

# Participative cultural productions of the oppressed: The master-servant dialectic through an Indian lens

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**ABSTRACT:** The master-servant and self-substance dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents the self as reflectively negating the particularities of its natural consciousness and transcending towards the social substance in order to inscribe its culturally refined self-conception upon the universal substance. Hegel argues that the reflective and determinate negations of the subordinated self by means of participative cultural production (*Bildung*) lead to the overcoming of servitude and subordination. That is, the actions of the supposedly 'inessential' servant-selfhood lead to freedom and disallows the ossification of the social substance. This Hegelian insight is employed in this article to understand dominations in contemporary liberal democracies, and the participative cultural productions of the Dalits and their politics of resistance in the Indian subcontinent.

**KEYWORDS:** cultural production (*Bildung*); Dalits; freedom; oppression; social substance

## Introduction

This article argues that an important lesson for contexts of oppression can be extracted from the Hegelian notions of reflective consciousness and participative cultural production, central to the master-servant and self-substance dialectic (*Bildung* section) of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 2018): reflective, participative cultural production in the democratic context opens up possibilities of resistance against oppression, and of situated, contingent and determinate freedom to participate more equitably in the social substance or the whole sphere of society, polity, culture and the dominant conception of reality. That is, in this reading the thrust of the master-servant and the self-substance dialectic is on the dramatic transformations of the dominated and unfree self: how it gets rid of the natural (particular) self-consciousness and transcends towards the (universal) social substance, inscribing its self-conception upon its social milieu and attaining limited freedom through participative cultural production without ever fully removing the conditions of servitude. Freedom and domination are persistent possibilities of human existence; we can only deal with them in determinate, non-absolute ways. Unlike in Heidegger and many later philosophers, we can notice in Hegel both the passive, prereflective and the active, reflective reception of culture inextricably interlaced with self-formation (see Novakovic, 2017).

There is justifiable criticism of Hegel (see Habib, 2017). Andrea Long Chu (2004) argues that there is only 'infinite hard labor' (bad infinity) for the servant in Hegel; it is 'a freedom to come that never comes, continually postponed or deferred through the dialectical mediation that history itself is' (p. 417).<sup>1</sup> My approach in this article is close to the one advocated by

Jean-Luc Nancy (2002, p. 7): not to restore Hegel or Hegelianism, but to read and think Hegel in freedom as 'a matter of making oneself available for it', for the logic of the dialectic as the reader sees it, rather than as its author perhaps intended it. Such attempts to read the master-servant dialectic have been done in the past (see Behnam, Azimi & Kanani, 2017; Selzer, 2003). My objective is an interpretive adventure in philosophy with the aim of understanding participative cultural production of subjects under conditions of subordination. The focus is on the subtle political disposition to resist servitude, and particularly on how Dalits<sup>2</sup> in India defy their subordination paradoxically through participative cultural production under the dictates of caste society and a rather restrictive, illiberal democracy (Hansen, 2019).

In the first section, I will outline the notion of participative cultural production with respect to the master-servant dialectic. I will then apply the logic of the dialectic to the situation of Dalits in India in terms of their continuing servitude under the master class of the majoritarian society. My final section will focus on participative cultural productions of the Dalits with an aim to emphasise that democracy can itself be understood as the politics of resistance.

## Servitude, *Bildung* and the road to freedom

The actual self in Hegel is not something naturally or traditionally given, but something that sublates its naturally given particularity, and develops itself historically through mediations of relation to, and negation of, the outside world. That is to say, negation, action and cultural production of the self and substance has a significant and revolutionary meaning in Hegel. As much as the negative self, Hegel also celebrates the negative (social)

substance with respect to *Bildung/culture*. He celebrates the negativity, malleability and transformability of both the self and substance (world) vis-à-vis positivity, fixity and dead objectivity. The negative, productive self, when confronting dead objectivity in the world, infiltrates it, destroys its fixity and immutability, and leaves its imprint on it in order to become an essential element of the larger social (universal) substance. Hegel makes explicit in the 'Culture' section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the self and substance get their actuality and substantiality only in their interpenetration or infiltration of each other's essence – that is, participative cultural production. Hyppolite (1974, p. 384) writes: 'The slave becomes the master of the master and rises to genuine self-consciousness, which he is in himself, only through the process of culture – the formation of being-in-itself'. That is, the 'Culture' section continues the story of the servant-self's freedom not only through *Arbeit* (work), but also through *Bildung* (participative cultural production, a concept that I shall further elaborate on below). For Hegel, determinate negation and participative cultural production are inherent ontological aspects of human consciousness, which are requirements for self-consciousness to have its world. Hegel writes that

