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## **Resistance movements and their cultural expression (songs, literature, folk art)**

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### **Abstract**

Resistance movements across history have drawn strength and continuity from cultural expression, where songs, literature, and folk art emerge as vital instruments of protest and identity. These forms of expression not only articulate dissent but also preserve collective memory and mobilize marginalized communities against structures of domination. In India, devotional poetry, Dalit autobiographies, revolutionary theatre, and protest songs have consistently challenged caste, class, and gender-based hierarchies, transforming art into a medium of assertion and survival. Folk traditions such as Madhubani, Warli, Tamasha, and Nautanki embody subaltern realities, blending aesthetics with political critique. Global parallels, from African-American spirituals to Latin American protest music, demonstrate the universality of culture as resistance. In contemporary contexts, digital platforms extend these traditions through rap, street murals, and online literature, ensuring their relevance. This study explores how cultural practices operate as archives of struggle, shaping consciousness and sustaining resistance across generations.

Keywords: Resistance movements, cultural expression, protest literature, folk art, Dalit consciousness.

### **Introduction**

Resistance movements have historically emerged as collective responses against oppression, injustice, and systemic exploitation, and their vitality has often been expressed through cultural forms such as songs, literature, and folk art. These cultural expressions serve not merely as artistic endeavors but as powerful tools of assertion, protest, and community mobilization. In the Indian context, songs of resistance—from the devotional yet rebellious verses of Kabir and Ravidas to the militant ballads of Gaddar in Telangana—have functioned as oral weapons against caste hierarchies, feudal exploitation, and political domination, providing both solace and strength to the marginalized. Similarly, literature has acted as a site of resistance where suppressed voices find articulation; Dalit autobiographies, revolutionary pamphlets, and feminist writings unmask social inequalities while constructing new narratives of dignity and selfhood. Theatre groups such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Safdar Hashmi's



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Jana Natya Manch used stage and street performances as vehicles of protest, making art inseparable from activism. Equally significant is the role of folk art traditions, where visual and performative forms like Madhubani, Warli, Tamasha, and Nautanki often transcend aesthetics to critique power and represent subaltern realities, carrying forward resistance within everyday cultural practices. These art forms become archives of struggle, transmitting political consciousness across generations in ways more accessible than formal historical texts. Resistance movements also highlight the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, where women's voices in songs, stories, and performances articulate a distinct yet connected dimension of protest, challenging both patriarchy and casteist oppression. Globally, similar patterns are evident—the African-American spirituals, the Latin American *Nueva Canción* movement, and anti-colonial literature of Asia and Africa illustrate how culture universalizes resistance while retaining local particularities. In contemporary times, digital media has extended this cultural battlefield, where rap songs, street murals, memes, and online literature continue to challenge state power and social inequalities, proving that the language of resistance adapts but never diminishes. Thus, cultural expression is inseparably bound with resistance movements, functioning simultaneously as a record of pain, a site of memory, and a medium of collective empowerment, ensuring that voices from the margins transform silence into speech and oppression into organized defiance.

## Definition and Scope of Resistance Movements

Resistance movements can be broadly defined as organized or collective efforts by individuals and communities to challenge, oppose, or overthrow systems of oppression, injustice, and exploitation. These movements may arise in response to political domination, economic exploitation, cultural marginalization, or social discrimination, and they manifest in diverse forms ranging from armed struggles and mass protests to symbolic and cultural acts of defiance. The scope of resistance movements extends beyond mere confrontation with authority; they also involve processes of identity formation, community solidarity, and the reimagining of social justice. In the Indian context, resistance movements have historically emerged against colonial rule, caste-based oppression, feudal exploitation, gender inequality, and state violence, with leaders and communities mobilizing through both political activism and cultural expression. Songs, literature, and folk arts play a central role in these movements, acting as powerful mediums for raising consciousness, preserving memory, and creating alternative narratives that contest dominant ideologies. Globally too, resistance movements encompass struggles for racial justice, indigenous rights, workers' movements, and feminist assertions, each finding unique cultural languages of protest. The scope of such movements is therefore not confined to political confrontation alone but extends into the realms of art, literature, performance, and everyday practices, where resistance becomes a way of life and survival. By uniting political activism with cultural creativity, resistance movements serve as dynamic forces that question established



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power structures, inspire collective action, and sustain the hope of social transformation across generations.

