

# Listening to the Sonorous: Digital Archiving as a Political Practice

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## Introduction

*“Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity,”* says Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author, in her famous TED talk on “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009). She argues that a singular narrative can have dangerous consequences, and expresses her initial wonderment that people of colour could “exist in literature”. Although the need for libraries and books for African-American children was emphasized, especially at the height of the civil rights movement, because education was “the key to break free of slavery”, (Wheeler, Johnson-Houston, Walker 2004), there was also a recognition of the need to tell stories that did not re-invisibilize children of colour (Bishop 2012), and those that did not reduce or essentialize a group of people, as Adichie so eloquently puts.

Padma Velaskar (2012) notes that even Ambedkar’s ideas on liberation were intrinsically linked to education, as a “key instrument” to not just liberate Dalit from oppression but also in the “reconstruction of a new social order.” Following the Mandal Commission report and the period of liberalization, Dalit mobilization was not just limited to making a space for themselves in educational institutions, setting up of Dalit study centres, and actively producing knowledge, but, an activism that spanned the political, and the cultural, in order to, as Mary E. Hancock’s writes (2008), carve a space in public memory and “an explicitly Dalit social and geographical space” through “erection of Ambedkar statues and busts”. The neo-liberal regime and proliferation of New Media, and the Dalit movement occur at the same time (post 1990s). As Hancock points out, the transregional, transnational, associational networks of Dalits have become more effective in the past decade, due to a variety of strategies. One of the ways in which these associational networks are made possible is through the internet.

Historically, the print (capitalist mainstream) media has not made itself accessible to the Dalit-Bahujan

community. As several studies have confirmed, the conspicuous absence of Dalit-Bahujan in contemporary mainstream media, and the inadequate coverage of their issues has marked the trajectory of Indian print and electronic media (Balasubramaniam 2011; Martand 2016). Though there have been several attempts by Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals in different parts of the country to start newspapers (Omvedt 2006; Aminmattu 2016), these efforts did not consolidate into one overall anti-caste articulation in the country at large. It is against this backdrop that the Dalit-Bahujan presence in the New Media must be empirically studied and theoretically understood.

Dalit camera, Round Table India, Savari are some instances of Dalit activism, online. The material they produce textualizes the world, not to impregnate reified abstract philosophical thought, but to produce compelling tellings of the world, instead of *showing* of the world. The text is not graphic but sonorous. They write to make themselves heard and in doing so, digital archiving becomes one of the strategies used by Dalit Bahujan community, as a part of a larger political project. This archiving is not dormant, but alive, and very much a political practice, to counter the hegemonic texts, by producing what can be referred to as “anti-caste matter”.

The coming together of various strategies to organize activities across spheres (not just limited to politics or cultural production) is what Agamben discusses in his piece “what is an apparatus”:

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself (Agamben as quoted in Packer 2010).



Anonymous. 02-10-2017. "Manemma." Water painting.

But this 'apparatus' falls short in describing what these revolutionary online spaces can do. Though technology itself can reify caste and re-assert the hegemonic order, it also has the potential to spring a surprise. In his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Mark Seem (1983) writes that revolutionary actions, intended to create new social orders, cannot be based on relations of exclusion and segregation, instead, groups must multiply and connect in "ever new ways" to keep the momentum of the movement going. The way in which internet is put to use by the Dalit-Bahujan-Adviasi men and women, and how they operate in order to create relations of solidarity across groups of people, straddling different spheres of activities (politics, educational institutions, cultural production in the form of movement media) can only be described as Oliver Marchart (2011) puts it, 'counter-apparatus'.

Most Dalit literary works are measured against a social-emancipatory project but there are certain expressions

of it that are unhinged, that are not contained by the project. Dalit studies centres, largely, seem to provide a negative description by reading itself against an already given political program, but a positive description should account for the surplus meanings that certain literary and artistic works have produced.

