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Framing Affect: Visual Representation of Dalits

Dealing with the contemporary question of identity politics in India based on caste, the essay engages with the affective realm that determines the postulation of visual practices of Dalits in "public/popular art", which has been neglected. On one hand, 'Dalit visual culture' has been overlooked (perhaps due to artistic or cultural parameters of *purity* and *pollution*) by upper-caste elites from established categories of highbrow cultural production in India. But, on the other hand, the idea of 'culture' has been played out vigorously as an essential marker which at least symbolically enables Dalits to proclaim their pedagogical wealth in artifact, history and politics within an extremely hierarchized and caste-ridden society. Implicitly, this paper therefore explores how an expanded economy of affect has provided meaning to the Dalit world to expound a cultural significance and articulations through the images that embody their social stigma, misery, humiliation, etc., as well as values inherent in their mission and protest.

There's nothing wrong in being grateful to great men...but there are limits to gratefulness...in politics, bhakti, or hero-worship, is a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship.

B.R. Ambedkar, Constituent Assembly, Nov 25, 1949 (cited from Raman 2012: 35)

But his real fear is that with these temples of Reason, the old religion will merely be exchanged for a new one; and when every Virtue will have its own temple, people will be content to worship rather than to practice virtue.

Ernst Gombrich (1979: 190)

1 Introduction

This paper explores how the framing of 'affect' completely based on the invariable assembly of images is critical in catalyzing the social and political characterization of the Dalits – a stigmatized populace – emphasizing how the utilization of visual idioms not only manifests their identity, but also prompts them to unleash their hopes and aspirations in a complex society. Now, there is an immediate need to specify the definitions and the efficacy of these two terms – *Affect* and *Dalit* – to inaugurate the complexities implicit in the subsequent arguments. It is sometimes confusing to employ vocabulary of affect, which underlines various meanings and usage such as emotion, feeling, passion, mood, etc. Thus, while the words are often interchangeable, there are significant connotative differences. According to Jonathan Flatley, "*emotion* suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression; *affect* indicates something relational and transformative. One

has emotions; one is affected by people or things." (Flatley 2008: 12) This allows me to establish a working definition of affect, which is sometimes interchangeably used as emotion. Aristotle defines emotions as "those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, and that are also attended by pain or pleasure. Such are anger, pity, fear, and the like, with their opposites." (Cited in Flatley 2008: 12) My intent of using the term 'affect' is to emphasize in my inquiry how a certain kind of visuals partially captures and communicates sensibilities (of human beings) in order to motivate towards an attachment or movement and agenda, with the embodiment of affective ramifications, such as all those mental and emotional suppositions in human beings discussed above. My understanding of affect is borrowed from various sources to examine how affect and its corollaries could work as potential and viable tools in order to constitute one of the ways of establishing values, judgments, and opinions among social groups and communities in general, and particularly among Dalits in this context, often prior to cognition and will. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend the term 'Dalit' before exploring the affective rigor through the visual syntax that prompted the course of Dalit activism and politics.

Today, the term Dalit refers to members of a community, if not necessarily a homogenous category, who identify themselves with those who are variously categorized as *depressed classes*, *subaltern*, *underprivileged*, *backward*, *Schedule Caste*, *untouchable*, etc. Further, these terms are often used to connote a common group of people, who are downtrodden and destitute; all of these communities in a meta-language may be referred to as "marginalized" in India (Guru 2000: 111–116 and Guru 2005: 67).¹ After the independence of the country, the Dalits were given constitutional status under the category of *scheduled castes* and *backward castes* and

¹ Gopal Guru (2000: 111–116 and 2005: 67) analyzes the process marginalization of Dalit in all the democratic spheres which includes ministerial governance, bureaucracy, information technology, education sector, market economy, cinema and media due to the mainstream understanding of Dalit as incompetent and non-meritorious as opposed to more skilled and knowledgeable upper caste in Indian society. Rather aspiring for a highly regarded job by Dalits, their marginalization is fixed around pollution-purity conundrum, where they are occupationally relegated to wretched and filthy menial jobs as many of the Dalits are very much engaged as scavengers, leather oriented labor, rag pickers, coolies, cobblers, butchery, etc. Likewise, Balmurli Natrajan points out that the 'caste system' has arguably been built upon a tripartite foundation of hereditary occupational specialization, ritualized/sacralized hierarchy, and mutual repulsion or separation, and kept in place by a variety of forces that are political (local kings and dominant caste groups, power relations including violence, patriarchy, and the modern state), economic (village economy with relations of economic interdependency, exploitative relations and segmented labor markets), social (kinship ties, marital practices and institutions of customary law), and cultural-ideological (ritual ranking, ideas of purity-pollution and religious sanction). See Natrajan 2012.

