created simultaneously by weak and strong counterpublics.

Musical Collectives as Anti-Caste Counterpublics: Contemporary Practices

In contemporary times, musical groups such as Casteless Collective, Kabir Kala Manch, and Youth for Buddhist India are popular musical spaces through which the anti-caste imagination has gained ground. These anti-caste counterpublics have carried forward the narratives of anti-caste and cultural assertion for dalit–bahujan. They re-centre historically marginalised identities that have experienced systematic erasure, and caste biases, and exclusion. Through songs and stage performances, these cultural groups are creating anti-caste consciousness and revoking oral histories that have been previously excluded. Such performative traditions involve creative ways to engage with public memory and insert what was excluded within mainstream imagination.

Casteless Collective was launched in 2017 by the film director, producer, and screenwriter Pa Ranjith as a 'fusion music band' (Leonard & Edachira, 2022). It is a collective of 'Gaana' singers and musicians. Gaana has its roots in the northern part of Chennai (Naig, 2016). Casteless Collective involves young singers who use and experiment with folk forms and render these into anti-caste songs. Some of its singers are Arivu, Isaivani, Tenma, and Muthu. Arivu (Arivarasu Kalainesan), in one of his interviews (Sree, 2020) said that his learning about anti-caste songs came from his parents who worked with the organisation Arivoli Iyakam.[8] They would often move from village to village raising anti-caste consciousness among people. He later learned of hip-hop musicians such as Kendrick Lamar but his family and Arivoli Iyakam were key to his early socialisation in anti-caste music (Sree, 2020). Similarly, Isaivani from Casteless Collective also mentions that her caste experience made her take up anti-caste music. In an interview, she mentions a childhood experience, where she was prevented from having classical training after she was made to show her caste certificate (Samuel, 2020). This incident motivated her to leave classical music and instead work with Gaana music. Gaana music was perceived as lowly within the existing musical genres in Tamil Nadu.

The very act of choosing a genre that was perceived lowly and reorienting it into the popular was an act of defiance and resistance. T. M. Krishna, a well-known classical musician, refers to Casteless Collective's alternative musical universe and its sense of 'directness' in discussing discrimination as unsettling to the classical universe (Samuel, 2020). Isaivani notes that the revolutionary anti-caste theme has altered the negative perception of Gaana and has instead turned it into a tool to inspire change (Samuel, 2020). Thus, Casteless Collective forces us to rethink music and what music can do for a community.

Kabir Kala Manch is yet another cultural collective formed in 2002 in Pune, Maharashtra. Sheetal Sathe, a dalit folk singer, has been closely associated with Kabir Kala Manch since 2003. In Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade*, she sings:

> When I see the cow call out and
> Lovingly lick her calf
> I am reminded of my mother
> When I was an infant
> There was a drought…
> My mother's milk dried in her breast…
> That's how I remember my mother
> When I hear the cow's call.

The song speaks of the lived reality of a dalit woman and the state of deprivation she lives her life in. For Sheetal Sathe, her songs are part of her anti-caste activism. Sathe's mother narrates in a conversation with her daughter, that Sheetal wants to change the world through her drum and song. It is, however, unfortunate that the state apparatus labelled them as naxalites and curtailed their cultural initiative of anti-caste activism (Nandy, 2020).

Kabir Kala Manch has been active in raising a voice against casteism and several other social issues such as communalism and patriarchy. It coordinates with many writers, activists, and artists who together produce a cultural space of resistance. However, treading this critical path has not been easy for the performers. The artists have faced state-led repression. Prakash (2023) has discussed such artists, poets, and singers who have been the bearers of resistance culture, through categories such as 'Poets as Suspects,' 'Poet as a Conspirator,' and 'Artists as Terrorists' in his work *Body on the Barricades*. It is interesting to look into ways in which artists, particularly poets and singers, are tagged with anti-national labels. The irony is that their songs instead aim to discuss a more inclusive state and dignity for dalit. For instance, Sathe's songs of resistance are a discussion of a humane world that she is imagining for caste-oppressed dalit communities. She had been labelled as 'Most Dangerous' and was imprisoned for her performance for three years before being granted bail (*The Wire*, 2017). In fact, in the recent Elgar Parishad cases in which several activists and musicians were arrested for allegedly inciting violence when commemorating the Bhima–Koregaon victory of 1818, the National Investigation Agency cited Kabir Kala Manch songs as evidence of anti-national activities (*The Wire*, 2020).

In Andhra Pradesh, anti-caste music was taken up by Jan Natya Mandali (JNM) that vocally expressed its views against state repression and inequalities. It was founded by B. Narasing Rao and Gaddar in 1972 in Hyderabad. The *Mandali* (group) flourished under the dynamic leadership of Gummadi Vittal Rao, also popularly known as 'Gaddar.' Reflections on the caste system were deeply entrenched in the JNM performances. The performances were referred to as *Gaddarnama* [Story of Gaddar] and the performances reflected the atrocities visible in society. Ilaiah (2004) has termed Gaddar performance as a response to a well-known incident of caste violence, encounter killings, and police repression against dalits. He referred to Gaddar as a 'bard whose song is his weapon,' a phrase that captures the spirit of resistance (Ilaiah, 2004, p. 44). The JNM singers too did not trod an easy path. Prakash (2018) talks about the state repression and hardships that JNM artists were subjected to—of 35 prominent JNM artists, 30 were killed in a time span of 35 years (p. 184).