This paper then tries to ask, not what is caste, but what is anti-caste, and in so answering the question, draws from scholarship that looks at body and embodiment, caste, and new media, to look at digital archiving as a political practice, and how technology facilitates this archiving. We argue that the digital media has a way of lending itself to both the sensible and the intelligible, in contrast to print media that privileges the intelligible over the sensible, much less preserve it. The general economy of the intelligible is to produce and preserve the being while the economy of the sensible alerts us to the economy of expenditure and annihilation of being—caste being by writing out<sup>1</sup> the body (not to be confused with writing the body out). The haunting dream of anti-caste project is to listen to the casted body and the fragrance of the casteless body where the dream is not considered as an apposite of waking life. The new media theoretically offers this place to experiment with the excription—of the caste body, and to secure a new set of civilizational apparels. What gets sometimes worked out as anti-caste matter is a nakedness of caste, its body and its mind.

Conventional Social Sciences treat religious-political discourses rather than caste body or matter or sense as contributing to the vitality of caste in contemporary India. It is true, some critical work has demonstrated the two-way traffic between a disembodied, philosophic reading of caste and an embodied understanding of caste. This study while pursuing the latter proposition seeks to highlight the acoustic somatic rather than the 'touch' variable integral to caste dynamics. In a more expansive manner, the paper has argued that the acoustic somatic encompasses touch as well. Reading of Dalit Bahujan Digital archives, therefore, should be read as offering anti-caste material that destabilizes majoritarian religious identity and identities of any kind.

#### *Archiving the Body*

As French historian Jacques Le Goff (quoted in Cook 1997) suggests, archiving and archival politics, typically, has been about those in power and therefore could speak, and those who were/are forced to remain silent not just in public life but also in archival records, thereby creating histories that are only one part of the story. Textual archiving, amongst other things, is based on the male principle, predominantly about preserving the manuscript, where in matter is seen as an inert

container of something, that it lacks what is referred to as *spontaneous morphogenesis*, or to put it simply, there is matter, and form is imposed on this matter. It is made to seem as though Matter does not possess the ability to produce a form on its own, a thought that is inherent in Western philosophy. Since minorities have been looked at as matter, as incapable of speaking for themselves, rather forced to remain voiceless. Archives of minorities is about unlocking this potential of matter, a synthesis of their creative impulse, as literature replete with biographical accounts, their experiences and desires, and a rewriting of histories that has hitherto not been allowed expression or place in archives.

### *Will to Archive*

Colonialism produced Indology and nationalist discourses critically engaged with Indology and sometimes a more nuanced reading of this archive but they still limited themselves to a certain closed reading of the Brahminic texts. In recent times, scholars like Pollock and others have tried to write a longitudinal intellectual history of the Indic civilization. This effort has given rise to a variegated archive and they tend to refer to textual sources that are of a dissenting tradition from the Brahminic kind and they are suggestive of an embodied understanding of the world and the self. It is the force of this embodied understanding and conduct that is being discussed by the Dalit-Bahujans during colonialism and more recently on the social media. The ancient strictures on listening, speaking, touching go on to prove that senses played a crucial role in articulating and violating the natural distribution of senses across the space of the body. The caste body was organized around a particular regime of the senses.

How does one understand the embodiment of caste? Among other things, such a question raises the issues of caste as a form of sensibility that works on the tension between looking at caste as sense and caste as intelligible. The presentation of caste or how caste appears in the form of food, clothing, sexuality, religion, relationships and aesthetics including the orientation of caste subjects towards these objects, people and ideas. Touch has been the most foregrounded sense that scholars have examined but hardly has anybody looked at caste as a form of listening, which is both intelligible and sensible.

In this essay, among other things, we focus on how Dalit-Bahujans bring their sense of body and bodily sense to critically deconstruct the Brahmanic-Savarna form of presentation and orientation of the self towards itself and the world at large (for example, '*Just Savarna things*' a Facebook page that pokes fun at people who claim to be 'casteless'). More specifically, this intervention focuses

on the form of listening that characterizes Dalit-Bahujan towards a sonorous world which has a resonant structure and how this form of listening to the resonant structure enables them to exit the caste world even as they are generally disciplined and contained by the cultural categories of caste. At certain historical junctures, the resonant structure is powerfully articulated through their performative arts. The Dandora or the drum played a crucial role not in playing out the tradition role of alerting the Brahminic ears of the approaching and polluting untouchable but provided a tool for widening the democratizing of the Dalit movement itself.<sup>3</sup>

The impossibility of assigning will or purpose to these performative cultures speaks of their ability to unhinge themselves from historical and cultural contexts. The indeterminacy of sense and the determinacy of reason play upon each other and more often play into each other and produce the experience of caste and occasionally, exit from caste. This indeterminacy of sense is further fueled by the medium where a modern body and mind dualism is not taken as a primary axiom. The combination of the indeterminacy of sense coupled with indeterminacy of the medium is what propels the will to archive of the Dalit-Bahujan English-knowing chattereti who process minutely the Brahmin-Savarna presentation rather the meaning of Brahman-Savarna content today.