several provisions were made for their social and economic development in India. This was as a result of the movement led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), a first leader/reformer of ex-untouchables masses, in which Dalit as a community acquired a consciousness and an awakening.² The identification with the term 'Dalit', according to Anupama Rao, fundamentally converts negative descriptions or stigmatized subjects into a confrontational identity and makes the subject appear political in order to demand inclusion or recognition in cultural and social networks (Rao 2009: 1–2). In order to achieve such goals, the Dalit community has been steadily fighting and struggling against the inequalities and hierarchies that are prevalent in caste-ridden society, the structure of which produces – and is constituted by – a distinct array of imageries.

In his work, Christopher Pinney, a distinguished visual anthropologist, argues that "visuality and other embodied practices have played a central role in the constitution of Indian public culture," and strikingly underlines the dominance of a certain kind of visual culture that he addresses gradually, calling it "Indian Hindu scopic regimes" (Pinney 2004: 9). Pinney's ethnographic inquiry for visual practices among the lower caste and backward communities was seemingly restricted to the rural belts where they were residing mostly in hierarchized spatiality. For having a weaker position in socio-political hierarchy of caste, such populations have found no easy access in temples and public places usually dominated by 'vegetarian' upper castes. Therefore, Pinney argues that they could only determine a sense of worship by *seeing* photos of Hindu gods/goddesses including pictures of their 'personal pantheon' (Pinney 2004). Similarly, Diana Eck refers to this visual context as *darsan* or 'Darsan effect,' particularly in Hindu ritual tradition where the scope of visuality is understood in terms of 'religious seeing' or 'the visual perception of sacred' (Eck 1985: 3).³

² "Dalit" is a word for a community which means 'ground down', 'crushed', or 'broken into pieces' in both the Marathi and Hindi language. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had used this term the very first time around 1928 in his newspaper *Bahishkrit Bharat*, during the 1970s, the term gained more visibility in Maharashtra in the context of the literary and cultural efflorescence due to the popularity of Dalit literature. It was Namdeo Dhasal, a founding leader of Dalit Panther Movement, who widened the scope of the term 'Dalit' beyond Maharashtra to include Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, land less labourers and all those economically exploited. For detailed discussions see Rao (2009: 1–2), Rao (2006) and Lata Murugkar (1991: 6).

³ The term is vivaciously employed by Eck to distinguish Indian society from the modern West, based on its majoritarian faith in Hindu religion, which according to her "is an imaginative, an 'image making,' because the idea of the sacred is seen as present in the visible world – the world we see in multiple images and deities, in sacred places, and in the people." (Eck 1985: 10) In India, it is often

Visual iconicity developed on the basis of either religious or ideological factors has played a critical role in Indian politics. Indian 'self' and 'affirmative' imagination has rendered a framework for practical politics and vibrant culture, idealized on the basis of an image. What we find in this process is that a person's interpretation of culture confronts his or her political self (Guru 2011: 36–37). Thus the political ideas have conjoined with affirmative imagination of national leaders whose images develop into a powerful iconography, denoting the essence of their social concerns and nationalist vision, something which the wider sections of the population, beyond the ideal faithful may be able to relate to easily.⁴ Since the 'Indian public sphere' is inundated with visuals that seize the aspirations of various castes, communities, ethnicity, and religious practices, how do we read Dalit assertions in terms of visibility? If individual and collective identities are constituted through systems of knowledge productions often embodied in visual forms (pictures and images), how, then, is visibility laden with affect instrumental in gravitating caste based identity and recognition in a democratic sphere? It is crucial to analyze how the entanglement of affect and visibility offers us a possibility understand the way in which it enables Dalits to register their own worth and to demand recognition in the public sphere.

2 Dalit Visibility and Cultural Production

Gary Tartakov, a scholar in Dalit and Race studies, questions their invisibility and examines their socio-cultural worth, while asking: "Where are the depictions of Dalits in the fine arts of contemporary India... and representation of this sixth of Indian population in the *popular media*?" (Tartakov 2012: 2, emphasis in original). The cultural production of Dalits has always been relegated to the order of invisibility and untouchability because of their association with low-end jobs such as manual scavenging, leather-oriented work, cleaning households, care of purity, etc. This problem of invisibility abysmally reverberates in Dalit cultural production. To

the case that one may well encounter, on auspicious occasions, a congregation of a crowd flocking to the premises of pilgrimage sites and temples to obtain blessings by act of seeing/touching the image of gods/goddesses. See Eck (1985).