...man brings himself before himself by practical activity, since he has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, *in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself*. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. Even a child's first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an intuition of something that is his own doing ([1835] 1975, p. 31; emphasis in original).

Herbert Marcuse (1941, p. 113) helps to illuminate the significance of recognising oneself in the world in the following way:

The world is an estranged and untrue world so long as man does not destroy its dead objectivity and recognize himself and his own life 'behind' the fixed form of things and laws. When he finally wins this self-consciousness, he is on his way not only to the truth of himself, but also of his world. And with the recognition goes the doing.

In other words, there is no brute and bare world for human consciousness, no lifeless and sterile social substance of norms, customs, rules, rituals, ethos and social institutions. Only when the self reflexively destroys the world and transforms it into a fluid and living objective reality, contaminates it with human inscriptions, mediations and interventions, and culturally produces and participates in it, does it become 'social substance' in actuality. That is, the principles of negativity, desire or creative incompleteness, and of participative cultural production transform the self and the substance, whereas the positivity of repose and inactivity, which is opposed to movement and *Aufhebung*, imprisons the self in its given or natural consciousness.

The master-servant dialectic (*Herr-Knecht Dialektik*) starts with the confrontation of two selves who desire to negate

each other and to deny the other the independence and self-sufficiency of subjectivity. In this confrontation, one of them dominates to become a being-for-self, having been recognised by the other unconditionally, while its antagonist is forced to become a being-for-another without recognition of its selfhood and sacrificing its will. The master's priority is complete, full-fledged recognition of his self by the servant as free, self-sufficient and independent self-consciousness, while the priority of the servant is mere survival in terms of material life, without being recognised in turn by the master as an independent self-consciousness. Hegel shows, however, how the servant's work/*Arbeit* dialectically acts upon the working consciousness and the social substance, which is the arena of work, and opens up new possibilities for the servant. Work done in an intersubjective space in absolute fear of the master and the discipline that it calls for, and with the ability of recognising one's self reflected in the product of work, transforms the self and the substance. The aspect of reflection is accentuated in the following statement by Hegel (2018, p. 114; emphasis in original) about the servant: 'As a consciousness forced back into itself, it will take the inward turn and convert itself into true self-sufficiency'. Hegel observes that it is this withdrawal into itself that transforms the servant into a more independent, creative consciousness, and the lack of reflection and formative activity, lost in the circuit of gratifying desires, makes the master a dependent, dull consciousness which is self-enclosed. The servant, alienating him/herself from natural existence, works upon things for the consumption of the master, transforms his/her own self, and, thus, is constantly conscious of own being. In short, the servant engages in production, produces a cultivated self and inscribes itself in the universal social substance. But the master, choosing the immediate enjoyment of things, takes for granted own being and remains an immature, rudimentary consciousness of desire and its gratification. As John O'Neill (1996, p. 21) argues, it is important to remember that 'the progressive figuration of self-consciousness begins in desire, which is humanized from the standpoint of an intersubjective relation that moves into progressively more general institutions of humanity'. As the dialectic has it, if the master's desire returns as soon as it is gratified, work is 'desire held in check, it is vanishing staved off, or: work cultivates and educates' (Hegel, 2018, p. 115; emphasis in original).

