

This is why Dalit women are singing Tathagata Buddha songs in UP

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Cultural-resistance is witnessed particularly among Dalit women in various popular forms and practices. The emergence of *Tathagata Buddha* songs can be seen as a form of resistance because its spread, popularity, and acceptance are marked in a particular moment of history — the conversion of Dalits into the fold of Buddhism on 14 October 1956. The emergence of Buddhism, particularly post-conversion, witnessed a new cultural wave in which musical practices like Tathagata Buddha songs gained widespread mass appeal.

Tathagata Buddha songs refer to a set of singing practices, hymns, and other musical performative dimensions that are particularly dedicated to Buddha, his preaching and the sense of emancipation that the emergence of Buddhism imbues. The widespread circulation of Tathagata Buddha songs is particularly popular among Dalit women who are active producers as well as the recipients of these songs.



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Musical practices in UP: Emergence of Tathagata Buddha Songs

In Uttar Pradesh the popular genres of music are *Ragini*, *Birha*, *Parody* music, *Alha* music, and so on. The association of these genres has a deeply entrenched association with Dalit lives.

The practice of Tathagata Buddha songs is particularly popular among converted Buddhists, who have adopted *Navayana Buddhism* as their religion. These songs are also chanted as part of *Katha Pathan*, a cultural performance in which the life and philosophy of Buddha are read out in public.

With socio-political awareness, Dalit-Bahujan people are increasingly taking up Ambedkarite practices and Buddhist tradition. The growing popularity of Tathagata Buddha songs reflects the widespread influence and reach of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion ideology in Uttar Pradesh.

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Buddhism in popular culture

Buddhism has a rich history of art and architecture. These art forms are witnessed in rock-cut halls, Chaityas (prayer hall or shrines), and Viharas (monasteries). The emergence of Navayana Buddhism has renounced the existence and worship of any form of god. It has witnessed a newer sense of aesthetics that has floated across Dalit-Bahujan culture.

Buddhism in popular music has been accepted by people not as a monastic order but as a form that largely reflects their cultural thought process and their resistance to the traditional practices of caste-based humiliation and exclusion that Dalits have been subjected to.

The emergence of Tathagata Buddha songs

Unlike traditional devotional songs in other communities, Tathagata Buddha songs are not just for spiritual quest, but contain a deeper social message of equality and fraternity drawn from Buddha's life. Many of these songs are in the form of chants of three lines (trisarana). For example,

Buddham Sharnam Gachami (I go to the Buddha for refuge)

Dhamam Sharnam Gachami (I go to Dhamma for refuge)

Sangham Sharam Gachami (I go to the Sangha for refuge)



Singer Tarranum Baudh | Photo courtesy: Kalyani | ThePrint

In most of these songs, Gautam Buddha is referred to as 'Tathagata' and not as 'Lord' Buddha. Buddhist scholar Lal Mani Joshi has discussed that the epithet 'Tathagata' has its root in two words 'Tatha+Agata', which means the arrival of the enlightened one or the one who has attained Nibbana. The term 'Tathagata' traces its roots from Pali rather than the

Brahminical notion that considered Buddha as god or 'avatar' of Lord Vishnu. Thus, the very term 'Tathagata Buddha' song is distancing itself from any of the mythical origins attributed to Brahminism.

Tathagata Buddha songs are not the traditional protest songs, but are largely devotional in nature centered on the practices of Navayana Buddhism. Their historical narrative responds against caste oppression and the contribution of Babasaheb. The songs are widely circulated on YouTube channels such as *Samata Awaz*, *Awaz India*, *Bahujan TV*, etc and social media too.

Tathagata Buddha songs have given a cultural alternative to Dalits to re-assert their identity in a manner that has enabled them to transgress their 'fixed' identity under the Hindu caste order. The emergence of a new cultural space is relevant, as it has allowed Dalits to come out of their traditional roles and identity, and take up newer roles and meanings that have empowered and recognised them.

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Meanings of Tathagata Buddha songs

Tathagata Buddha songs and Bhimgeet have given a sense of emancipation for many Dalit women singers like Dharmacharni Pragya Kirti, Shweta Sakhya, among others. By reworking on the lyrics of those songs that largely drew from Hindu mythology, the Dalit neo-Buddhists have used the Tathagata Buddha songs as an expression of resistance by imbuing in them historical and social messages.



Singer Shweta Shakya | Photo courtesy: Kalyani | ThePrint

Besides Buddha, many of these songs invoke other social reformers who are revered within the Dalit community. Even the reverence shown towards Tathagata Buddha is with specific reference to the Brahminical social order that he had questioned towards the fourth century BCE. The songs have specific reference to social exclusion which the Dalit community has faced and the sense of emancipation that Tathagata Buddha songs often imbibe. One of the popular songs has the following lyrics:

Buddha ne sansar jagaya (Buddha has awakened the world)
Samata ka hai phool khilya (Enabled the blooming of the flower of equality)
Hum to tere gyan ko apnaye hain (We have embraced your teaching)
Tumhare bina jag suna pada hai (Without you the world is deserted)
Aao pyare Gautam tera aasra hai (Oh affectionate Gautam we seek your support)
Ye araz thukra mat dena (Please don't reject our request)
Akar ke tum gyan batana (Come and enlighten us)
Hum to iss duniya ke bade sataye hain (We have been persecuted in this world)
Hum diwane, hum diwane hain tere. (We have fallen in love with you)

Many of these songs have words like *karuna* (compassion), *pragya* (wisdom), *sheel* (modesty), which are propounded as desirable traits of human behaviour in Buddhist philosophy.