### *Affective Disposition and the Will to Archive*

It looks like that the cultural memory is fraught and is not likely to handle a hostile past. It is in that context perhaps that the will to archive among the marginalized goes deeper than creating a storage facility. After all, storing grains vis-à-vis knowledge requires technologies that keeps it safe from hoarders, pests, smugglers, corrupt, and revenue officials, intemperate and impoverished peasants. State is the final arbiter of producing, storing and distributing grains. Market may be considered another name for the state. Dalit-Bahujan women have been traditionally associated with planting, harvesting and storing grains, of building the edifice of traditional and modern state, of producing the conditions for monuments and texts, of building bridges between experience and thought. In modern times, the foundation of nation-building in the form of massive dams, flyovers, railway lines, concrete cities, industrial and physical infrastructure has been laid down by these women. Both the Nehruvian dream of dams and bridges, that Nehru refers to as the temples of modern India, and the neo-liberal dream of gated communities, and concrete jungles that form the phallic, capitalist, Savarna economy is based on these kinds of labour.

The Dalit-Bahujan women's affective disposition

towards procuring, storing and retrieving experience as knowledge may also be addressed as the will to archive. Both the capitalist economy and the micro-physics of work become the disciplining and controlling structures of repressive, representational regimes. Further it denies the Dalit-Bahujan body the power to act and think to transform the past, present and the future. This is the why stories and dances are enacted. We are suggesting that if there are translations of Dalit-Bahujan poets, mystics or literary figures, then such translations must be read in a manner that opens up a temporality that is less alienating. This time produced may be what Bataille (as quoted in Irwin 1993) calls Sovereign, an unattached time that is not tied either to a burdensome Brahminic past or a projected emancipatory future. It speaks of the immediacy of the instant. Is there a moment where there is an intensity for exiting from a caste body and mind and surrendering oneself to the infinite randomness of the world? Needless to say, the distinction between ideas and objects, histories and enactments, techniques and technologies does not pose serious issues.

This processing of matter requires knowledge, skills, and an affective disposition. The will to archive is about the need to capture this imperceptible process, a process that is transient, resonant, and poetic and extremely difficult to capture, because it is the will to archive the Dalit-Bahujan being herself. The will to archive is to listen to the process of materiality, a materiality through which the Dalit-Bahujan self is created and continuously processed. This processed self, reimages casteless horizons even as it inhabits the oppressive, negating, dominant caste horizon and embodied Brahminic structures which regulates horizontal thinking (where vertical thinking is about the communion between man and God or authority, horizontal thinking is about the communication amongst men).

### *The Nature of the Archive*

Archives, by its very nature is the trace of an event, it does not speak of the perceiving senses but of the perceived meaning of the event. It is the presentation rather the content that the senses concentrate on, it is singing rather than the song. The perceived meaning is a hegemonic Savarna construction which also fits the capitalist logic. The perceiving senses are not available for examination through these hegemonic meaning-systems, they work on the model of a sonorous structure where shapes and sizes of sounds are not immediately available through the act of listening. A Savarna-capitalist logic works towards constructing an intelligible world, the Dalit-Bahujan aesthetics works towards the foregrounding of the sensible. The sensible refers to the presentation of a

thing, object, or a people, whereas the intelligible refers to the content of a thing, object or a people. Modernity drives a wedge between presentation and content and the prevailing Savarna logic reinforces the conceptual over the embodied. Scientific rationality acts alongside political rationality, including religious faith to wear down the seeking of an artistic world that is not based on exalted human purposes or action.

