

Ashok Vijaydashmi to Dhola — National archives, central libraries failed Dalit-Bahujan history

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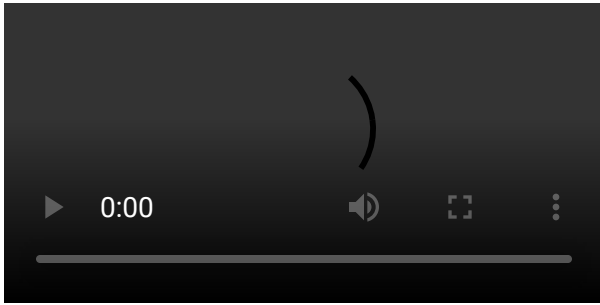
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A bronze sculpture depicting Mahad water movement by Babasaheb BR Ambedkar | Commons

Dalit-Bahujan history is marked by absence and exclusion from the mainstream historiographic writings. National archives and central university libraries in India have failed to record Dalit-Bahujan experiences or their cultural nuances. This lack of formal documentation has meant that much of the Dalit-Bahujan culture and history survives only through oral narratives, passed down from one generation to another through story-telling, ethnographies, myths, and folklore. Engaging with these oral repositories takes us beyond the existing notions about India's marginalised communities and the Brahminical and Eurocentric biases inherent in them.

The archival exclusion has only widened the gap in acknowledgment of Dalit-Bahujan knowledge production in India. This is unlike the West, where researchers of folk culture and oral histories have shown keen interest in preserving Dalit-Bahujan history. For instance, the [Smithsonian archives](#) have preserved oral recordings of the Dhola epic by singers such as Ram Swaroop Dhimar and Matlol Singh. This acknowledgement infuses dignity into their labour, something that Indian archives and history-telling have largely missed. But mainstream historiography institutions in India have kept not just Dalit-Bahujan stories out, but also any acknowledgment of the caste system.



There have been some efforts, though. The Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, has a [Dalit Resource Centre](#), which has conducted *basti*-level [conferences](#) and [workshops](#) and is documenting oral history of Dalit-Bahujans. Similarly, institutes like [Nagaloka](#) in Nagpur, Maharashtra, have been important sources of Buddhist repositories in India.

But the responsibility of recording Dalit-Bahujan history has mainly rested on the shoulders of people's memory and imagination, and cultural symbols have played an important role here — not just in keeping alive the history that dominant castes have all but buried but also in questioning their authoritarian views and practices that have relegated Dalit-Bahujans to the margins.

Also read: [Real fight for National Archives should be about what it doesn't contain, not the relocation](#)

Exclusion of Dalit-Bahujan stories and oral history

Historical writings in India have been mainly about glorifying the worldview of the dominant castes. The act of writing itself is shaped by existing power dynamics — who gets to write whose history. The hegemonic caste-ruled social order has controlled how mainstream narratives are told and oral traditions of Dalit-Bahujans ignored.

A prominent example is the history of King Ashoka. The Dalit-Bahujan community considers him as a non-Aryan (Dasyu), who was a Mulnivasi and a Shudra. Ashoka's acceptance of Buddhism is seen as his revolt against the existing social order as stated in the [Vedas](#). It is alternative histories such as these that mainstream historiography has blatantly disregarded, creating huge gaps in our understanding of not just Dalit-Bahujan history but larger Indian history and culture.

The caste system's control over the cultural realm of performing art, which dictates the myth, narration, and languages used in performances, has subsumed Dalit-Bahujan culture into the dominant narratives. This (mis)appropriation has created a Brahminical homogenisation of Dalit-Bahujan art and culture. Therefore, India's caste-based society has not only forgotten the history of those on the margins but also created historiography of misplaced identities.

The oral narrative of Dalit-Bahujan history offers an alternative to the established understanding of Indian history. This is significant because it enriches our engagement with the everyday cultural frameworks of Dalit-Bahujan society such as their celebration of festivals, idolisation of icons, rituals, etc.