The Re-Emergence of Anti-Caste Sonic Counterpublics in North India

Kanshi Ram, an anti-caste leader from North India, laid specific emphasis on the formation of a cultural wing that can connect with people, as it will enable the sustenance of the movement. In a conversation at the meeting of Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4) unit in 1982 in Delhi, he mentioned that while the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) has money, resources, and skill, it is limited in terms of mass mobilisation and how it connects with people. The purpose of DS4 is to mobilise people towards anti-caste struggle that was cultural (Bahujan Sanghtak [1983], cited in Ram, 2014b, pp. 111–112). He also strategised on how to work with the cultural group DS4 that he formed. In a meeting organised in 1983 in Delhi, he discussed the three pillars that define the goals of DS4, namely, popularity, authenticity, and representation.

Many of the anti-caste activists recall their experiences of singing and walking many miles, singing along to connect with people. One such anti-caste singer, Kasturi Baudh, who was associated with DS4 recalls, '*Uss samay ek junon sa tha…hum apne pariwar ko bhool kar milo chalte the bahujan andolan ke liye*' [There was some deep-seated passion during that time we would often forget our family and walk miles for the sake of the bahujan movement]. It is interesting that singing and travelling became an essential part of the anti-caste movement, as recalled by the singers.

The strategy for initiating anti-caste politics was to create a popular base among the masses through musical performance. Kanshi Ram claimed in one of his rallies that by December 1983, DS4 would become a national force. In one of his early speeches in 1980, he discussed the key programme of BAMCEF and DS4—the *Chalta Firta Ambedkar Mela* [The mobile Ambedkar fair], which aimed to bring anti-caste caste theme and awareness about Ambedkar among the

masses (Bahujan Sanghtak [1983], cited in Ram, 2014a, Vol. 1). The first Chalta Firta Ambedkar Mela was organised at Gwalior on behalf of BAMCEF *Kendriya Shakha* [central branch], Delhi in April 1980, and the next was organised in May 1980 at Risaldar Park in Lucknow.

The theme of the carnival, which was at the heart of DS4, suggests the potential to create anti-caste reverberations. Attali notes that the festival and 'carnival parade' are spaces of transgression. In fact, the carnival can be seen as a space that creates 'dissonance' and 'disorder' as opposed to existing norms, which intend to establish 'harmony' and 'order' (Attali, 1985, p. 21). The music that is an integral part of such carnivals has a social meaning. Attali argues that this music is 'a simulacrum of ritual murder;' the very purpose of music in a transgressive space like carnival is to create sounds of dissonance rather than adherence to rituals and norms. Carnivals such as Chalta Firta Ambedkar Mela reimagined public space, previously exclusive to privileged castes and now accessible to marginalised castes. For dalit–bahujan communities reclaiming public space either through public visual culture or through musical performances was significant. Carnival space involved not just active production of music; it was also a public sphere for bringing cultural artefacts together. Belli considers this as a claiming of space as part of 'public memorialisation' that ensures a public presence (2014, p. 90). The meetings for DS4 were often followed by anti-caste songs from different folk singers. For instance, *Bahujan Sanghtak* [Bahujan organisation] mentions Bhojpuri songs presented by Rajnath Sonkar Shashtri, Surjan Ram, Vimala Adhyapika, and others in DS4 meeting (Ram, 2014a, p. 228). Similarly, other musical performances of DS4 included singer Kumar Shyam Singh Tez at a DS4 event in Ghaziabad in 1983 (Bahujan Sanghtak [1983], cited in Ram, 2014b, Vol. 2, p. 156). The enmeshed nature of musical programmes and social movement was at the centre of the anti-caste movement of DS4 led by Kanshi Ram.

Recent Trends of Sonic Anti-Caste Counterpublics From North India

Live Lord Buddha is a recent initiative in North India, which emerged through the efforts of anti-caste activists such as Shanti Swaroop Baudh, Hari Bharti, and Milinder Gautam. Milinder Gautam, the organiser of Live Lord Buddha, mentions starting this in 2014 in Gokulpuri, Delhi, with an event that brought together anti-caste singers.[9] When I met Gautam during my fieldwork, he stated that the event saw about 20,000 visitors. The event is organised annually and is a significant public space where people get together to collectively associate with anti-caste cultural production. The information on the programme is circulated through social media channels as well as personal networks. Gautam also recalled, during our conversation, that when he along with others planned to hold the cultural event, they had apprehensions about its success. However, once the chain of the network was formed, sufficient funds were collected to organise the event. Support poured in, including from bureaucrats, government employees, and activists. Gautam said, 'It was support from my community that led to successful execution

of the event.' The programme's success indicates that anti-caste movements go beyond the political sphere and have a bearing on the community's sentiments.