Perhaps, the will to archive by the Dalit-Bahujan is to disrupt this heavy emphasis placed on the intelligible over the sensible, of the conceptual over the embodied. Issues like the affirmative policy do not always make economic or rational sense but they do possess a social, ethical and an embodied rationality. The caste system does not allow for some kinds of resonances: listening for, listening to (which the caste system allows, in certain instances) and listening with (which is one of the possibilities but is disallowed by the Savarna regimes of listening). The promise or the hope of this will to archive, situated in the realm of aesthetics and the sensible, is to allow for *listening* and *speaking* with, instead of the dominant disposition of the Savarna to merely hearing to a sound-object, as the Dalit is often thought of, and to *listen* to the other regimes of senses.

Textual archives (that reduced minorities to matter incapable of expression) now available as *digital archives* should be seen as spaces where matter can reveal itself, where matter and form are interlocked and one is not privileged over the other. Archives today cannot simply be read as manifestation of dominant order, but as spaces of the transformation of matter which can be explosive. Differentiating between the online and the offline or 'real' worlds, referred to as the online disembodiment thesis has long been rejected by digital culture scholars. Research on cybercrime, illness forums, rape survivor blogs are often cited as a clear indication that one cannot transcend their bodies in the 'online worlds'. Such literature, although relevant and important, is predominantly framed around crime and violence (we acknowledge that offline hierarchies are often played out in the online as well), and do not consider how crucial *body* and *embodiment* is for the (liberatory) politics of the marginalized, who are 'most commonly associated with bodies' (Dumler 2003). Digital archives provide a platform for people to create and curate spaces for themselves, and need to be thought of in terms that go beyond just representation and content.

### *The Ocular and the Sonorous*

From colonial calendar art to post-colonial modern commercial cinema, public culture in mainland India has been heavily influenced by the ocular centric media. In

both colonial and post-colonial modernity, the cultural expression of elites has largely been visual while that of the masses is aural and oral. For instance, Ananditha Ghosh's (2006) work on the Battala press discusses the valorization of the printed word, its silent reading, and the use of what was deemed *proper and high culture* by *Bhadralok* ("upper caste" people of Bengal) as opposed to the "*basar*" songs that were considered "low culture" and associated with lower castes and Muslims. Similarly, as Farina Mir (2010) points out, it is impossible to miss the "orality" or the "performative" aspect of Punjabi literature, because genres like the "quissa, var, dole, kafi... ..were not meant for silent reading".

Interestingly, in North-East India, musical traditions have been fore-grounded as public culture rather than visually orientated cultural artefacts like cinema, painting or sculpture. Aizawl has emerged as the transnational musical center for production and dissemination of the North-East music to neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. But even the narrative of Indian cinema, as Sheila Nayar (2004) points out, finds itself moored in a "non-writing" mindset that uses motifs and techniques that are specific to oral cultures and storytelling. Ajith Kumar (2013) in an interview discusses how *Nadan Pattu* (literally means local song and therefore associated with low caste and culture) moved into the "public" and urban spaces, because of the Malayalam cinema industry. Nayar's assertion, then, that it is important to focus on invisible orality because the subaltern may find representation through it must not be forgotten.

This focus on sonority in a public culture that is ocular-centric, the main thrust of this paper, then begs the question if the "privileged" or the "upper caste" can *listen and if they do then what kind of listening is valorized and what is disallowed*. This paper will briefly (by that we mean, it is not an exhaustive study of the portal, its users/readers, or a close scrutiny of its content or moderation of content) look at as an example of digital archive, *Savari*—an online collective started in 2012 by Adivasi, Bahujan and Dalit women to share their stories and many of the translations carried out in *Savari* testify to the aforementioned distinction. The Tamil Dalit colonial newspapers like *Ayothass*, *Oru Nai Paisa* spoke of an experiment with newspaper genres; the ambition of Dalit in colonial India having the potential to produce news and demanding that it be read and heard by others. To shape the senses of the Upper Caste was an audacious claim but the claim was nevertheless made. The Dalit digital archive may profit from including these formal academic research materials (cited in the text). It need not see these materials as antagonistic because they have been produced by caste Hindus.