My aim so far has been to delineate the Hegelian concepts of negation, mediation, action and participative cultural production in order to emphasise the ontological and historical significance of work and its emancipatory potential. Undeniably, this emphasis is central to both Hegelian and Marxist traditions of social philosophy. For example, Sean Sayers argues that the biblical allegory of the fall is not a misfortune because labour in the Hegelian sense is both the result of a disunion and the solution for it. 'For through working on the world, we also come to objectify ourselves, to transform ourselves, to humanize our world and make ourselves at home in it' (Sayers, 2011, p. 19). Self-conscious beings have no choice but to work and act as they have fallen away from their natural condition, and so their creativity and liberation, just as for the Hegelian servant, lie in the activity of work, which Sayers considers as the spiritual essence of human beings. Human beings violate their natural self through their transformative work, and thus become alienated from that self, which for Sayers is the negative characteristic of work. However, this feature is overcome through the positive activity

of shaping the world or social substance so as to remove human estrangement from nature and making a reunion with oneself and nature possible. Work in the broadest sense, whether manual, intellectual or artistic, always involves recognising an incomplete reflection of one's self in what one produces. This is not to deny that there are structures that preclude the reflective element of work and of humanity itself from manifesting, as Marx never failed to emphasise. But resisting such structures is itself a work in which can be recognised a reflection of the self's yearning for freedom.

Work involves determinate negation and as a formative activity it shapes, forms and transforms the thing and the servant's self simultaneously; through work, the servant finds her/his developed and cultivated self. 'In his service', Hegel observes, 'he (the servant) sublates all of the singular moments of his attachment to natural existence, and he works off his natural existence' (2018, p. 115). Fear for absolute power and the regularity of work disciplines the servile consciousness into a being-for-self, and thus prevents its exclusion from the world of the Spirit. In the phenomenological journey of the self, the most rudimentary form of consciousness 'is self-equal through the exclusion *from itself* of all that is *other*' (Hegel, 2018, p. 110; emphasis in original). It externalises itself through work, humanises the world and becomes a dialectically open and incomplete yet full-fledged self-consciousness. By working upon things and turning nature into cultural objects, the servile self produces artifacts that enter into 'the element of lasting' (ibid., p. 115). The point here is that although ontologically to be a self means externalising one's self and inserting into the social substance its self-conception, it is the self of disciplined action and work of all types that does so more effectively and attains its situated freedom. In this sense, the master is the one who takes the world as it is without having to alter it in pursuit of freedom.

Alain Badiou (2017, p. 42) accentuates the servant's deferment of 'the satisfaction of his immediate desire for the sake of culture, of the invention of more and more beautiful, more and more extraordinary and creative objects', and her/his remaking of self in that process. Focused on the possibilities of the future, disciplining natural drives and transcending towards the social substance, the servant, according to Badiou, learns to master desires, whereas the master is caught up in the mere circuit of desires and passions. As Badiou himself argues, it is erroneous to equate the dialectic with the historical institution of slavery. But deferment of gratification and consequent self-cultivation are an essential aspect of dependence and discipline (*Bildung*), which, according to Žižek (1999, p. 106), is required to 'live my bodily existence as the permanent negativization, subordination, mortification, disciplining, of the body' rather than directly negating or destroying my bodily life. At the same time, the dialectic can make significant contributions in contemporary contexts with respect to the concept of participative cultural production under conditions of domination, as I shall argue in the next section. For Alexandre Kojève (1969), the servant's work is production that leads to the transformation of subjectivity; he/she achieves selfhood, worthiness and dignity as an independent self-consciousness, and freedom from the given thorough the choice of action. The act of the servant is an 'act of self-overcoming, of negation of himself (negation of his given I, which is a slavish I)' (1969, p. 21). Kojève (1969, pp. 49–50) also emphasises that in the dialectic itself, the servant's freedom

is merely an abstract, unrealised idea, which must be realised by means of 'conscious and voluntary transformation of given existence, by the active abolition of Slavery'.