Another initiative is Youth for Buddhist India (YFBI), led by Shanti Swaroop Baudh and team which included Dharmakirti, Madukar Pipliyan, and R. C. Rajpal.[10] The group was launched in December 2014. In my conversation with Hari Bharti and Sudhir Bhaskar, current position holders of the trusteeship, I was told that the core objective of the organisation is to bring about anti-caste thinking, particularly among the young. They mentioned that YFBI has collaborated with numerous artists and singers to organise events. These events included a cultural programme, organising marathon, and distribution of awards and pamphlets to mention a few. However, these cultural events are not as widespread as the events witnessed during DS4 times.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the anti-caste performances and the multiple 'anti-caste counterpublics' formed through performative spaces that emerged at discrete moments of history. From Achuthananda's loknatak (people's theatre) to contemporary DS4 performances, the emergence of counterpublics has been about the re-centring of oppressed caste identities. The article also engaged with the entwined relationship between music and everydayness, which is foregrounded through musical performances. The musical events are not separate from the everyday music; they generate discursive arenas with the possibilities of contesting the dominant public sphere. The everyday music is evident in how music belongs not only to political or ideological domains but also to the realm of the ordinary. The everyday music integrates many seemingly mundane acts of resistance and thus becomes a gradual process to develop anti-caste consciousness among its listeners and practitioners.

The article extends Rege's understanding of counterpublics as 'Ambedkarite counterpublics' through the naming of these counterpublics as 'anti-caste counterpublics.' An anti-caste counterpublic allows us to think of multiple alternative cultural spaces and is an umbrella term that includes both strong counterpublics and weak counterpublics. Through an account of different sonic counterpublics that were formed as musical groups, anti-caste collectives, cultural groups, and political groups, this article suggests how 'anti-caste' becomes the vocabulary to capture diversity and rethink the concept of counterpublics.

However, there is a need to evaluate anti-caste counterpublics in contemporary times. The rise of Hindutva politics, particularly after 2014, has not only made Hindutva-driven politics the dominant public sphere, but it has also led to a substantial curtailment and withering away of anti-caste counterpublics. The shrinking anti-caste cultural space is driven by fear (Kalyani, 2021)[11] and by the shift of the 'aspirational middle class' dalit–bahujan from anti-caste politics to more immediate political gratification (Pai et al., 2023). The relevant question today is, have 'anti-caste counterpublics' withered away or have they been relegated to a weak counterpublic? There is no immediate answer, but the question highlights the need to evaluate the changing dynamics of anti-caste counterpublics.

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Notes

1. Talk back is used by bell hooks (1986–1987) as an act of liberating, a moment of defiance and courage that created the possibility of critical dialogue for black women. The term 'everyday music' indicates how music is represented in the social life of a community and eventually becomes part of the affective space in which community feels its belongingness. In his discussion on music and everyday life, Frith, S. (2012) understands music as more than just a superfluous art; it is enjoying being together in a group. It also implicates its potential power to disrupt and talk-back to social hierarchy. Everyday music is marked by its presence in discrete spaces, yet it is connected with the individual's emotional self, memory, and identity.
2. The reference to dalit–bahujan community in this paper is to communities that have participated in anti-caste movements or have been associated with anti-caste consciousness. The term 'dalit' refers to Schedule Caste communities, while 'bahujan' is a more umbrella term for other low-caste communities, that are described as OBC communities in administrative terminology. The term 'dalit–bahujan' is an attempt to read together histories of anti-caste resistance witnessed among SC/ST/OBC communities.
3. See Hemant Kumar Baudh Official. (2009, March 4). Official page. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/@HemantKumarBauddh; Malti Rao. (2020, April 7). Official page. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/@maltirao
4. Shiv Bhawan. (2012, March 5). *Ideal Bahujan Song 4* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/kSK80pQZn9Y?si=J52xchXzA2xMKNZ-
5. The new aspect in music is experimentation that is done with existing forms and genres. For instance, Jassal (2012) in her discussion on *Birha* talks about domestic space in which lower-caste women would often share their everyday experiences. In the anti-caste musical forms, even though the folk form of Birha continues, its practices in terms of what it conveys, how women singers have used them have changed substantively. Birha, from belonging to domestic space has shifted to public arena. Furthermore, Birha, from being a narrative of pain, now talks of assertion and resistance (Kalyani, 2023).
6. Carras' (2020) usage of 'commoning practice' refers to a collective, dialogical processes, in which, he argues, sonic counterpublics is generated through network of things coming together.
7. Shambhuk was a shudra saint who tried to educate his community members. Since education to shudra community was prohibited under *Manusmriti* (the Hindu religious text, prescribing code of conduct), his act of educating shudras defiled brahminical principles. He was hence ordered to death (Bharti, 2011, pp. 80–109).
8. Cody (2013) translates *Arivoli Iyakam* as the light of knowledge movement, and it is used to refer to enlightenment rationality in Tamil cultural studies.

9. Live Lord Buddha: A musical program. (2013, September 27). YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/@LiveLordBuddha
10. Youth for Buddhist India [Facebook Page]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100070107175905
11. The article discusses the threats that the singers from dalit–bahujan caste face when they try to be assertive.

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