

GEET GA RAHE HAI AAJ HUM ...⁴⁸

Exploring songs of protest and hope in the Women's Movement(s) in India

Sakhi Nitin Anita
Gender Studies
PhD Candidate

ABSTRACT

Music has been an essential component of people's movements towards social transformation. In the West, antiracist and class struggles often inspired poetry and music which were used to communicate revolutionary ideas to the larger public and generate a political or social consciousness favourable to the ideologies of the movements. As a feminist scholar from India, I locate my interest in tracing the history of songs and poetry – of protest, of change, of invocation, of imagination, and of hope – that were sung and performed in the contemporary women's movement(s) that flourished from the 1970s in India. What I call the 'women's movement(s)' here are the myriad, multifaceted and multi-layered voices and strands of feminist political engagement in India that came together at particular moments towards a common goal, while at times also parted ways and spoke to each other from standpoints of difference. In tracing the genealogy and context of the songs that were composed, sung, performed, and re-written during these political engagements, I also hope to trace the 'flow' of the women's movement(s) – or perhaps certain aspects of it – and map the emergence and shifts of a feminist discourse in India as expressed through the songs and poetry it generated. What were the issues highlighted in these songs? What were the metaphors they expressed, and why were they relevant in the liberatory politics espoused by those who sang them? How did they change and evolve over time, and do their changes reflect the shifts in the discourse of the movement as well? These are some of the questions I shall explore in the paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sakhi Nitin Anita is a PhD student at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS. As a feminist researcher, she is interested in exploring and expanding the connections between gender, education, development, and feminist praxis. She is also passionate about feminist

⁴⁸ The first line of a popular song during the student movements of the 1970s in India. See Number 3 in List of Songs. Translates to: "Today, we sing a song..."

epistemologies, endeavouring to ‘engender’ knowledge from a space of creative tension with academia. Beyond her PhD, Sakhi hopes to reimagine the classroom beyond its four walls, as a transformative space which empowers young people to critically examine and creatively challenge the systems of oppression we live in and which live within us.

KEYWORDS:

social movements, women’s movements, feminism, protest music, India

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to Prof Ilina Sen, who read it first in 2015, during a transformative course she taught on Women’s Writings in India.

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INTRODUCTION: A STORY OF TWO SONGS

Growing up, my life was quite confusing. It was almost as if I inhabited two very distinct and often contradictory universes. One universe was that of my grandparents, with whom I spent the day while my parents were at work. At my grandparents', life was simple. I had a daily routine of school, homework, and TV. Every evening, my grandparents performed a worship ritual (*puja*) and lit a small oil-lamp in front of a shrine dedicated to their – for that time, *our* – Hindu gods. One of the Sanskrit prayers that my grandmother taught me to recite during this *puja* was:

शुभं करोति कल्याणं आरोग्यं धनसंपदा शत्रुबुद्धि-विनाशाय दीपज्योती नमोऽस्तुते	<i>Shubham karoti kalyanam, arogyam dhana sampada, Shatru buddhi vinashayam, deepa jyoti namostute.</i>
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A rough translation of this would be, 'I pray to the divine light which brings prosperity, good health and well-being, and removes malice and evil thoughts.'⁴⁹ In this clunky English translation, the prayer feels strange, alienated from its familiarity and ubiquity in most Hindu Brahman households as the first prayer taught to children. And yet, my grandparents never explained its meaning to me, nor do I remember asking. It was just something we all did – a daily ritual offering of piety to God, along with lighting the lamp and incense and letting its fragrance waft through the house. It was, in its own way, quite fun.

And then there were the songs I learnt in my other universe. Every evening, after leaving from work, my parents would pick me up and bring me back to their home. The journey from my grandparents' home to my parents', on my dad's scooter, felt like traversing through a wormhole which would transport me into another universe altogether. This was

⁴⁹ This and all following translations of non-English songs and poetry are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

my parents' world – a world of Ideas and Ideals; a world that intrigued me, made me wonder, and to a certain extent, a world that discomfited me as well.

My parents worked in a nonprofit organization, Abhivyakti,⁵⁰ which they had founded together four years before I was born. It was their first offspring. Abhivyakti was a defining part of my life in this universe, and my most memorable associations with it are the workshops, trainings, and protests I attended with my parents. Sitting on my mother's lap, I learned to sing songs in Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi, with lyrics such as "*Le mashalein chal padein hai log mere gaon ke...*"⁵¹ (Bearing torches, the people of my village are on the move) and "*Girenge zulm ke mahal, banenge fir navin ghar*"⁵² (The palaces of oppression will fall one day, and new homesteads will take their place).

The lyrical simplicity of the songs made it easy to imagine and infuse meaning into their metaphors – the arrogant opulence of the "*zulm ke mahal*" (the palaces of oppression), the revolutionary light of the "*mashalein*" (torches), and the promise of a brave new world evoked by "*Phool hum naye khilaenge, taazgi ko dhundte hue*"⁵³ (We'll bloom new flowers, heralding a fresh start). These metaphors, and the imagery they evoked, encouraged me to inquire into the deeper meaning of the songs.