⁴ In recent times, scholars from the disciplines of Art History, Visual Anthropology and Cultural Studies have attempted to not only analyze but to determine the societal stature and major contributions of popular leaders with emphasis on their significance in contemporary times, particularly through the corpus of images, which are widely circulated in multiple media including massive sculptures at crossroads. See Ramaswamy (2009), Guha-Thakurta (2011), and Guru (2008/2011).

counter such a scenario, Dalit voices have been articulated in the modes of radical literature, which centers the values of equality, social justice, and human dignity. Even the realm of 'Indian visual culture' with its tall theoretical posturing promises to serve the interest of the common culture of the working class and the subjugated; however, it fails to probe the images of Dalit life worlds. In India, the representation of Dalits is negligible in the domain of popular visual culture. The study of Dalit visual culture thus emerged as a distinct case, which had to appropriate a diverse and seemingly unconnected imagery that circulated in the domain of 'Public/Popular art' (calendar art, posters, banners, statues, monuments, etc.).

Gopal Guru, a social scientist, offers an imagination that is based on "negative language" (Guru 2011). Guru says that the rendering of negative language marks the struggle of Dalits against the visible for acquiring recognition and dignity in society. In that process, the development of Dalit visibility can provide a much clearer understanding of Dalit life-worlds. Arguably, Dalits have started identifying themselves through the images, even if one might not necessarily designate all of them as 'art'. If we broaden the scope of Dalit visibility, how do we interpret the moment of acquiring visibility through the images of Dalits? Can we argue that Dalit images are a visual embodiment of public affect, as Erika Doss reflects, "repositories of feelings and emotions" that are encoded in their material form, narrative content, and "the practices that surround their production and reception" (Doss 2009: 9).

The affect determines those intensities that pass from body to body (human and non-human). Eventually, this idea of affect is clearly exemplified in the image of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, who is one of the leading icons in Dalit visual culture, an image used in different variations for educational and ethical purposes, mostly by Dalits. The enduring commitment of Ambedkar has hugely inspired Dalit and many marginalized groups. In addition, Ambedkar is also known as the principal architect of the Indian constitution, a staunch advocate of the interventionist modernizing state and of the legal protection of the "modern virtues of equal citizenship and secularism" (Chatterjee 2004: 8). Because of Hinduism's inability to abolish the caste system and remove the stigma of untouchability, Ambedkar declared his intention to convert to a religion that did not endorse caste hierarchy and would pro-

vide the framework of a society based upon principles of non-discrimination, equality, and respect. After years of deliberation, he embraced Buddhism⁵ (Verma 2010: 56).

In the course of investigating the historical lineage of Dalit existence, Ambedkar built up a polemical account of the social history of the subcontinent, in which he points out a primary contradiction between two religious and thinking systems – Hinduism and Buddhism. In this context, he argued that the rule of Ashoka (268–232 BCE), where the essential principles of Buddhism were adopted and practiced by the ruling dynasty, was exceptional as he felt that the society was more egalitarian and based on the idea of equality during that period. Ambedkar, therefore, not only adopted his religious values from Buddhist doctrines, but also extolled Buddhism as the system of belief, which had carried the tradition of resistance to the brahmanical order and its hierarchy. Thus, in his movement, Ambedkar revived all the symbols associated with Buddhism and projected it as the alternative social order, which is rooted in the Indian soil (Alone 2012).

The image of Ambedkar, therefore, encrypts a form of social message as well as protest against caste violence, and has indeed become an image which transcends the barriers of language-based regions. The affect can be understood as the name given to those:

visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if neutral) across barely registering accretion of force-relations... (Seigwoth/ Gregg 2010: 1)

The stature of Ambedkar portrays rational and liberal views that prompt the Dalit community and backward caste groups to connect with each other's sentiments, whereby affective charge reproduces certain emotions (or emotional bonding), more evident in the corpus of Dalit visual culture. In recent times, the image of Ambedkar is often deployed by the Dalit community and other backward caste groups across the country in order to register their protest against the rigid caste system, which is responsible for their social stigma. Furthermore, the image of Ambedkar is critical in building up the solidarity among the various Dalit castes and sub-caste groups (fig. 1).