The Buddhist songs embody a worldview that has an agenda of social justice, equality, and compassion. Tamsin Bradley and Zara Bhatewara term this Navayana Buddhist tradition as “practical spirituality” by which the humanist aspect of Buddhism is placed at the centre of Buddhist philosophy instead of abstract or other-worldly religious philosophy. The production of such songs is actively taken up by organisations like Karuna Trust, The Triratna Buddhist Community, Youth for Buddhist India (YFBI) among others.

In North India, particularly Uttar Pradesh, many of these songs are circulated by way of booklets written by Shanti Swaroop Baudh, Budh Sangh Premi, Shayar Devidas Gulde, S.K. Roshan, Bhikhu Pragma Deep, and others. Dalit women have also been active agents in the production of these songs. Many poets and singers like Premlata, Shobha Baudh have published booklets of their songs.

Also read: Columbia University teaches Ambedkar’s biography, but few in India have even read it

An account of a Buddhist singer from UP

A fairly popular Dalit singer from Hapur in western UP is Pramita Gautam *aka* Dharmacharni Pragma Kirti. Her voice is representative of many local voices for whom singing Bhimgeet and Tathagata Buddha songs has been an act of resistance and a means of empowerment.



Singer and composer Pramita Gautam (left) | Photo courtesy: Kalyani | ThePrint

Pramita Gautam’s speeches and songs, several of which she has herself composed, reflect the Buddhist philosophy and ideals of Babasaheb Ambedkar. For her, songs are the medium through which she can “express her reverence and commitment to Ambedkarism”.

What has she gained as a Buddhist and as a singer? Buddhism, she says, has enabled a dignified position for her in society, and the songs gave her public recognition. “Whenever I go to any of these cultural programmes, I do not book hotels. People are so much willing to host me at their residence. They know me because of my songs and have a deep sense of respect for what I am doing for the Dalit-Bahujan community,” she says with a sense of gratitude.

Pramita was interested in singing since childhood and would often accompany her father to Kabir Kirtan *sabhas* (gatherings), where she would recite from *Bijak*. It was towards her middle school that she got inclined towards Bhimgeet. Her inclination towards Babasaheb is an “expression of reverence” she has for Dr Ambedkar. “My father told us, ‘Babasaheb is the one who has done everything for us, he has given us a respectful place in society.’” As a child, she often faced exclusionary practice by some teachers, which moved her further towards her commitment towards Ambedkar’s mission.

These Buddhist songs have played an important role in reworking the identity of Dalit women and their position in society. This change in the status of Dalit women singers has been possible because of the Buddhist philosophy, which is based on the principles of equality, including that of gender, in society. Also, Buddhism does not have a stratified society based on caste; nor has it scriptures like *Manusmriti* that relegate women to a secondary position in society.

Pramita Gautam acknowledges a sense of solidarity nurtured with other Dalit women during the course of her singing career. The process of singing for her has also been about capturing a public sphere that she would have otherwise not gained access to due to the practice of *pardah* (veil).

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Conclusion

From medieval saints like Chokhmela, Eknath, Tukaram and Kabir, to the Dalit neo-Buddhists today, all have relied on the power of music and poetry to successfully voice their concern against the darkest practice of social exclusion in Hindu religion. Their songs of resistance against the graded inequality of the caste system find echo in the musical practices of Dalit Navayana Buddhists, who have drawn inspiration from the rich musical tradition of Bhakti movement to carve out a distinct cultural space for themselves.

The emergence of Tathagata Buddha Songs, Bhimgeet and similar musical productions in the Dalit-Bahujan community in Uttar Pradesh has acted as a powerful tool to awaken social consciousness and cast off their dehumanising caste identity under the Buddhist order.

Conversion to Buddhism has enabled the Dalit community to challenge the exploitative caste practice that has scriptural sanctions within Hindu tradition. These songs have worked differently for Dalits, especially women, as it has enabled them to question the authority of *Manusmriti* that gave them a demeaning position in society. These songs also have their cultural significance in that they have allowed the Dalit community to re-work and re-imagine their identity with a sense of dignity.

With the growing socio-cultural revolution, Tathagata Buddha songs and Bhimgeet are significantly creating a 'contested space'. This cultural contestation and resistance are reflected through the everyday lifeworld of prominent Dalit women singers like Pramita Gautam, Malti Rao, Shweta Shakya, Seema Azad, Taranum Baudh, Sanghamitra Gautam, Baudhmitra, among others who are both producers and consumers of such music. The microcosm of their lifeworld, in which these musical practices are situated somewhere, explains the meanings and significance of Tathagata Buddha songs for them.

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This is an edited version of the author's article first published in Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion. Read the full version [here](#).