In their subtle way, these songs opened a Pandora's box of questions about the world with which other aspects of my life never bothered to engage. Where I was taught to respect and adhere to normative ways of being and doing, these songs invited me to question and challenge them. In the late 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, as India, pushed towards a neoliberal economic agenda, the following verse portrayed a very different picture of the economy:

⁵⁰ Abhivyakti Media for Development is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation based in Nashik, India. It has been active for over 30 years on issues related to alternative and community media, education, governance, and development. For more information, see www.abhivyakti.org.in

⁵¹ *Le mashalein chal padein hai*. Hindi. Composed by Vallisingh Cheema

⁵² *Tu zinda hai toh zindagi ki jeet par yakin kar*. Hindi. Composed by Shankar Shailendra

⁵³ *Geet ga rahe hai aaj hum*. Hindi. Composed and sung by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini

वर्ल्ड बैंक के द्वार पर खड़ा था एक इन्सान हमने पूछा नाम तो बोला मैं हूँ हिंदुस्तान कटोरा लिये खड़ा था... ⁵⁴	<i>World Bank ke dwar par</i> <i>Khada tha ek insaan</i> <i>Humne poocha naam to bola</i> <i>Main hun Hindustan</i> <i>Katora liye khada tha...</i>	There was a man standing on the steps of the World Bank When asked his name, he said, "I am Hindustan." He was carrying a begging bowl... ⁵⁵
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It is from an engagement with such songs during my childhood that I draw inspiration for this paper. As my academic focus is gender studies, I aim to explore the songs and poetry – of protest, of change, of invocation, of imagination, and of hope – that were sung and performed in the contemporary women’s movement(s) that flourished from the 1970s in India. What I call the ‘women’s movement(s)’ here are the myriad, multifaceted and multi-layered voices and strands of feminist political engagement in India that came together at particular moments towards a common goal, while at times also parted ways and spoke to each other from standpoints of difference.

I imagine the movement(s) as a river, a continuous flow that did not have a single origin source but rather grew out of the intermixing of various ‘tributaries’; a flowing that took new directions as required; which at certain places broke into smaller streams that made fertile long-parched lands. The songs, I imagine, are like the fish in this river – flowing in and out of different currents, forming ‘schools’ at certain locations but swimming to other parts as well, responding to the ‘flow’ of the waters.

The fluidity of the movement(s), as well as the songs within them, do not allow for ‘signposting’ the music to specific historical periods in the women’s movement(s). Nor can they be assigned to particular groups as they were popularised by different groups at different times. Rather, I hope to trace the ‘flow’ of the women’s movement(s) – or perhaps certain aspects of it – and map the emergence and shifts of a feminist discourse in India as

⁵⁴ *Jageera sara rara*. Hindi. Composed and sung by the Disha Sanskritik Manch, Haryana

⁵⁵ This and further songs shall be presented in such a format: Lyrics in *Devanagari* (script for Hindi and Marathi) and English, followed by my own translation into English. More details about the song given in endnotes.

expressed through the songs and poetry it generated. What were the issues highlighted in these songs? What were the metaphors they expressed, and how and why were they relevant in the liberatory politics espoused by those who sung them? How did they change and evolve over time, and do their changes reflect the shifts in the discourse of the movement as well? These are some of the questions I shall endeavour to explore in the paper.

I acknowledge a limitation of my location, which is language. The songs I heard growing up were in Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi, and it is these songs I shall be studying in this paper. Here I also acknowledge another limitation – my caste location as a Brahman (privileged caste) which limited my exposure to Ambedkarite music. The music of the Ambedkarite movement and its music was an integral part of anticaste articulations and the Dalit⁵⁶ movement, which played a distinct historical role, as Sharmila Rege argues, in the emergence of a ‘Dalit counterpublic’ (Rege 2009). My lack of knowledge of these songs limits me from engaging with them critically, yet I will attempt to locate them within Dalit feminist voices that arose as a discursive challenge to the feminist ‘mainstream’ in India. Finally, I want to reemphasise that it is extremely difficult to put certain songs into fixed categories as they were sung, in different contexts, by various groups.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: SING A SONG OF REVOLUTION

Music has been an essential component of many movements for social transformation. R. Serge Denisoff (1969) has explored in depth the role of ‘propaganda’ songs, used “to communicate an idea, a concept, or a total ideology to the listener” and to generate a “political or social consciousness favourable to the position of the movement.” (229). The Left movement has used such songs performed in the folk idiom as a “means of creating class consciousness” (ibid.) in the people. Antiracist movements too were enriched by ‘Negro folk music’, as it was called by Lawrence Gellert, a white music collector who documented and collected songs of the Black protest tradition from the 1920s to 1940s (Garabedian 2005). Gellert (1969) saw Black folk music as propaganda, stating that he “wasn’t