⁵ Dr. Ambedkar publicly embraced Buddhism in Nagpur and subsequently admitted an estimated 380,000 men, women and children in the presence of other *bhikkus* on 15th October 1956. The 1961 census showed an increase of about three million Buddhist in India in which three quarters of them in Maharashtra alone. See Valerian Rodriques (1993).



Fig. 1: The statue of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar at Valataru (Godavari District), Andhra Pradesh
(Courtesy: Syam Sundar, Vijayawada, India)

When Ambedkar underlines that "the history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between – Buddhism and Brahmanism" (Ambedkar 1987: chapter 7, unpaginated), this seems to evoke an impression of cultural category as identified by the Dalit masses that congealed a movement based on the values of Buddhism. As a consequence, the mass conversions of untouchables, under the guidance of Ambedkar, have opened up new avenues to probe the unyielding ideas of history and culture through the lens of the oppressed and marginalized. In any case, Ambedkar may not have conceptualized 'culture' in a more definite way. For him, caste was a central fact of Hinduism and untouchability an inherent feature of caste. Ambedkar wished to replace religion of rules with 'true' religion, a religion of principles, which he considers is the basis of civic government (Fitzgerald 2007: 134–136). These principles – liberty, equality, and fraternity – are true religions which are being partly derived from the American and French revolutions combined with situated ways of thinking for critiquing Hindu ritual orthodoxy in the Indian context. Therefore, he chose to pursue Buddhism as critical for education for the untouchable masses and social outcasts (*ibid.*: 143). In the wake of postcolonial and subaltern discourses, Dalit life-worlds (involving their experience) are pushed to embrace a cultural and aesthetic turn that tends to resurface Dalit identity (Pawaiya 2010: 6). As a result, Dalits are understood as a separate unit of consciousness comprehended through their experiences and historical narratives.

So, what does visibility add to our understanding of the social (via the visual field), especially in the case of Dalit discourse? Is visibility merely formulating a 'Dalit

identity' by imbibing cultural codes; or is it staging the intrinsic idea of revolution? In any case, Dalit visibility is mostly associated with contemporary Buddhist imagery that combines elements of past art with new features, connecting past traditions with distinct past, present, and future (Tartakov 1990: 411). The extraordinary iconography of Ambedkar is most popular and visible in the specific visual culture. It is palpable in the images held by people in the rallies where his endearing mini-statue is ceremoniously carried by mass supporters. The iconography is personified with Buddhist symbols and metaphors such as the Ashokan Chakra (wheel), an elephant, the *stupa* etc. As wheels turn that which is high becomes low, while low becomes high (Ilaiah 2004: xxi). In this symbol, productive masses (laborers) saw the image of their blood, sweat, and labor. Ambedkar enshrined in Ashokan Chakra (wheel) allowed Dalits and marginalized to experience a possibility of change (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2: By carrying a mini statuette of Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the activists and sympathizers of the Bahujan Movement celebrate the 125th birth anniversary of Ambedkar at Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

The juxtaposition of the modern figure of Ambedkar with *sakyamuni* Buddha is inscribed in a variety of media, such as sculpture and popular decorative posters and paraphernalia. There is a fascinating description in the firmness of the symbolism inherent in the way Ambedkar is presented or portrayed in pictures and statues. Thus, the blue business suit that he is almost inevitably shown wearing is as regular and unchanging as the *Sakyamuni* Buddha's orange robe. And the significance of the book (mostly identified as the Indian Constitution) Ambedkar is often shown holding is to expand this expression of a man of modern education and high civic

status relying upon secular principles and education (fig. 3). Ambedkar was trained in the USA, seeking the values of both European and Buddhist Enlightenment.



Fig. 3: The poster of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his popular posture carrying a copy of Indian Constitution, and graceful Buddha (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

In this case, emotion is attached to the notion of knowledge that inspires Dalits to capture sentiment implicit in this particular iconography, which evolved to crystallize the rich legacy of a learned man such as Ambedkar. Therefore, Ambedkar strongly professed to develop the liberal education and acclaimed the English language as "mother of all goddess".⁶ He envisaged that English (as a language of rational thought) will provide much opportunity to the Dalits and backward masses of India, who are caught in many superstitions. Apparently, a poster of three infants with Ambedkar in the background motivates viewers to access the domain of knowledge, education and pedagogy, which is regarded as the only weapon to fight poverty, misery and degradation. Notwithstanding, their European-type look and blond curls inspire the younger generation, as the poster says 'to educate, to unite and to struggle' (fig. 4).