Before moving to the next section, I must quickly refer to Novakovic's (2017) discussion on the Hegelian concept of 'participative cultural production' (*Bildung*), which I have been using thus far without explanation. She argues that *Bildung* is cultural participation of the self in the social substance with a sense of at least minimal reflection, which can help prevent the social substance from ossification. Expression and reflection are inherent to *Bildung*, and so participating in a culture in an involved way and adopting a reflective attitude towards it go hand in hand so that even engrossed reception and perpetuation of culture cannot be merely passive and unreflective. This explains cultural dynamism and movement. Novakovic (2017, p. 91) points out rightly that 'Hegel provides an extensive list of the different modes of cultural self-expression and he argues that a culture is nothing over and above its own objective manifestations, which include the religion, law, language, custom, art, etc. that it has produced'. Cultural objects, she argues, are expressions of the self and make it real, and at the same time offer to participants a space for reflecting about themselves and their culture. Thus, about the servant, Hegel (2018, p. 116; emphasis in original) writes that 'the form (made by work), by being *posited as external*, becomes to him not something other than himself, for his pure being-for-itself is that very form, which to him therein becomes the truth. Therefore, through this retrieval, he comes to acquire through himself a *mind of his own*'. So, the point to reiterate is that the self in servitude engages in cultural production by externalising its own self-conception by participating in the universality of dominant cultural ethos in order to attain a contingent and limited degree of freedom. I will now move to show the salience of the master-servant dialectic for the contemporary context of caste discrimination, before I take up the significance of the Hegelian notion of participative cultural production for the same context in the last section.

### The dialectic of contemporary oppression

The master-servant dialectic is a hermeneutically vibrant text as its varying interpretations show. Its meaning for contemporary contexts of oppression existing in liberal democratic societies such as India, seen from the perspective of self-substance dialectic and the transformative character of cultural production, is my preoccupation in this section. The exclusion and subordination of sections of population is a permanent feature of social existence, as exclusionary othering is inherent to self-other encounters, even in societies of exceptional community sentiment. In any kind of oppression, there is a dominating and a dominated side upon which some form of force is exerted; domination is undoubtedly a relation of force. In this sense, we straightforwardly have forms of modern oppression in liberal-capitalistic democracies when we consider, for example, institutional and informal forms of captive servitude, including forced labour, sex and poverty, manual scavenging, human trafficking and several other ways of compelling people do things against their will and desire. The master-servant dialectic is a useful prism to make sense of exclusionary othering, especially in liberal democracies, which often use the might of the armed and resourceful state and

force of the law under the pretext of maintaining public order to openly intimidate, suppress and crush voices of servant-selves and sometimes to clandestinely regulate, surveil and make them invisible and illegitimate (see Mander, 2019). The conditions of oppression might be worse in non-democratic societies. But there is no denying the reality of domination under democratic conditions that tend to delegitimise the very claim of being oppressed. At the same time, democracy is the rule of, by and for the people, where people constantly engage with the State dialectically and can be true to their inherent ontological drive to resist exclusionary tendencies that preclude their participation in the universality of the social substance. Therefore, to the extent that exclusionary tendencies are inherent to social existence, the politics of resistance is definitional for democracies. It is in this sense that I want to look at participative cultural production of the dominated population groups in democracies as a central feature of the democratic politics of resistance.

Several contextualised readings of the master-servant dialectic do exist. To illustrate, from a postcolonial vantage point and deploying Said's orientalism thesis, Behnam, Azimi and Kanani (2017) argue that the power relations analysed in the dialectic exist in the West's employment of language, literature and translation to hegemonise the cultural space of the East, leading to cultural colonisation and enslavement of the mind, thus keeping alive 'the more dangerous form of the master-slave relationship'. By stereotyping the Orient as the other, they argue, orientalism makes itself self-evident and self-validated, thus colluding both directly and implicitly with 'political and economic imperialism'. Hence, for them, 'Orientalism is master-slave dialectic incognito' (Behnam et al., 2017, p. 566). In a very different way, Linda Selzer shows how the African American scholar and writer Charles Johnson's philosophical parable 'The Education of Mingo' (1977) fictionalises the master-servant dialectic in the story of a white man who mistakenly believed that in owning and educating the slave Mingo he would make him 'a mere extension of his own will', only to realise that this is never possible because the parable suggests, just as in the dialectic, that 'the Other is capable of his own objectifications – of transgressing the boundaries of self and of remaking the world according to his own needs, aims, and desires' (Selzer, 2003, p. 113).