⁵⁶ Dalit’, meaning ‘downtrodden’, is a self-referential term of identification and belonging as well as political activism, used by members of the formerly ‘untouchable’ castes in India.

interested in just music for its own sake, but rather as a weapon in the service of Black freedom.” (quoted in Garabedian 2005, 182)

In India, political music can trace a historical lineage to the Bhakti tradition, which arose in different parts of South Asia during the sixth century (Bhagwat 1995). The Bhakti movement established a ‘philosophy of devotion’ through which anyone regardless of their social positioning could experience a direct connection to god, and which also challenged the established hegemonic structure and ideology of religion at that time. Vidyut Bhagwat has written about women saints from the 13th to the 18th century AD who used the oral medium of devotional songs (such as *ovi* and *abhang* in Maharashtra) as an “imminent critique of patriarchal oppression” (ibid., 25). Sharmila Rege also locates a caste critique in songs which were expressed by women in the ‘private sphere’, such as the *ovi* (song of the grinding stone) and *palna* (song of the cradle) which adopted “overtly political themes of a caste society.” (Rege 2008, 17).

Music was a rallying force in the nationalist movement for independence from colonial rule. The nationalist movement produced much poetry and music that furthered its rhetoric of patriotic devotion to the imagined ‘motherland’. We have examples of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s ‘*Vande mataram*’ (I salute thee, mother) and VD Savarkar’s “*Ne majasi ne parat matrubhumila, sagara pran talmalala*” (Take me back to my motherland, oh ocean, I pine for her) evoking anguished sentiments for the imagined nation as a mother who needed to be saved from the clutches of ‘outsiders’. While the poetry of the nationalist movement is a separate area of inquiry, beyond the scope of this paper, it offers an insight into the legacy of music and its enduring connection to social and political movements.

PART I: WE SHALL OVERCOME

Denisoff, in his analysis of ‘propaganda’ songs—songs of protest and persuasion—presents an overview of their functions within a social movement. These are six: 1. To arouse and solicit support for a cause, 2. To reinforce the value system of the individuals within the movement, 3. To create cohesion and solidarity, 4. To recruit individuals to join the movement, 5. To propose solutions and means of achieving a desired goal, and finally, 6. To

draw attention to a problem situation or discontent, generally by invoking the sentiments of the people. (Denisoff 1968, 229). These functions, he further states, are achieved by the employment of two distinct types of propaganda songs – magnetic songs and rhetorical songs. Rhetorical songs use a provocative and polemic style to describe a particular social condition and appeal to people’s emotions. They often pose a challenge to the existing institutional structures but do not propose any call for action or “offer any ideological or organisational solutions, such as affiliating with a particular movement.” (ibid., 231). Magnetic songs, on the other hand, appeal to the audience with a view to convert them into a particular ideology or to follow a movement. In the Left movements, they are operationalised to create a political consciousness of class. Denisoff states further that:

The magnetic song contains the three elements of class consciousness: awareness of class position, differentiation from others as indicated in the content of the songs, and finally, the desire or willingness to join a movement as suggested in the lyrics of the propaganda song. (ibid.)

While Denisoff presents an interesting framework for analysing songs from a functional perspective, his analysis is limited to the context of leftist folk songs from the United States. Deploying this frame to study songs of protest in India, I find that the distinction between magnetic and rhetorical songs is not quite as fixed. The closest examples of rhetorical songs are Adam Gondvi’s ‘*Sau me sattar aadmi*’ and Sahir Ludhyanvi’s ‘*Woh subah kabhi to ayegi*’. They use powerful and provocative metaphors to conjure a picture of India that has failed to live up to the promise of independence. It is a nation fraught with inequality, where human dignity is trampled upon daily. Is such a country truly free?

<p>सौ में सत्तर आदमी फिलहाल जब नाशाद है दिल पे रखकर हाथ कहिये देश क्या आजाद है? कोठियों से मुल्क के मेयार को मत आंकिये असली हिंदुस्तान तो फुटपाथ पर आबाद है⁵⁷</p>	<p><i>Sau mein sattar aadmi Filhal jab nashad hain Dil pe rakh kar hath kahiye Desh kya aazad hai? Kothiyon se mulk ki Mayyar ko mat aankiye Asli Hindustan to Footpath par aabad hai.</i></p>	<p>When seventy of every hundred Indians are troubled Can you say from your heart that our country is free? Do not measure the progress of this nation by its palaces, You will find the real ‘Hindustan’ living on the sidewalks.</p>
<p>माना कि अभी तैरे मेरे अरमानो की कीमत कुछ भी नहीं मिट्टी का भी है कुछ मोल मगर इन्सानों की कीमत कुछ भी नहीं इन्सानों की इज्जत जब झूठे सिक्कों में न तोली जायेगी वो सुबह कभी तो आयेगी।⁵⁸</p>	<p><i>Mana ki abhi tere mere Armaanon ki keemat kuch bhi nahi Mitti ka bhi hai kuch mol magar Insaanon ki keemat kuch bhi nahi Insaanon ki izzat jab jhoote Sikkon mein na toli jayegi Woh subah kabhi to aayegi...</i></p>	<p>The world may not value your dreams, or mine In this world, where even dirt has value But people do not, There will come a dawn, someday When people’s dignity is not measured In false coin.</p>