⁶ A foundation stone was laid by Dalits on April at Lakhimpur Khiri Village (UP), a few kilometers away from National Capital Region and a 30-inch brass statue of the 'goddess' was mounted formally in honor of Lord Macaulay, the 19th Century colonial official who sought to create an English-speaking Indian middle-class elite. The active members and sympathizers' belonging to Dalit movement believe that learning English will open up new opportunities for India's 160 million Dalits in higher education and high-status government careers. See Anand 2010 and Raghavan 2013.

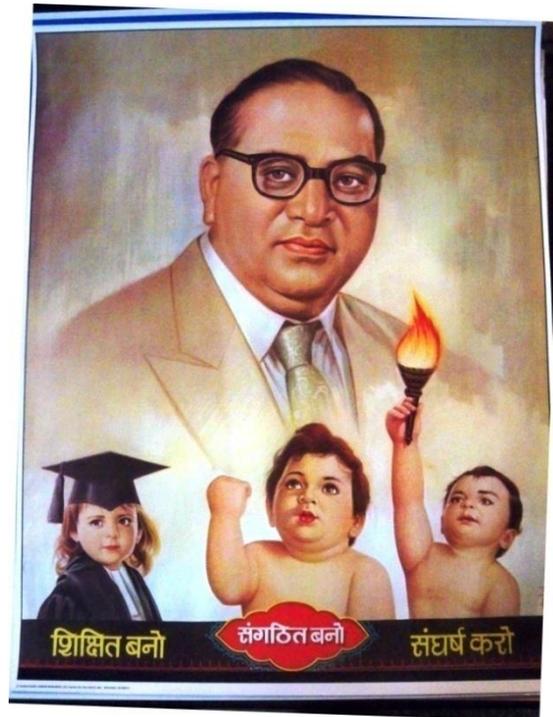


Fig. 4: A poster of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in which children are emphasizing his doctrine on the right to education; value of unity and struggle (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

Ensuing inspiration led the Dalit community to install a large number and variety of statues of Ambedkar in their neighborhoods, crossroads, private properties, and villages across India. Although many of the statues anatomically look imperfect, their presence seems to be more significant in propagating Ambedkar's ideas and historical struggle against the bigotry of caste practices. For all his great deeds, some have even sanctified him as a god who offered armor in form of the secular constitution to the weaker section of society, including women and other minorities. Therefore, the Indian Parliament is also venerated by Dalits as a temple where they literally worship the modern features in the dignified composure of Ambedkar. It is quite evident in the poster that explicates a manifold narrative of Ambedkar's life-journey in multiple tableaux (fig. 5). The Indian Parliament has a central place in this narrative, because members of the Dalit community strongly believe that the drafting of the constitution is a culmination of Ambedkar's endeavors and struggles to find a place in the Indian history, along with many significant socio-political events that accentuate his stature and personality. Therefore, Ambedkar is considered to be an ideal role-model for many downtrodden who are deprived of the bare minimum resources: access to quality education, as Ambedkar directs, could perhaps transcend all the adverse conditions and odds.