However, if the master-servant dialectic were an allegorical depiction that stood for the one-time event of the origin of self-consciousness, society and culture from natural consciousness, the original struggle that culminated in the social contract, it would be impossible to undertake any such reading of the dialectic. According to Tony Burns (2006), instead, the master-servant dialectic must be read as a permanent aspect of consciousness wherever and whenever it occurs and thus inherent in all social institutions always. If we consider the master-servant relation as an inherent aspect of the human condition as such, as we want to do here, the dialectic is a useful prism to make sense of othering, servitude and oppression in various forms. Burns (2006, p. 100) argues that 'it makes perfect sense to talk about the existence of a kind of "slavery" even in those societies within which the institution of slavery has been legally abolished'. This is so, he continues, because 'the relation between master and slave discussed in the *Phenomenology* is the archetype of all social institutions' (*ibid.*). Going even further, Sartre considered the objectifying look/gaze (*le regard*) of the Other as enslaving. Emphasising

that such slavery is not a historical event, he writes: 'I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being' (Sartre, 1956, p. 267). That apart, considering the dialectic with Burns as inherent to social relations as such is significant also because, as Robert Stern argues, Hegel's basic motivation with respect to the concept of alienation (*Entäusserung*) of the self from natural consciousness and traditional forms of ethical community (*Sittlichkeit*) is the steep dialectical divisions (*Entzweiung*) of modern consciousness such as self and other, state and individual that make it 'impossible for consciousness in this modern form to feel "at home"' (Stern, 2002, p. 147). In other words, the dichotomous relationship between the dominated and dominator has only deepened with modern *Bildung* for Hegel, just as the quest for freedom.

In sum, social institutions of all types – or the self-substance dialectic as such – will have elements of hierarchy, by way of which exclusion and subordination always come into operation. Notice that this is how B. R. Ambedkar (2014, p. 261) considered caste oppression as a form of slavery in the *Annihilation of Caste*:

slavery does not merely mean a legalized form of subjection. It means a state of society in which some men are forced to accept from others the purposes which control their conduct. This condition obtains even where there is no slavery in the legal sense. It is found where, as in the caste system, some persons are compelled to carry on certain prescribed callings which are not of their choice.

He ends the above famously undelivered speech, prepared for a gathering of Hindu reformists, by declaring that the Hindu society can achieve *Swaraj* (self-rule) only when it becomes free of the slavery of caste. Similarly, Arundhati Roy observes that social reformist Jotiba Phule equated caste bondage with slavery more literally: 'the Shudras were conquered and enslaved by the Brahmins' (2014, p. 76).

It is in this sense that I propose to read the abstracted dyad of self-other encounter in terms of the South Asian institution of caste, using the lens of the master-servant dialectic. The high-caste self as the dominant master, who demands subservience and recognition from the low-caste servant-self at the bottom of the caste-hierarchy, sets off a very specific historical form of servitude and oppression. The high-caste master-self ensures for himself a life of freedom from want and fear and conditions of self-respect and recognition from the Other, whereas the low-caste servant-self is forced to engage in demeaning work and is condemned to a life of ignominy, servitude, humiliation and subordination. Hence, the low-caste self, still placed in the lowest order of social hierarchy and public consciousness according to South Asia's centuries-old caste system, and its accompanying notions of the inherited inequality of birth, birth-based occupations and ritually sanctioned impurity of the low-born, is the historical figure of the servant-self in the hierarchical relationships of South Asia's social institutions.

Gopal Guru (2009) categorises Dalits as the 'insignificant other' (and Muslims as the 'significant other') in India's social order. He explains the differential attitudes of the master class adopted towards the Dalits in India in terms of their being perceived as a 'sociological danger'. He argues that 'it is the deep sense of repulsion that makes even the scented body a source of nausea'

for the high castes (Guru, 2009, p. 214). Such dispositions and the social practice of untouchability have historically relied on the ideology of purity and pollution, resulting in their social exclusion. Their status as the insignificant other in relation to the majoritarian caste-communal self in contemporary India is leading to the rise of violence against them and, further, 'they feel insecure due to occasional pronouncements to bring back the old social order based on Vedic social ideology' (Thorat, 2019, p. 235). In this way, Dalits who are still placed in the lowest order of social hierarchy and public consciousness in South Asia could well be understood in terms of the master-servant dialectic as forced into a position of servitude and subordination.