I call these songs rhetorical because they do not address solutions or ideological commitments that need to be made in order to transform the status quo. The appeal to an emergence of a ‘new dawn’, while provocative, does not discuss the means of achieving it. In contrast, songs popularised by socialist groups such as the Rashtriya Seva Dal in the 1970s,

⁵⁷ *Sau me sattar aadmi*. Hindi. Composed by Adam Gondvi

⁵⁸ *Woh subah kabhi to ayegi*. Hindi. Composed by Sahir Ludhyanvi

heavily emphasize ‘*sangharsh*’ or revolutionary struggle as the only means to reach the desired goal:

इसलिए राह संघर्ष की हम चुनें ज़िन्दगी आँसुओं से नहाई न हो ⁵⁹	<i>Isliye raah sangharsh ki hum chune Zindagi asuon se nahai na ho</i>	We choose this path of resistance so that Our lives will not be drenched in tears
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The magnetic appeal of these songs lies in their rousing call to join the movement, to come together and harness the power of solidarity and overthrow the prevailing systems of oppression. However, challenging Denisoff’s (1968) categorisation, these songs also encompass rhetorical elements, especially in their provocative attempts to arouse empathy for marginalised and powerless groups. The revolutionary songs of this time are rooted in the experiences and struggles of the marginalised – poor peasants, workers, landless labourers, oppressed castes, and tribal people – and yet they reflect a spirit of buoyancy, a hope that with this new political consciousness, the revolution will not be too far behind:

रुके न जो, झुके न जो, दबे न जो, मिटे न जो, हम वो इन्कलाब है जुल्म का जवाब है हर शहीद, हर गरीब का हम ही तो ख्वाब है! ⁶⁰	<i>Ruke na jo, jhuke na jo, dabe na jo, mite na jo, Hum woh inqalab hai, zulm ka jawab hai, Har shahid, har gareeb ka hum hi to khwab hai!</i>	We are the revolution that will not stop, not cease, not bow down, Not be trampled upon or destroyed
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⁵⁹ *Isliye raah sangharsh ki hum chune*. Hindi. Composed during the Narmada Bachav Andolan

⁶⁰ *Ruke na jo, jhuke na jo*. Hindi. Composed during the Bihar Sampurna Kranti Revolution

		We are the hope of the poor, the martyrs!
हमारे कारवां को मंजिलों का इन्तज़ार है, यह आंधियों, ये बिजलियों की पीठ पर सवार है, तू आ कदम मिला के चल, चलेंगे एकसाथ हम अगर कहीं है स्वर्ग तो उतार ला ज़मीन पर! तू ज़िन्दा है तो ज़िन्दगी की जीत में यकीन कर! ⁶¹	<i>Humare caravan ko manzilon ka intezaar hai Yeh andhiyon yeh bijliyon ki peeth par sawar hai Tu aa kadam mila ke chal, challenge ek saath hum Agar kahin hai swarg to utar la zameen par Tu zinda hai to zindagi ki jeet par yakeen kar!</i>	Our journey is nearing its destination Riding this wave, this hurricane of revolution Come join us, we'll walk hand-in-hand And if there is a heaven somewhere, We will bring it down upon the earth. You are alive, so believe in life's victory!

PART II: BREAKING THE SHACKLES

The songs above were popularised by several student uprisings and youth movements or 'chalval' that were emerging in India in the 1970s. These movements were inspired by leftist

⁶¹ *Tu zinda hai toh zindagi ki jeet par yakin kar.* Hindi. Composed by Shankar Shailendra

ideology, but they were also distancing themselves from traditional Marxism. Vidyut Bhagwat (1995) recounts her experiences of participating in the youth movements:

The young radicals from all quarters were throwing off the shackles of dogmatic versions of Marxism, democratic socialism, and for that matter even liberalism. They were adopting new conceptual frameworks and experimenting with new strategies of action. Problems of the various oppressed sections of the Indian society – the tribals, cultural and religious minorities, slum-dwellers, landless labourers, the non-organised sections of the toiling masses, etc – were highlighted and discussed in depth. (24)