### *Savari: A Brief Profile*

*Savari* is a space for Adivasi, Bahujan, and Dalit women to share their stories, converse with men in their communities and comment about current issues. To quote:

We are adivasi, bahujan and dalit women. Here we share our thoughts about our lives and the society we live in, including conflicts with the self, family and community. These are perspectives from our history, and our dreams for the future. Here we are in conversations with each other, with the men from our communities, and others. Inspired by our foremothers, the free spirited, knowledge bearing, community healers of the Saura people, this space is named *Savari*. *Savari* group: Authors and Organizers.

As is evident in their "About Us", they describe themselves as 'Authors' of their stories and 'organizers' of the website, archiving and creating alternative web-histories that take into account a multitude of voices including Dalit, Bahujan, Tribal and other marginalized groups. Personal stories that are self-reflexive, film reviews, reflections on current news stories and laws, Dalit literature and poetry translated into English, republishing pieces that originally appeared in *Round Table India* or *countercurrents*, combining materials from *Dalit camera* to supplement what has been written.

Recently, literary historians have touched on some aspects relating to caste and gender questions but they have rarely paid exclusive attention to anti-caste texts. *Savari* is a robust Dalit-Bahujan online portal and it has varied content; large number of committed contributors and user/readers and their great strength lies in the readers' allegiance to source loyalty (anti-caste disposition). Perhaps, for the first-time, technology allows for Dalit-Bahujans to collect, process and store information in the form of digital archives and not much theorizing has been attempted by Indian scholars to look at this interesting development on the cyberspace.

*Savari* is a repository of knowledge, and can be read as a site of (what scholars have referred to as), theoretical '*transformative capacity of embodiment*' (Gorringe & Rafanell 2007) and to extend it further, to include *transformative capacity of caste*, because caste is embodied in specific ways as can be seen in the next section.

### *Bourdieu and Foucault: A Gorringtonian Analysis of Embodiment of Caste*

This section borrows heavily from Hugo Gorringe's works on the embodiment of caste, and the transformative capacity of embodiment. In order to explain how this transformative capacity of embodiment can be extended to caste as well, we go back and forth between two

important texts authored by Gorringe. Gorringe & Rafanell (2007), in their essay titled *'The Embodiment of Caste: Oppression, Protest and Change,'* suggest that Bourdieu's "'caste'" Habitus helps in understanding how caste is internalized, and agency in such a set-up is only a "by-product of this structural internalization." As William H. Sewell, Jr., (1992) notes, lack of agency is inherent to the concept of habitus, except, perhaps in "structural crises" where "reflexive agency" is only a "slip" and not a "permanent state" (Gorringe 2007). But Gorringe & Rafanell find it is useful to understand how caste habitus shapes both the physical and psychological practices of respondents in their empirical research.

In addition, they write that Foucault's *Political Anatomy* balances Bourdieu's caste habitus, and shows that both power and agency emerge "in and through interaction". The stark contrast between the two in terms of how they think of bodies: for Bourdieu, the body is unaware of itself as the site of power struggles and rules of the game; for Foucault, the body is aware of the rules of the game and how it is being manipulated by those who create truth regimes, can explain how caste operates as the structuring force at the macro-level which is one's caste habitus on one hand, and how it is re-reproduced through interaction on the other, and therefore for Gorringe and Rafanell, a combination of the two helps explain how individuals and their micro-level interactions ultimately "sustain the macro-level phenomena" of caste.

While there are multiple instances where Savari women speak about the way in which caste is internalized in the caste habitus, they also write:

It is caste system that disciplines and socializes bodies. Thus, the different stereotypes for bodies for 'upper' and 'lower' caste people. Traditionally these bodies were bound by their assigned jobs which are considered to be their duties. When the boundaries are transgressed, when they are visible in spaces which are otherwise meant to be for 'upper' castes, violence is not always explicitly physical but rather perpetuated through symbols and actions that would assert the authority of 'upper' castes by constantly humiliating the 'lower' castes. This maintains the existing status-quo and power structure of caste. This is done by distinguishing US from THEM; 'upper castes' from 'lower castes' through various symbols, of which body and skin tone is an important one. (Meenu, *Savari*, July 17, 2015).