The historical trajectory of Marxism has undoubtedly influenced a strongly materialist reading of the master-servant dialectic, where the interpretive key to the text is the unequal relations pertaining to material production. Andrew Cole (2004) historicises the dialectic and argues that a historical reading will reveal its context of servitude not as modern capitalism as it concerns Marx, but as medieval feudalism; hence, rather than a clichéd struggle for recognition, the dialectic represents a 'struggle for possession, struggle between "ownership" and "effective possession" – the former a mode of possession via legal right and military force and the latter a mode of possession via labor' (Cole, 2004, p. 584). Cole, thus, sees the story of medieval class-struggle for the possession of land in the dialectic, and objects to the 'phenomenological turn' in interpretations like Kojève's because they obscure 'the underlying material problems of possession'. While such readings are legitimate from a strictly historical point of view, they are also limited when we consider the essential question of domination in the dialectic (Burns, 2006). In this connection, the troubled relationship of Indian Marxism with caste is well known (see Nigam, 2019). This is why deploying the dialectic as an interpretive lens to understand the oppressive relations of caste in the South Asian context is not really a way of detaching the text from its context of class, for there are indisputable linkages between caste and class – and also gender and other forms of subordination (see the many essays in Thorat & Krieger, 2012; Menon, 2019). The South Asian phenomenon of caste is not merely about purity and pollution, touching and not touching, but also about production, possession, dispossession and domination in general. Shailaja Paik's (2019) review of Aniket Jaaware's remarkable book (2019) points out his inattention to the 'political and economic logic of caste structure'. Besides, while Jaaware decidedly moves away from the 'economic' (productive) analysis of caste towards an understanding of caste as a system of sociohistorically generated regulations on 'the bodily behaviour of people' and the materiality of touching and not touching, it can be definitely shown why his analysis thereby implicitly acknowledges the inescapability of the question of material possession and dispossession of embodied subjects, and the question of domination in general. With this underlining of the intertwined structures of caste, class and other forms of domination, and the salience of the master-servant dialectic for the contemporary context of caste, my next move is to show how participative cultural productions of the servant-subject of caste can lead to a politics of resistance within the limits of liberal democracy.

## Participative cultural productions of caste-subjects

The underlying assumption of the Hegelian conception of freedom is the unavailability of an abstract, ahistorical, unmediated and contextless freedom. Instead, meaningful freedom is situated, determinate and contingent. It is also useful to recall the emphasis of our first section that Hegel is not a philosopher of the naturally given self; there is only the culturally produced self and substance. In other words, the un-Hegelian impenetrability of the world of spirit or social substance is a hindrance to situated freedom.

The social contract theory assumes the end of conflicts and the beginning of peace after the inauguration of the rationally calculated sociopolitical agreement. In Hegelian social theory, the relentless tensions and conflicts inherent in self-alienation, participative cultural production and incomplete stages of reconciliation between self and substance are necessary parts of the unfolding saga of the self-substance dialectic. Hegel notes in *The Philosophy of Right* that '...education (*Bildung*), in its absolute determination, is therefore *liberation* and work towards a higher liberation (*Befreiung*)' ([1820] 1991, p. 225; emphasis in original). What he means by 'liberation' is rising to the ethical life that is not simply natural, but spiritual, cultural and universal. This life carries with it without shame the particular identity of the individual, but in its universal meaning. For Hegel, particularity is the infinitely self-determining content of universality, and so it is present in ethical life as 'free subjectivity'. In this sense, the struggle for Dalit liberation is not merely about the particularities of the Dalits, but also about the universality of human freedom and dignity, as Ambedkar reassured the Dalits in 1942:

The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for reclamation of human personality (as cited in Keer, 1990, p. 351).