It is out of this space of dissent and dialogue that the first women's groups emerged in cities, comprising mainly of middle-class, educated women (Kumar 1989). In Maharashtra, such autonomous groups began to form in Mumbai and Pune and shared an umbilical (even if reluctant) bond with leftist and socialist groups. The context for their emergence, as articulated by Indu Agnihorti and Veena Mazumdar (1995), was the growing disenchantment with the post-Independent state, which had failed in the provision of rights postulated by the Constitution. Women in these groups demanding socioeconomic and political mobility felt constricted by the “long-standing patriarchal social hierarchy” (ibid., 1869) of the Indian state.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Mathura rape case became the “rallying point” (ibid., 1870) for the women's movement and gave it visibility. Women's groups organized protests and campaigns against gender-based violence and demanded amendments to the law. Other forms of violence were also highlighted: violence in the personal sphere such as dowry, wife-battering and sex-selective abortion; state-sponsored violation of women's bodies through population policies, forced sterilizations and unsafe drug trials; political violence wherein women's bodies became battlegrounds for religious and communal conflicts; and government complicity in the atrocities done to women by the armed forces in the conflict-ridden AFSPA areas (McDuié-Ra 2012).

The women's movement also invoked the second-wave feminist slogan of ‘the personal is political’ in its analysis of structural roots of women's oppression and violation. This

analysis got shaped into the songs which appealed to women to ‘break the prisons’ of patriarchy, to free themselves from the bonds of domesticity and servitude that had shackled them for centuries:

<p>इरादे कर बुलंद अब रहना शुरू करती तो अच्छा था। तू सहना छोड़ कर कहना शुरू करती तो अच्छा था। सदा औरों को खुश रखना बहुत ही खूब है लेकिन खुशी थोड़ी तू अपने को भी दे पाती तो अच्छा था।⁶²</p>	<p><i>Irade kar buland ab rehna shuru karti toh accha tha Tu sehna chhod kar kehna shuru karti toh accha tha Sada auron ko khush rakhna bahut hi khoob hai lekin Khushi thodi tu apne ko bhi de pati toh accha tha.</i>⁶³</p>	<p>I wish you could strengthen your resolves And instead of suffering silently, speak out It is noble to nurture another’s happiness, but I wish you could keep some happiness for yourself too.</p>
<p>दरिया की कसम मौजों की कसम यह ताना बना बदलेगा तू खुद को बदल तू खुद को बदल तब ही तो जमाना बदलेगा⁶⁴</p>	<p><i>Dariya ki kasam, maujon ki kasam Ye taana –baana badalega Tu khud ko badal, tu khud ko badal, Tab hi to zamana badlega</i></p>	<p>The seas promise, the waves promise This warp and weft of our lives will change But you need to change yourself Only that will change the world.</p>
<p>या देशाच्या बायांना आया बहिणींना सांगाया जायचं हाय गं एकी करून आणि लढा पुकारून ह्यो तुरुंग फोडायचा हाय गं⁶⁵</p>	<p><i>Ya deshanchya bayanna aya bahininna sangaya jayache hai ga Eki karun ani ladha pukarun ho turunga fodayache hai ga</i></p>	<p>We appeal to all women – sisters, mothers, daughters of this country – Let’s unite and raise our voices – to break the prisons confining us!</p>

⁶² *Irade kar buland*. Urdu. Composed by the Pakistan Women’s Movement. Adopted into Hindi by Kamla Bhasin

⁶³ This song is based on an Urdu *ghazal* that was initially sung in the Pakistani women’s movement. It was rewritten for the Indian women’s movement by Kamala Bhasin

⁶⁴ *Dariya ki kasam*. Hindi. Composed for the Stree Utsav, 1981

⁶⁵ *Ya deshanchya bayanna*. Marathi. Composed by Madhav Chavan

Many songs also had an uplifting spirit, evoking a picture of women who had already broken their shackles and were joining the movement. It beckoned to the possibility of women determining life on their own terms, as well as the role they could play in effecting a larger change in society:

<p>तोड़ तोड़ के बंधनों को देखो बहने आयी हैं ओ देखो लोगों, देखो बहने आयी हैं आएगी, जुल्म मिटाएंगी, वह तो नया ज़माना लाएंगी⁶⁶ तारीकी को तोड़ेंगी वह खामोशी को तोड़ेंगी हाँ मेरी बहने अब दर को पीछे छोड़ेंगी निडर, आज़ाद हो जाएंगी, वह तो नया ज़माना लाएंगी</p>	<p><i>Tod tod ke bandhano ko dekho behne aayi hai O dekho logo, dekho behene aayi hai Ayegi, zurm mitaegi, woh toh naya zamana layegi... Tariki ko todengi woh khamoshi ko todengi Haan meri behne ab dar ko peeche chhodengi Nidar, azad ho jayengi, woh toh naya zamana layegi...</i></p>	<p>Look, our sisters have come, breaking their fetters Look everyone, our sisters have come They're here, now they will end all injustice And herald a new world They'll blot out darkness, they'll smother silence Yes, my sisters will cast away their fear Fearless and free, they will herald a new world!</p>
<p>पर लगा लिए है हमने अब पिंजरो में कौन बैटेगा? जब तोड़ दी है जंजीरें तोह कामयाब हो जायेंगे</p>	<p><i>Par laga liye hai humne Ab pinjaron mein kaun baithega? Jab tod di hai zanjeerein Toh kamyaab ho jayenge Zara sun lo!</i></p>	<p>Now that we have wings Why should we stay in cages anymore? Now that we have broken our chains We are certain of victory Do you hear us?</p>