However, the contestation to this appropriation and homogenisation is happening in a new, popular cultural space. Jamaican-British sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines cultural space as a “site of negotiation” where a “struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle”. This struggle negotiates its position to re-construct identities that have been subsumed into mainstream culture. The creation of this popular cultural space in India is, therefore, a necessary alternative that questions the authenticity of the existing dominant caste-cultural practices.

Some of the new pop-cultural spaces can be seen on popular Twitter and Instagram handles such as @TribalArmy, @EqualityLabs @AmbedkariteIND, @bhim_warriors_official, @Dalitdesk etc.

Also read: *New Dalit women autobiographies are opening up private, intimate spaces, rewriting history.*

Ways of engaging with oral history

Oral history has failed to transgress beyond sociological and anthropological imagination. Historian Meleisa Ono-George, who has done extensive research on race and gender histories, especially those of Black women, argues that history is not only about what is popularly known, but also about the process and politics of its production. Therefore, who tells the history, who listens to it, and who narrates are crucial parameters to understand what gets historicised and what gets ignored.

Oral history has enabled the voice of oppressed communities globally. The oral repositories of Black culture is very much reflected in their hip-hop music. Similarly, Soca-Calypso music has preserved the essence of Caribbean diaspora. Art history has substantively engaged with these forms, thereby giving due credibility to oral narratives of the margins.

Unfortunately, the Dalit-Bahujan narratives didn't get their rightful place in India's history-making process because of the prevalent biases against oral history. Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals who have tried to fill this gap with their writings on oral narratives include Mata Prasad, Dr Vijay Kumar Trisharan, Dr Rajendra Badgujar, S.S. Gautam, Satnam Singh, and Shanti Swaroop Baudh.

Examining the layers of Dalit-Bahujan oral traditions shows how their history and culture is well entrenched in people's everyday lives and practices. Much of the Dalit-Bahujan history has also been distorted through Brahminical mythical interpretations. For instance, the Dalit-Bahujan community believes that the festival of Ashoka Vijayadashami has a Buddhist genesis, which is celebrated as Dhamma-Vijay Diwas. However, the Brahminical interpretation has turned it into a myth from *Ramayana*, which is a blatant cultural appropriation.

The caste life narratives are yet another significant way to engage with oral history. A caste life narrative is not just a literary document; it involves lived experiences and everyday struggles against dominant caste structures. It also unfolds Dalit-Bahujan narratives and how the community has responded to the cultural homogenisation and oppressive caste structures. Researcher-author and history professor Shailaja Paik has specifically discussed the limitations of historical studies to engage with Dalit women's narratives, resulting in their marginalisation and making them 'transgressive subjects'.

Engaging oral narratives through music is yet another significant aspect that can help explore Dalit-Bahujan history. The evidence of Dalit music can be traced back to ancient texts such as *Rajtarangini*.

Also read: Kanshi Ram's Bahujan movement was also cultural, not just political

Reworking with oral history

Engagement with art, music, culture, festivals, and performances are some of the crucial aspects of the Dalit-Bahujan lifeworld. This oral history needs to be mainstreamed and systematically engaged with by giving them adequate space in archival sources, museums, and libraries.

The oral histories of the Dalit-Bahujan community are neither a part of classroom discussions nor are the writings about them acknowledged and included in knowledge production. Caste in school textbooks are still treated as 'something out there'.

This non-engagement with oral histories or excluding them from mainstream archival sources reflects a triumphalist view of understanding history and nation-building, which has necessarily excluded Dalit-Bahujan narratives.

An engagement with oral history is a community-led approach that can deconstruct the colonial and Brahminical history in culturally meaningful ways. Moreover, engaging with oral histories beyond anthropological imagination can do justice to a bottom-up approach of understanding historical nuances. The genuine acknowledgement of Dalit-Bahujan history is the least that can be done to bring dignity to their work and cultural labour.

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(Edited by Prashant Dixit)

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