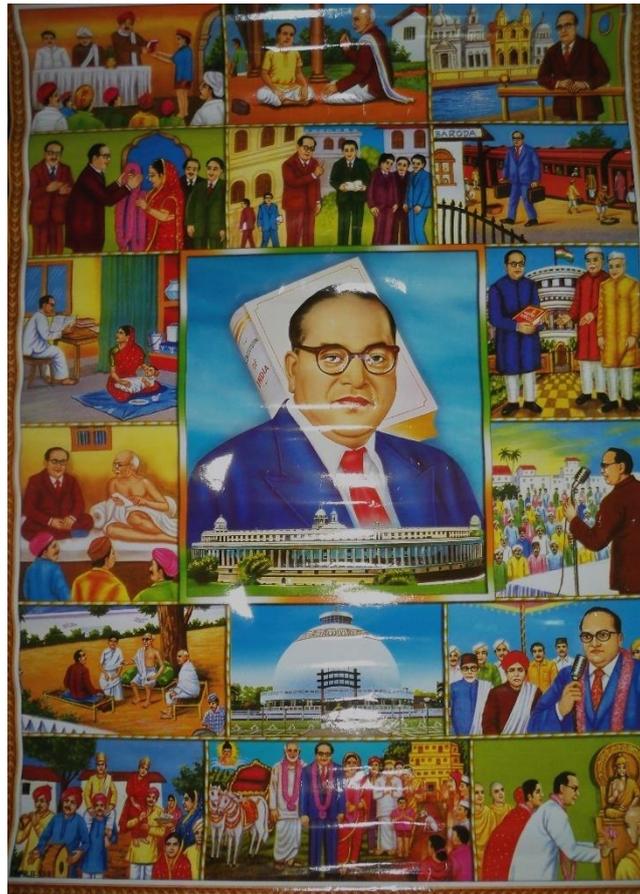


Fig. 5: A poster demonstrating the life cycle of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar from Birth to his Mahaparinirvana-death anniversary (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

As Dalits are becoming politically more conscious about their role in society, there is now a significant corpus of Dalit visual culture, which is embodied in political posters, electoral banners and paraphernalia espousing the image of Ambedkar (see fig. 6 and 7). Since the decade of the nineties, the sudden growth of political consciousness among Dalits has entailed electoral gains in many parts of India. Dalits, as a political force that constituted huge vote banks, have successfully altered their activist impetus into mainstream politics. Therefore, most political parties and politicians of all hues, ranging from Left to extreme Right, compete to claim the name of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Guru 2008: 205–206). The characterization of Ambedkar's image in the posters and hoardings indicates the growing political and cultural importance of Ambedkar; the list even includes many other Dalit/tribal leaders of national stature such as Kanshiram, Birsa Munda, Mayawati, etc. (Jaoul 2012).



Fig. 6: A Dalit woman selling the posters and other paraphernalia on pavement during the 125th birth anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (Photograph: Rahul Dev)



Fig. 7: The local potters selling figurines and statues of Dr. Ambedkar and Buddha in Lucknow Uttar Pradesh (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

3 Political Mobility and Efficacy of Affect: Bahujan Samaj Party

If affect is "perhaps best understood as physically expressed emotion, or feeling", according to Gregg and Seigorth (2010), then 'emotional energy' has become more relevant to strengthen solidarity-driven social groups and communities⁷ in recent

⁷ The 'emotional turn' is structured around the congregation of masses or mass hysteria, which Heaney (2013) argues is exploited by the political parties and social movements.

times. "Emotions movements ('emotional turn')" (Heaney 2013: 244) is a study of the social and political formation of groups, which are perpetuated and ghettoized by the old dichotomies earlier ushered in by nationalism. In Indian politics and in the public sphere, the element of affective and emotional vigor has been employed to address public sentiment, especially with the staging of gods in audio-visual formats, where the circulation/consumption of religious images enabled the Hindu cultural nationalism to mobilize masses from the late 1980s onwards (Rajagopal 1994, Rajagopal 1996, and Brosius 2005).

Perhaps it was a shift to culture, as identified by Jyotindra Jain, where the "religion of Hinduism (temple, ritual, worship) is altered into the culture of Hinduism (ethical values, language, and territory, nation and territories, knowledge systems, history, etc.)" (Jain 2009: 226). This progression is often called "religio-culture", what seems appropriate to describe the agendas and activities of Hindu cultural nationalism (Jain 2009). As a result, Hindu culture has become much stronger, and ubiquitously influenced the larger political space. In turn, Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), a Hindutva-led-political outfit, has made an astounding victory, almost wielding absolute power due to the amount of seats, after the pivotal elections of 2014 that decimated the secular parties of India.

In the same period, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party for the welfare of Dalit and poor masses, which focused on bringing social change among downtrodden and other backwards in the society, reflects the political growth of Dalits in the political sphere of north India. BSP has ruled Uttar Pradesh (UP), one of the largest regional states, under the leadership of Kumari Mayawati. Hailing from a very poor background, she went on to serve four terms as Chief Minister. The success of Mayawati is hugely reflected in unprecedented growth of Dalit popular visual culture, which provides a strong context to Bahujan politics in support of the emancipation of Dalits. Sudha Pai, a leading political scientist, reads the story of Dalit assertion through cultural signifiers, including Ambedkar's image itself as symbol in the mobilization at grass-roots level and argues that the emergence of BSP and Mayawati "provides space for discussing culture, politics, and the culture of politics" (cited in Narayan 2006: 25). Eventually, this political assertion in UP is also understood as 'Dalit counter-public sphere', which does not engage with the mainstream media dominated by the upper-caste, because the peculiar nature of its primary constituency—literacy and poverty rates—prevents them to gain access to

the mainstream public sphere (see Loynd 2008: 63). BSP sympathizers and followers consist of India's economic underclass that lives in abject poverty and, thus, cannot afford either television or newspaper subscriptions. Therefore, the employment of Dalit icons, visual imageries, and symbols is quite significant in BSP's socio-political agenda to mobilize and educate the audience of the subjugated.