Frederick Neuhouser argues that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the concept of labour is significant because it allows the subject to transform the world in accordance with her/his dispositions, thus making it possible for the subject to identify with the objective realm or social substance. According to Neuhouser (2000, p. 149), the Hegelian concept of *Bildung*, which is central to the master-servant and self-substance dialectic, 'refers to a kind of formative experience that results in the transformation of unformed, "natural" individuals (or peoples) into subjects who both aspire to be free and who possess the subjective capacities they need in order to realize their freedom'. Thus, Neuhouser emphasises that although freedom is essential to the human being for Hegel, freedom does not come cheap; under conditions of natural consciousness humans are not 'suitably equipped' to exercise their freedom. It is through participative cultural production (*Bildung*) and that alone that humans become properly equipped to exercise freedom, and this means continuous participation in the social substance that in turn means cultural production of self and substance. This is why social practices and forces that obstruct or exclude participation in the social substance must be challenged and neutralised constantly, and Dalit politics in India is a case in point. Because self-identity can emerge only through the mediation of social institutions, through our participation in them, the self-substance dialectic in general and the master-servant

dialectic specifically, Kenneth Westphal (2020) argues, are emancipatory projects for every individual. Customs, laws and institutions that enable the *Sittlichkeit* are artifacts fashioned by human beings. Westphal emphasises that the Aristotelian-Hegelian notion of the second nature is cardinal for freedom because the 'tolerably just social practices', which have become our social habits (if they have), are our free creations. 'All these social institutions and practices are our own human artifice and are decisive in our self-liberation as a *zoôn politikon* from the limits of our merely natural constitution (our first nature) and the uncultivated nature within which our species developed' (Westphal, 2020, p. 114). In this sense, participative cultural productions of excluded citizens are attempts from their part to resist the systemic obstructions made by the master class/caste to their development as free persons, to their participation in and transformation of the dominant universal.

The various forms of participative cultural production by oppressed sections, especially by Dalits in India, are actions of reflection, conceived deliberately as resistance against oppression in anticipation of emancipation. Paulo Freire (2005) observes that reflecting and acting (praxis) upon oppressive contexts are necessary in order to transform them. The obstructive quality of oppressive reality, Freire notes, is its ability to seduce the oppressed and suppress their reflective consciousness from acting upon the world that oppresses them.

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 2005, p. 51).

In a Hegelian vein, Freire stresses on the interdependence of the subjective and the objective that makes critical perception of, confrontation with and intervention in objective reality possible. The dialectic of the master and servant and self and substance envisage the servant-self attaining self-consciousness and freedom in its critical externalisation and possession of the world by inserting its self-conception into it. This is visible, if imperfectly still, in Dalit politics of resistance in India.

An analysis of oppression in overt and covert ways in democratic contexts necessitates an analysis of the forms of transformation, participation and thus possession of the social substance by the oppressed people, which results in their contingent emancipation. Since a philosophical exercise demands only a basic delineation of the concrete forms of such politics of resistance, we shall limit ourselves here to certain suggestive references alone. By getting rid of their natural and traditionally ascribed selves of 'first nature' and engaging in participative cultural production of the universal social substance by inscribing in it their self-conceptions, Dalits in India reveal several ways of resisting their experiences of subjugation and making resistance integral to their 'second nature'. These include invention and discovery of newer and better worlds in their imagination and works of exteriorisation. A denial of these would be an inadequate interpretation of oppression existing in contemporary contexts, where we can also find, coexisting with oppression and subordination, everyday political deliberations, actions, productions, reconstructions, deconstructions and resistances. The Dalits resist the homogenisation of culture, blatantly accomplished by the master classes/castes, by generating sub-cultures under strain in the form of signs,

symbols, representations, slogans, alternative imaginations, constitution and reconstitution of public spaces, production of academic and popular materials, and forging of alliances with freedom lovers, all of which express and externalise the will of the oppressed. Gopal Guru (2009, p. 219) argues that 'resistance is internal to humiliation. Since humiliation does not get defined unless it is claimed, it naturally involves the capacity to protest'. Insofar as several manifestations of humiliation and oppression still exist, the aspirations of the oppressed for universality, recognition and freedom also exist. Dalit resistance is seen in the celebration of Dalit symbols, flags, narratives and religious festivals, mass conversion to Buddhism and Islam, erection of statues of Dalit icons like Ambedkar, and Dalit-Bahujan-Muslim unity movements, which are politically conspicuous instances of participative cultural production and contestations of the hegemony of the Brahminical order. Although violence against Dalits is still widely prevalent in Indian society, Dalit literature and Dalit intellectual culture in general, artistic works, films, music, paintings, journalistic reportage and campaigns by Dalits and others centred on themes related to Dalit oppression have a place of their own in India's public culture today. With various forms of participative cultural productions, Dalits engrave their refined, universal, ethical and unprejudiced self-conceptions in the universal social norms and orders, thus preventing them from ossification.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