As Gorringe and Rafanell (2007) note caste is not just "a state of mind" but is constituted and reproduced through interactions. Meenu on *Savari* also directs us to think about how, even while macro-level social institution of caste "disciplines and socializes bodies", one is also aware of the actions that help those in power to re-assert their authority and give sanction to certain kinds of performances over others.

In one sense, sharing would mean 'having' and on another level, it is also being with, and not merely as a possession. One of the important characteristics of the new media is that it provides a dignified address to its participants. Many of the educated Dalits come from rural or ghettoized urban Indian pockets. But on the new media, there is less humiliation and insult that they have to face because of the not so entitled address that they possess. The new media has a potential to create a form of sharing that obscures formal possessions and entitlements and allows for sharing or being with. The Rohith Vemula movement was based on this kind of sharing.

*The Theoretical Transformative Capacity of Body, Embodiment (and Caste?)*

Gorringe's essay, *'The Transformative Capacity of Embodiment'* (2007), also makes visible how bodily practices can lead to "resistant modalities of agency", that bodies have the potential to subvert and transform power structures. Gorringe contends that the biological body does not just disappear in various contexts and that this recognition of the biological body need not necessarily be essentialist. It can lead to an awareness that the biological posits the social just as the social posits the body, co-constituting each other, where the biological and the social cannot be seen as separate, and one is not privileged over the other.

While the social shapes these bodies in specific and marked ways, affecting both the physical and psychological practices, the awareness of how certain disciplining happens can lead to acts of resistance to transform the social, and therefore both bodies and social are always in a state of flux, always in the process of co-constituting each other, thereby offering an opening to transformation (theoretically, at least).

*"Bodies that do not belong"*

Since the mainstream largely ignores alternative histories, and systematically silences voices of the "others", women writing for *Savari* will themselves into being, thereby creating techno-corporeal (inter) subjectivities which are individual, and, due to identification with its committed readers, also intersectional and collective in nature:

These [mainstream] most often end up reinforcing the savarna hegemony by appropriating voices of the underprivileged. It is in this context that the internet and social media gave a scope for breaking away from such narratives and became influential in making heard multiple voices which were otherwise kept away from mainstream discourses. (Meenu, *Savari*, July 17, 2015)

Also, consider:

..the step to share your lived experience with your community through the self-determined platform of Savari. This is such a powerful story that some of us can identify with as we intersectionally navigate caste, class, religion and the politics of identity, culture and economics in the broader frame of caste reservations and Indian social milieu. (Noel Didla comments on Favita Dias's post, *Savari*, November 28, 2015)

It is imperative for the Dalit-Bhajan community to gather themselves in the cyberworld because the political economy of creation and dissemination of information in the virtual world does not present problems of production as in the capitalist print economy. Although, it is critical to note that given the problems of access in a developing economy like India, only educated, university dwelling Dalit (more men than women) have access to the internet and the possibilities it offers, spaces like *Savari*, though a rarity, offer the Dalit-Bahujan- Adivasi women a crucial platform to voice their opinions.

It is evident in their writings that their corporeality, "embodiment of caste", and their voices are not taken into account by the mainstream and that becomes the very reason for their online presence, and therefore as Richardson and Harper (2002) write, "impossible to separate theories of technology from theories of embodiment" despite the insistence of disembodiment theorists that technology offers a closure for the body and an opening into infinite possibilities of the "mind" and 'virtual reality', re-asserting that the mind is separate and privileged than the body.

These archives are important:

Because the explosive pertinence of a remembered detail may challenge repressive or merely complacent systems of prescriptive inventory of history [typical archiving based on male principle is a part of such an endeavor], memory, like the body, may speak a language that reasoned enquiry will not hear. (Davis and Starn 1989)

#### *Anti-Caste Archives*

Anti-caste refers to both being and becoming human (Guru and Sarukkai 2012). It refers to transformation at two levels: at the level of a theoretical understanding of emancipation from caste (provisions in the Indian Constitution) and an embodied awareness and an inner transformation (expressive arts like literature, performative arts and spatial arts). It is true that these are not mutually exclusive spheres but such a distinction makes us aware that anti-caste is not merely a product of the mind but it has deeper embodied moorings (Wakankar & Milind, 2010). Savari, and various other Dalit forums online, offer a space where discussions include all the three overlapping categories, i.e., the constitutional rights and legal provisions provided for the marginalized, their

experiences of marginalization, Dalit literature and art, and an effort to bring to light the scholarly contributions made by Dalit thinkers.