I would argue that this kind of visibility stemming from cultural discourses, perhaps, crafted a strong emotive connection with the persona of Mayawati; as millions of Dalits view her as their icon and refer to her as *behenji* (sister) who is harbinger of social change and optimism in the dark lives of many oppressed in society (Badri Narayan 2006: 31–33, Ciotti 2012: 157). This kind of visibility becomes extremely important if we understand it in relation to what Partha Mitter has argued, as being about the institution of an 'iconic society'. According to Mitter, what constitute the 'iconic society' are the images produced by Christian missionaries, elites, nationalists and religious classes of India after the arrival of print technology in colonial India (Mitter 2003: 2). The images of Mayawati generate something new in this framework of the 'iconic society' that is shaped by a huge proliferation of mechanically reproduced images. They have not only gained visibility in public spaces, but this mechanical reproducibility has given a cultic charge to Mayawati's persona. As a result, a variety of her iconic images are manifested in many Dalit households and provided the impetus to Dalit politics in the Hindi heartland. In addition, the members of Dalit and other disadvantaged sections wish to see her becoming Prime Minister (PM) of India, and indeed affirm their hope through *iconicity*. With the colossal parliament in the background of the placard, Mayawati is seen as a rightful claimant to the most commanding seat of power, as she draws her genealogy from two critical figures of Dalit emancipation – Dr. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, two great Dalit stalwart leaders – and is indeed given grace by Buddha (fig. 8).

Dalit memorials, parks and monuments also represent the visual culture of Dalits. A large crowd of Dalits attended the site of Deeksha Bhumi, Nagpur to pay homage to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It is often considered as a Neo-Buddhist pilgrimage center, especially because about 600, 000 followers have embraced Buddhism along with Ambedkar in 1956. On similar lines, Mayawati has constructed the *National Dalit Prerna Sthal* (Dalit inspirational site), located in the industrial city of Uttar Pradesh,

NOIDA⁸ and the *Ambedkar Samajik Parivartan Sthal* (Ambedkar's site of social change) in the capital city of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, after having faced many bureaucratic controversies, media trials and jurisprudential hardships (fig. 9 and 10). These memorials commemorate the struggles of Dalit leaders and masses, which have faced many toils and pain to articulate the humanistic movement of social transformation. The urban landmark is regarded by Mayawati as a materialization of the vision of the members of the oppressed community on the bank of Yamuna River.



Fig. 8: Yashpal Gautam, a Dalit activist carrying placard during the political rally of BSP, espousing Mayawati as next Prime Minister of India (Courtesy: Yashpal Gautam)

Notably, the site is viewed by subjugated and oppressed people to be significant because the bank of the Yamuna River has been marked for commemoration of figures assumed to be critical in mainstream Indian history due to monumental sites and memorials such as the Taj Mahal for Shahjahan, the Mughal ruler; Raj Ghat for Mahatma Gandhi; Shanti Vana (Forest of Peace) for Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister; *Shakti Sthala* (a site of Empowerment) for Indira Gandhi, the only female Prime Minister of India. So far, no monument has been dedicated to Dalits and backward classes whose sacrifices and labor have never been manifested and brought to memory anywhere in the country. Importantly, a strong feeling and emotion is attached to the site of Yamuna, where politics of memorialization is crucial.

⁸ NOIDA is an industrial city that emerged in the late eighties and which became a part of the National Capital Region and NOIDA as this abbreviation stands for New Okhla Industrial Development Authority.

The site emerging as *Dalit Prerna Sthal* is linked to the political assertion of Mayawati, which – as Kajri Jain, the art historian posits – necessitates us to radically redefine our perspectives by viewing them in the broader context of "both Dalit and Hindu cultural and political struggles" (Jain 2014). Drawing on Rancière's idea of the redistribution of the sensible, Jain argues that this public site indeed has to be seen as a model of 'high art', which provides a distinct form of recognition.