⁶⁶ *Tod tod ke bandhano ko*. Hindi. Composed by Kamla Bhasin

जरा सुन लो! ⁶⁷		
बदलत आहे जग हे सारे नवा जमाना घडे ग बदल जागा सांग तू ही आता टाक एक पाऊल पुढे ग! ⁶⁸	<i>Badlat aahe jag he saare nava zamana ghade ga Badal jaga sanga tu hi aata tak ek paul pudhe ga...</i>	The world is a-changing, a new milieu takes shape Women, take a step forward, and change with the world...

PART III: SPEAKING OUT

As the movement progressed, specific issues were picked up, which found expression in songs as well as street-plays performed by *kalapathaks* (troupes of folk artistes-activists) on gender and women's rights. The 'Stree Mukti Sanghatna' (SMS) was a leading group in Maharashtra to launch various *kalapathaks* that took up questions of discrimination and violence, sex-selective abortion, and dowry to various corners of the state through the mediums of plays and songs. In 1983, the SMS wrote '*Mulagi zali ho!*'⁶⁹ (A girl is born!), a musical satire about the life of a woman in a patriarchal society. It was a huge success and has more than 3000 performances to date.

⁶⁷ *Par laga liye hai humne*. Hindi. Composed by Kamla Bhasin

⁶⁸ *Badlat aahe jag he saare*. Marathi. Composed by Yashwant Lokhande

⁶⁹ See <http://streemuktisanghatana.org/programs/cultural-troupe/> for more details

One of the SMS' songs, 'Hunda nako ga bai' (I don't want a dowry, dear), part of another musical by the same name, is a sharp satire on the issue of dowry. By detailing the 'gifts' demanded by the groom's family upon marriage, it reveals that despite a strong and punitive anti-dowry law in India, the custom of demanding dowry persists in various subtle and not-so-subtle ways, taking on a more material manifestation in an increasingly neoliberal and consumerist society:

<p>हुंडा नको ग बाई, मला हुंडा नको ग बाई... माझ्या मुलाचा रुबाव मोठा, नाही पैश्यांचा आम्हा तोटा करा थाटात साखरपुडा, ठेवा जावयाचा मान तेवढा द्या अंगठी शर्ट-पीस बाई, पण मला हुंडा नको ग बाई... ... द्या स्टीलच्या भांड्यांचा सेट, सोफा सेट आणि कपाट द्या फ्रिज किंवा कुकर बाई, पण मला हुंडा नको ग बाई... (हिला सगळंच हवं ग बाई, पण हुंडा नको ग बाई!)⁷⁰</p>	<p><i>Hunda nako ga bai, mala hunda nako ga bai Mazhya mulacha rubab motha, nahi paishyan amha tota Kara thatat sakharpuda, theva javayacha maan tevhada Dya angthi, shirt-piece bai, pan mala hunda nako ga bai ... Dya steelchya bhandyan cha set, sofa set ani kapaat Dya fridge kinva cooker bai, pan mala hunda nako ga bai (Hila saglach hava ga bai, pan hunda nako ga bai !)</i></p>	<p>I don't want any dowry, dear... My son is very virtuous; we have more than enough money I only expect a lavish engagement ceremony And for my son a gold ring, new clothes and other gifts But no dowry, of course! ... I want steel utensils, a sofa-set and cupboard, A refrigerator or rice cooker will also do, but I'm not asking for a dowry! (She wants everything</p>
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⁷⁰ *Hunda nako ga bai*. Marathi. Composed by the Stree Mukti Sanghatna

		but a 'dowry'!)
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Another issue connected to women's marital lives was their husbands' alcohol addiction. Men's alcoholism is connected to increased domestic violence and intimate partner violence. A group engaged in anti-alcohol campaigning in Shahada, Maharashtra wrote the song '*Bai mazya kachachya barnit*' (The Woman in My Bottle), imagining alcohol as the '*savat*' (mistress) who had swayed the husband and who needed to be kicked out of the house.

बाई माझ्या काचंच्या बरणीत बाईला वतली गल्लासात ग बाईला लाविली तोंडाला ग ... बाईने इस्कोट ग केला, इस्कोट ग केला अशी बाई लागली कीड सौंसारा ग बाई लागली कीड सौंसारा ⁷¹	<i>Bai mazhya kachachya barnit, Bai la vatali gallasat Bai la lavili tondala ga ... Bai ne iskot ga kela, iskot ga kela Ashi bai lagali keed saunsara ga bai lagali keed saunsara</i>	This Woman is in my glass bottle He pours Woman into the glass He puts Woman to his lips ... Woman has burned my house down This Woman is an infestation in my marriage...
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The song uses an interesting metaphor of the ‘mistress’ who lures a woman’s husband away, makes him spend all his money on her, and brings discord into the conjugal life. This ‘bad’ woman needs not only to be kicked out but also killed and buried. While playing on the patriarchal binary of the wife/mistress as the ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ woman, the song nevertheless managed to become quite popular and resonated with many rural women suffering due to their husband’s addictions.