Spaces like Savari transport us into different worlds where past and present intertwine, where there is space for the sensible (encompassing the intelligible) and the performative. The "authors and organizers" bring with them, a historicity of experience, that is at once about the past and yet about the present, and in many instances, timeless, and therefore relevant at all times. For instance, consider Shubadra's poem '*kongu*', translated into English and published on Savari (reproduced here in full):

#### **Kongu isn't a rag that stands guard over my head**

Kongu ties up my hunger,  
tucks my stomach in and keeps watch  
for me like *Katta Maisamma* while sleeping;  
When I turn into a canal of sweat at work  
she mops it up like a cool breeze,  
like the moon clutching together the stars  
she glistens as the sack  
that holds roots, vegetables, grains  
and the *komati's* groceries on my head;  
In the fields and the fallow plots, when I grow tired  
she spreads out a bed to give me rest,  
when my grief streams from my eyes to the skies  
she draws my eye babies towards herself  
like a mother, and hugs them close, my dirt rag;  
When my husband reaches out in love or anger  
like a ball of butter she always gets caught before I,  
to aggression or violence, from those at home or outside,  
my *kongu* rag always succumbs first...  
Kissing my ears and cheeks  
she holds up an umbrella of *senna* flowers  
over the dawn of my face  
the sapphires of my hair;  
From chilly weather and searing looks  
from the blasts of heat waves  
from the sneakiness of rain drops  
she offers cool relief like the shade of a tree,  
becomes a warm fire that covers my shoulders.  
She becomes a pad for cool pots  
that slake your thirst from a mile away,  
burns her fingers  
handling vessels on the stove,  
comforts my crying babies  
hugging them like warm baby clothing.  
Though she works cheerfully by my side all day in the  
dust  
she stems the life streams  
flowing from my body's sluices all night;  
Like a cow nursing a new-born calf

she licks all dirt off my body,  
 like a wicker wall  
 she hides the *modugu* stain spreading through my cloth;  
 Only when she becomes the snake charmer's *been* at my  
 waist  
 do planting, harvesting, weeding and threshing,  
 chores and songs screech into motion.  
 My dirt rag that rolls in my hands, sweat, bed, bones,  
 limbs  
 in pleasure and sorrow,  
 my kongu rag that sticks to me  
 in work and song, in crisis and comfort,  
 like the filth that clings to my feet, the companion  
 of my life path...slaving like the washerman's stone,  
 when does my perspiring kongu find the time for rest?  
 She's not the patchy *pallu* that stands guard over my head  
 nor the hobbling stone... over my breast  
 how can I drag her into the bazaar  
 set fire to her honor and lose myself?

How does one read the immeasurable life of Kongu in the finite perceiving senses of Subhadra? At a time, when the upper castes women were eager to burn their sarees as a feminist gesture, this Dandora poetess unweaves the gift and the illimitable giving of the Kongu to materially and socially and culturally outcast woman. Unlike Brahminic strictures that do not allow all the senses to participate in abandon, the Kongu produces a casteless sensibility that allows the Dalit woman to gather herself, sense of the self and sense of the world together. The Kongu allows the Dalit woman to touch herself in a sensuous and desirably way, to protect and care for her body in times of severity of weather, it delays her hunger and communicates deeply with her flesh which enfolds both the sensible and the intelligible.

The Kongu that wraps the personhood, like a mother, caring for the body and "eye babies", and unwraps to carry a day's ration, is alive. Subhadra's poem is an evocative poem on Kongu where it is in not merely an instrumental object used just representational purposes, but by moving out of a world of subject and object dualism and entering a world where one can hope to get a glimpse of things in their totality, where such a possibility is suggested because it consciously moves away from the cultural embodied arrangement caste makes, and reveals a much more basic, primal arrangement.