Fig. 9: *National Dalit Prerna Sthal* (Dalit inspirational site) at NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

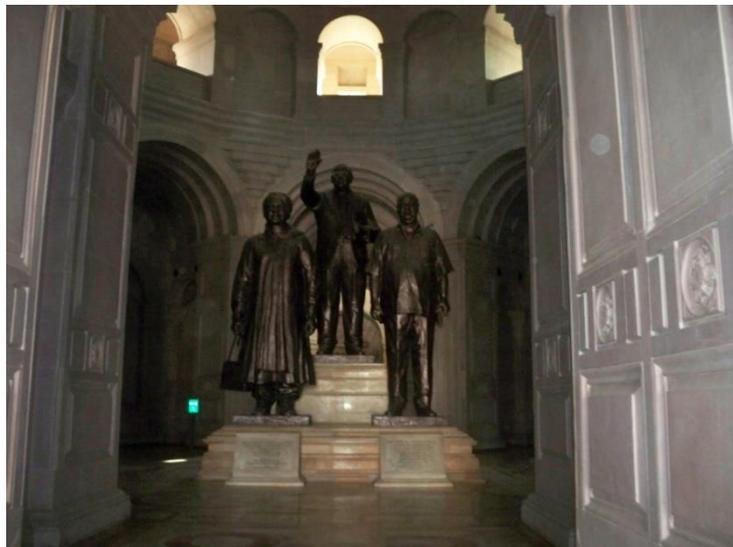


Fig.10: The massive statues Dr. B.R. Ambedkar accompanied by Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in the interior sanctum of *Ambedkar Samajik Parivartan Sthal* (Ambedkar's site of social change) at Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh (Photograph: Rahul Dev)

4 Conclusion

Affect and emotion have been implied in the circulation of Dalit visuality to acquire visibility in public sphere in their larger struggle to seek recognition and dignity in the society. I argue that, by creating such a complex visual culture, Dalit communities attempt to garner a kind of cultural capital which was reserved for the upper castes elites, and develop both a knowledge system as well as a complex iconography to represent inspiring leaders and role models, all of which can be harnessed for social justice that enshrined in Ambedkar's message of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Dalit visual culture is based on Ambedkar's legacy and more forcefully spelled out in Bahujan ideology (literally meaning people's majority), which goes entirely against the modernity which is refracted through pre-existing or "traditional modalities" (Freitag 2003: 370).

By isolating "traditional modalities", Sandria Freitag highlights that the processes through which the Indian society learned to respond to construct visual narratives to make sense of their world (*ibid.*: 370). And the most prominent and obvious examples she provides come from religious exercises – for example the movement from god-figure to god-figure or illustration to illustration in Hindu and Jain temples (*ibid.*: 370). If one understands affect to be seizing Dalits, because it functions as the corporeal instantiation of recognition or bear characteristics of approval in a society, then it can also possibly work in a negative way. Dalit could indeed be entrapped in the process of the 'Darsan effect' slipping away from the power of reasoning that is in fact enshrined in such iconic images and symbols.⁹

Now, it is apt to take a cue from the work of the art historian, Ernst Gombrich, who problematizes the uses of symbolism to uphold the name of reason especially during the French Revolution (Gombrich 1979: 190, Landes 2001). He clarifies this problem through an anecdote from the context of the French Revolution, and then illustrates how 'the religion of reason' was bolstered with the corpus of symbolism: he identifies a person called Salaville, who was quite bewildered and particularly outraged by the fact that an opera singer in Notre Dame had represented Reason (e.g. in the popular image of French Liberty). Gombrich further remarks about Salaville,

⁹ Similarly, Richard Davis (2012: 1–5) focuses on Hindu images which he argues are mass-produced and are widely consumed by Hindus in their households as well as they are widespread in many other public sites, which according to him, these reproductions of gods and goddesses democratized the idea of worship in India, beyond the temples and shrines.

"But *his* real fear is that the old religion will merely be exchanged for a new with these temples of Reason; and when every Virtue will have its own temple, people will be content to worship rather than to practice virtue" (Gombrich 1979: 190, emphasis mine).

In this regard, I believe that affect can bind people to people, body to body but it cannot instruct or educate people broadly about virtues such as those enshrined in the iconic images. Rather, it can merely advance the proliferation of personality cults (or demagogues) exercising their cultural agendas in the fraught idea of 'space' congealed in the socio-cultural fabric of India (often called Indianness) with so many complexities; where one kind of iconicity (image) is competing or, perhaps, merging with seismic ideology.

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