It needs to be reiterated that the objectification of the self in the world must be understood as the enactment of the self-substance dialectic where the self imbues spirit into the substance and the substance fills the self with content. Under conditions of oppression, the servile self aims to achieve the universal self of freedom and reason by way of participative cultural production. Rather than reclamation of individuality, particularity and cultural specificity, participative cultural production expresses the desire for possessing the universal substance and the demand for recognising universal humanity: 'the movement of individuality culturally educating itself is the coming-to-be of such an individuality as universally objective essence; i.e. it is the coming-to-be of the actual world' (Hegel, 2018, p. 286). By inscribing in the social substance their universal self-conception, the oppressed both participate in universality and prevent its sterile, demeaning, particularised ossification. In fact, by constantly resisting parochial particularities that have found their place in the dominant conception of universality, resistance politics of the oppressed makes democracy vibrant and true.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chu points out that Hegel saw the Atlantic slave trade as superior to African forms of slavery, European enslavement as emancipatory, and believed that slavery should be abolished only gradually (see also Habib, 2017). While emphasising the failure of the Hegelian master-servant dialectic in the case of the black-white and coloniser-colonised encounter in general, referring especially to Hegel's own unjustifiable views of Africans in several texts, Fanon underscores the need to read the dialectic on the social plane as a struggle of the unequally placed group to gain recognition from the privileged other, breaking the vicious circle of each referring back merely to abstract self-identity. 'The only means of breaking this vicious circle

that throws me back on myself is to restore to the other, through mediation and recognition, his human reality, which is different from natural reality' (Fanon, 2008, p. 169; see also Habib, 2017, on Fanon).

<sup>2</sup> The lowest castes of the Indian subcontinent, the erstwhile 'untouchables' (now known as 'Dalits'), are no more so under the Indian Constitution, framed by the Constituent Assembly, chaired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit icon. While democratic law forbids untouchability, various forms of caste discrimination still prevail in the subcontinent (see Thorat, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> I want to cite two striking recent incidents of Dalit resistance. Disposal of animal carcasses, especially cow carcasses, which is anathema for caste Hindus, is a traditionally assigned Dalit duty. But Dalits are also attacked for skinning the cows for their hides by cow vigilantes among Hindu nationalists. There is resistance among Dalits to shun such traditional occupations after the Una Incident of 2016 in Gujarat, when four Dalit young men were beaten and publicly shamed by circulating a video clip of the torture on social media. The following is a translated verse from Gujarati Dalit poet Sahil Parmar's poem 'We will not come to drag (your dead cattle)', which is reported to have 'struck a chord with Dalit protesters'; the verse is a call to Dalits to shun the occupation of carcass removal:

Give it your all  
If you have to  
Give up your life  
But don't go, to drag  
To drag their dead cattle  
Don't go tear the empty carcass  
Don't go drag their  
Wasted dead cattle

(cited and translated by Jadeja, 2018, p. 307).

Dalit resistance has many faces. The 2015 suicide note of the Dalit research scholar of the University of Hyderabad, Rohith Vemula, who was disheartened by the university's alleged discriminatory treatment, became an iconic symbol of Dalit resistance. Abdul JanMohamed (2019, p. 247) interprets the line in the letter 'my birth is my fatal accident' as 'a profound illocutionary utterance, which, accompanied by his suicide, transforms Rohith Vemula into a figure of political resistance...'. The effects of Vemula's gesture were felt on several Indian campuses, especially on his own, and several academics and celebrities from all over the world, including Noam Chomsky and J. K. Rowling, signed letters of protest; the Indian Parliament debated the incident and the opposition slammed the central government for apathy towards Dalit issues.

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