In the 1990s, as the movement space began to be claimed by NGOs and other development bodies, the pitch of the songs too underwent some changes. In contrast to the broad, magnetic appeals of ‘changing the world’ and ‘creating a new tomorrow’, the songs in the 1990s talk about concrete, achievable goals for women. Included in these is the political representation of women, which was picked up by women’s rights groups with great fervour after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 that allotted a quota of 33% seats in local governance bodies to women. Songs about women’s representation in governance ranged from the rhetorical ‘*Vichara aaplya manala*’ to the magnetic ‘*Aata vidhansabhet jayacha*’:

⁷¹ *Bai mazhya kachachya barnit*. Marathi. Composed by the Shahada Andolan

<p>विचारा आपल्या मनाला – गावाच्या पाण्यावर बाईचा अधिकार किती? गावाच्या संपत्तीत बाईचा वाटा किती? पंच बाई आल्या म्हणून अविश्वास ठराव किती? ३३% आरक्षण असल्यामुळे पुरुष सत्ताधान्यांची ओरड किती?¹²</p>	<p><i>Vichara aaplya manala</i> <i>Gavachya panyavar</i> <i>baicha adhikar kiti?</i> <i>Gavachya sampattit</i> <i>baicha vata kiti?</i> <i>Vichara aaplya manala</i> <i>Panch bai aalya mhanun</i> <i>avishvas tharav kiti?</i> <i>Tehtees take arakshan</i> <i>aalyamule</i> <i>Purush sattadharyachi</i> <i>orad kiti?</i></p>	<p>Ask yourself – How many women can claim a right To the village water sources? What is their share in the village assets? Ask yourself – How many ‘No Confidence motions’ are passed when A woman claims the elected chair? How much anger and opposition from men threatened by the 33% reservation for women?</p>
<p>आता विधानसभेत जायचं अन लोकसभेतही जायचं सत्तेत सामील होऊन आता राज्य करायला शिकायचं!¹³</p>	<p><i>Ata vidhansabhet jayacha</i> <i>an loksabhet hi jayacha</i> <i>Sattet samil houni ata</i> <i>raja karayla shikaycha !</i></p>	<p>Now our march is towards the parliament and state assemblies We are getting our share in the power And we shall learn how to govern!</p>

PART IV: DIFFERENT WOMEN

¹² *Vichara aaplya manala*. Marathi. Composed by the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan

¹³ *Ata vidhansabhet jayacha*. Marathi. Composed by Jyoti Mhapsekar

Another shift in the women’s movement during the 1990s was marked by the emergence of the voices of Dalit women that challenged the inherent Brahmanism of the autonomous women’s movement. It poised itself against what Sharmila Rege (1998) describes as the “universalization of what was, in reality, the middle class, upper-caste women’s experience.” (43). The women’s movement so far had relied upon personal experience, especially centred on sexuality, as the epistemological foundation of its anti-patriarchy stand. In doing this, it failed to pursue a deeper analysis of patriarchy as being located in and expressed through other intersecting identities – specifically through caste. Thus, Rege concludes, a “feminist politics centring on the women of the most marginalized communities could not emerge.” (ibid.). In the 1990s, certain songs reflect the emerging voices and awakening consciousness of women who spoke from locations of difference:

रेशमाच्या साड्या नेसून बंगल्यात तुम्ही राहणार तुम्हाला दुखं कसं कळणार? ¹⁴	<i>Reshmachya sadya nesun banglyat tumhi rahnar, Tumhala dukkha kasa kalnar?</i>	You wear silk sarees and stay in palatial homes What do you know of sorrow?
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These songs may be said to come from what Rege (1998) articulates as the ‘Dalit standpoint’. The songs are similar in their expression to Black women’s songs of protest (Sharp 1992), which addressed ‘sympathetic’ White women:

They come up to a miner’s wife, say “I know how you feel”
 These dirty, rich aristocrats who never missed a meal
 They never spent a lonely night, or heard their children cry
 Or had to tell their children why daddy had to die
 (Sarah Gunnings, ‘Hello, Coal Miner’)

The miners’ songs of protest remind me of another powerful and provocative expression of caste consciousness in the song ‘*Hadachi kada*’:

¹⁴ *Reshmachya sadya nesun*. Marathi. Composer not known

कागद आम्ही बनवला, त्यावर तू धर्मग्रंथ लिवला विणली फुलांची परडी, अन देव तू पुजला अस्पृश्यांची परडी वापरून देव नाय बाटला का? हो दादा रं... तवा तू कसं इचारलं नाय की आमची जात कंची हाय नी आमचा धर्म कंचा हाय! ⁷⁵	<i>Kagad amhi banavla, tyavar tu dharmagrath livla Vinli phulanchi pardi, an dev tu pujala Dada, dev tu pujala Asprushyanchi pardi vaaprun dev nay baatla ka? Ho dada ra... Tava tu kasa icharla nay, Ki amchi jaat kanchi hai Ni amcha dharm kancha hai?</i>	Oh, big brother ... Why did you not care about our caste, our religion When we did all your work? We made the paper; you wrote your scriptures on it We wove flower- baskets; you used them in your worship Tell us, big brother How was God not polluted by the baskets we wove?
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This song offers a sharp critique of the reality of caste domination that pervades the very core of Indian society. It exposes the paradox of the purity/pollution rhetoric that undergirds the hegemonic system of caste, which accords the Brahmans and other ‘upper’ castes power and legitimacy through the notion of religious purity, while at the same time appropriating the labour of the ‘polluted’ castes in the maintenance this supposed ‘purity’ of the upper castes.

⁷⁵ *Hadachi kada*. Original song composed by Cherabanda Raju. Translated into Marathi by Avhan Natya Manch

CONCLUSION: THIS SONG HAS NO END

These songs – of which I have managed to capture only a few here – are a rich legacy of counterhegemonic thought, written in a simple, alliterative but provocative style; a way to appeal to a mass audience. They constitute a treasure-trove of memories – They do not only evoke nostalgia but also are what Rege (2008, 20) terms “critical memory markers” which enable us to hold on to the energy and vibrancy generated in the new social movements in India. Perhaps, these songs also help to sustain our politics (and preserve our sanity!) in a political climate that is becoming increasingly antithetical to the goals of equality, freedom, and social justice.

These songs – of protest, largely, but also of celebration and of hope – are part of an oral tradition of music in India. They have not been recorded, except by certain NGOs or activist groups which have recorded them in cassettes and CDs (although not so much on the internet) and compiled in small booklets. In the contemporary milieu, they appear to fade out as the spaces of dissent are snuffed into nothingness. Not only are they fading, but they are actively being strangled into silence by an openly paranoid and fascist regime occupying the central government. Folk-troupes or *shahirs* (folk-singers) who use these songs in their performances, such as the Kabir Kala Manch – a cultural troupe espousing Dalit and working-class affiliations – are arrested under the draconian UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) for having ‘Naxalite’ connections.⁷⁶

In such a bleak scenario, it makes me wonder if the messages in most of these songs – of unity, solidarity, and hope that a new, better world is possible – have lost their punch. Is such a world ever possible? Or does it only exist in dreams and empty rhetoric? But perhaps, for our particular milieu, in our very fraught, fragile, reaching-the-edge-of-hope world, the appeals made by the songs are more relevant than ever. They require an urgent revisiting, an engagement to reinvigorate and reimagine their invocations of solidarity and hope. I conclude this paper with a final song – a love-ballad for and about women, and what this coming-together in the movement(s) has meant for us:

⁷⁶ See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/mockery-being-made-of-right-to-privacy/article29847089.ece> for more details

<p>तुम्हारा साथ मिलने से एहसास-ए-कुव्वत आया है नयी दुनिया बनाने का जूनून फिर हम पे छाया है कुछ तनहा-तनहा मैं थी कुछ तन्हाई तुम में थी दोनों में थी लाचारी, दोनों थी थक के हरी इजहारे राज करने से घुटन को कुछ घटाया है हम-ख्याल है जैम हम-तुम हमसफ़र भी बन जायें चाहे जैसे हो मौसम इक दूजे को अपनायें इन्ही सपनों के रंगों ने हमें फिर गुदगुदाया है ¹⁷</p>	<p><i>Tumhara saath milne se, ehsaas -e -kuvvat aaya hai Nayi duniya banane ka, junoon phir hum pe chhaya hai. Kuch tanha -tanha main thi, kuch tanhai tum mein thi Dono mein thi laachari, dono thi thak ke haari Izhaar -e -raaz karne se, ghutan ko kuch ghataya hai. Hum -khyal hai jab hum tum, humsafar bhi ban jaaye Chaahe jaise ho mausam, ik dooje ko apnaye Inhi sapnon ke rango ne, humein fir gugudaya hai.</i></p>	<p>Having you with me, I feel emboldened Impassioned to create A new world with you I was isolated, alone. So were you Both of us were helpless, Tired and weary After sharing my heart's secrets with you, I do not feel suffocated any more Our dreams are similar, Let us become fellow travelers Promise to accept each other, come what may Together, our dreams will become rosier Reinvigorating, refreshing, rejuvenating us...)</p>
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¹⁷ *Tumhara saath milne se.* Urdu. Composed by Kamla Bhasin

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