The Kongu, described variously as "a tool, companion, a comrade-in-drudgery", suggests that there is an inexhaustibility to the kind of relationship one can experience with "objects" but for that to happen one needs to go beyond looking at them as merely objects. Subhadra's Kongu, an object of ire for (upper caste)

feminists (Zare & Mohammed 2012) because the nationalization of women was irrevocably tied with "covering the female body in layers of discourse through layers of Cloth" as Priya Srinivasan (2011) writes, draws attention to the fact that these mundane objects have a history and relationship with people that moves beyond the objective- representational framework.

Isolation or alienation of the *things and objects* marks the caste arrangement where objects are thought of in terms of their use-value and representation. Both the sacred and sacrosanct and undesirable bodies that "do not belong", are, in a Brahminic tradition not allowed to be experienced in a sensorial way. Curiously, the distance between objects and people is a consequence of it being either sacred or not. But this reading of Kongu effectively disrupts this sort of an arrangement, where a distanceless reading of the Kongu implies that one can touch the life of the object and at the same time, the object can touch your life as well, in doing so, it also redefines the Savarna understanding of use and reflection as well. Distance is produced to keep certain impurities that are connected with the biological functioning of the human being but then it is not limited to the imputes alone, it is a general mode of receiving the experience by the touched (Savarna).

The intimate relationship that Subhadra shares with her Kongu, a life-force that expands and shrinks as needed, but always touches the body, the way it extends itself into worlds of labour, and caring, but always intimately connected with the body, as though, even while the life-hardened Kongu provides shelter and life to the wearer, also derives its energy from the very body it hugs. This to and fro between the sensible and the intelligible (and it is important to note that one can never say which is more important) is to be listened to with the being. To see/read the archive, is to listen with the being, and not merely hearing. 'Speaking with' would require an openness to listen to an immeasurable other. It is not an individual response to Brahmanical supremacy and caste, but an anti-caste thought to do a secular criticism of casteism, not caste as religious or spiritual but caste as deprivation, lack of access and rights, an anti-caste thought to counter caste as a modern category that finds itself institutionalized in modern spaces such as universities and media.

Such a reading of Kongu, then, reveals to us, that, though determined by caste, cannot be contained by caste alone. Just as "untouchability is always in excess of its description" (Guru 2009) so is this reading of objects and things. The realm of the sensible (which is also intelligible but not vice versa) offers us infinite possibilities. It cannot be understood through the intelligible alone, since it is, by its very nature, situated in the realm of sensible



and the performative, and can be experienced in all its rich, sensorous magnificence, disclosing to us that the sonorous precedes and exceeds caste. We are talking about a sense and an experience that not only determines but exceeds caste.

## Conclusion

We begin the essay with the importance of stories, of increasing visibility by being heard, and the digital worlds that make it possible for the Dalit-Bahujan community to throw into sharp relief, their absence in the mainstream media, and the importance to focus on listening to the sonorous, the invisible oralities. This essay does not just speak about the Dalit-Bahujan presence online, but also about the conversation between the poetic and the prosaic. The sense of the new media and the intelligibility of print textuality, the tension between Dalit women's poetic transformatory project against the Brahminic philosophical tradition, a fight that is not just against the dominant intelligible but also a fight to retain the capacity for the sensible, this productive tension between the sensible and intelligible, perhaps, describes best, the anti-caste digital archives.

Should we restrict the meaning of this presence, a poetic presence rather, to modern transformative project or should it be treated as a project in itself? It is against this second and broader social project that we read Kongu. Subhadra's Kongu is simultaneously a project to address both the inscription and excription of the casted body, it transgresses caste not through a deliberate act but in a non-coercive, non-categorical way of addressing and describing the world. It is a form of interpretation that is not confined to producing the meaning of the world.

## Notes

1. Jean Luc Nancy theoretically posits a condition of not only inscription of the body but also the excription of the body in his work *Corpus*
2. [https://www.facebook.com/justsavarnathings/Their 'About me' reads: We, the caste-less people](https://www.facebook.com/justsavarnathings/Their%20'About%20me'%20reads%20We,%20the%20caste-less%20people). They also have a twitter handle, @justsavarna, and often use #justsavarnathings
3. Sundar Sarukkai's interesting phenomenological work on the drum seems to posit a Brahminic ally orientated understanding of the sensible but this is an effort to read Dalit-Bahujan sensibility from the bottom upwards.

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