## The Role of Cultural Expression in Sustaining Resistance

Cultural expression plays a crucial role in sustaining resistance by providing oppressed communities with creative tools to articulate dissent, preserve collective memory, and inspire solidarity across generations. Songs, literature, and folk art not only give voice to the marginalized but also transform abstract struggles into emotionally charged, relatable, and enduring forms of communication. In India, devotional yet rebellious verses of Kabir, Ravidas, and Tukaram challenged caste hierarchies centuries ago, while modern protest songs of Gaddar in Telangana or Dalit Panther activists mobilized masses against social and political injustices. Literature, particularly Dalit autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* or Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, provides lived testimonies that question systemic oppression while constructing new narratives of dignity and assertion. Similarly, feminist writings foreground the dual struggles of women against patriarchy and caste, ensuring that gendered voices remain integral to resistance. Folk art, whether in the form of visual traditions like Madhubani and Warli or performative modes such as Tamasha, Nautanki, and street theatre, embeds resistance within everyday life, making protest both accessible and participatory. These cultural forms serve as archives of struggle that transmit knowledge, emotion, and consciousness to future generations, ensuring the continuity of movements even when formal political mobilization weakens. Globally too, African-American spirituals, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Latin American *Nueva Canción* movement demonstrate how art and performance preserve the spirit of rebellion while mobilizing political action. In contemporary times, digital platforms have expanded the reach of cultural expression, where protest rap, street murals, memes, and online literature amplify marginalized voices and connect local struggles to global solidarities. Thus, cultural expression sustains resistance not merely as an aesthetic practice but as a vital political act that nurtures identity, strengthens collective will, and transforms resistance into a living tradition that adapts across contexts, ensuring the survival and relevance of struggles against injustice.

## Songs as Cultural Resistance

- **Folk Songs of Protest**

Songs have historically been one of the most powerful and accessible mediums of cultural resistance, embodying the voice of the marginalized and the oppressed while simultaneously fostering collective identity and resilience. Folk songs of protest in India date back to the Bhakti movement, where poet-saints like Kabir and Ravidas employed simple yet radical verses to challenge the rigidity of caste hierarchies, religious orthodoxy, and social inequality. Their poetry, though devotional in tone, carried sharp critiques of Brahmanical dominance and



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emphasized egalitarian spiritual values, making them an enduring source of inspiration for subaltern communities. Similarly, Dalit protest songs continue this legacy, directly voicing the anguish of untouchability and caste-based exploitation while asserting dignity, equality, and the need for social reform. Tribal communities also developed unique traditions of protest songs, often rooted in their struggles against forest alienation, land dispossession, and state violence. These oral traditions ensured that cultural memory of resistance survived even when mainstream history attempted to erase them.

- **Freedom Struggle Songs**

During the freedom struggle, songs became vital instruments for mobilizing masses and uniting diverse communities under a common vision of liberation. From the patriotic ballads that emerged during the Revolt of 1857 to the revolutionary songs of the Indian National Movement, music created an emotional bridge between political ideals and collective action. Songs like *Vande Mataram* and *Sare Jahan Se Achha* transcended linguistic and regional boundaries to inspire unity, while revolutionary groups used underground songs to spread anti-colonial sentiment and strengthen morale. The freedom struggle thus transformed songs into political tools that carried messages of hope, courage, and sacrifice.

- **Labor and Peasant Songs**

With the rise of communist movements and working-class struggles in the 20th century, songs became closely associated with labor and peasant mobilization. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), founded in 1943, played a historic role in popularizing resistance songs that addressed exploitation, poverty, and inequality. Through performances in villages and towns, IPTA combined folk tunes with radical messages, making art inseparable from activism. These songs not only united workers and peasants but also challenged capitalist and feudal structures by creating a cultural space where collective grievances were expressed and politicized.

- **Contemporary Protest Music**

In the contemporary era, protest music has taken new forms through hip-hop, rap, and independent protest bands that connect traditional resistance to modern urban realities. Dalit rap and hip-hop artists, such as Sumeet Samos and Arivu, foreground caste discrimination and everyday struggles of marginalized youth, reclaiming space in popular music that is often dominated by elitist narratives. Similarly, independent protest bands like *Indian Ocean* or *Kabir Café* use fusion styles to revive Bhakti poetry and folk traditions while infusing them with contemporary socio-political relevance. Protest music today also extends into digital platforms, where songs are streamed widely, mobilizing young audiences and linking local issues to global struggles.

Songs as cultural resistance reveal how oral traditions, revolutionary ballads, and modern protest music sustain struggles across time and space. They function not merely as artistic expressions



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but as living archives of pain, defiance, and hope, enabling communities to challenge oppressive structures while forging solidarity. From the verses of Kabir to the chants of Shaheen Bagh, songs demonstrate the enduring power of music to transform resistance into a collective cultural force that continues to inspire movements for justice.

## **Folk Art as Resistance**

### • **Visual Folk Arts**

Folk art, in its many visual and performative forms, has historically functioned as a potent instrument of cultural resistance, giving expression to the lived realities, grievances, and aspirations of marginalized communities. Visual folk traditions such as Madhubani, Gond, Warli, and Bhil art have not only served aesthetic purposes but have also carried embedded critiques of social injustice, exploitation, and displacement. Madhubani paintings, once rooted in ritualistic practices of Mithila women, have evolved into narratives that depict Ambedkarite ideals, gender struggles, and Dalit assertion, thereby transforming domestic walls into sites of political commentary. Gond art, associated with central Indian tribal communities, often encodes ecological wisdom and resistance to deforestation and mining, subtly criticizing state and corporate intrusion on indigenous lands. Warli art, traditionally produced by tribal communities of Maharashtra, represents communal life and struggles against land alienation, while Bhil paintings reflect narratives of survival and defiance, asserting the dignity of tribal identity. These arts, though grounded in ritual and tradition, have emerged as vibrant modes of protest against caste oppression, ecological destruction, and political marginalization, ensuring that the visual becomes a space where silence is broken and subaltern voices are made visible.

### • **Performative Folk Arts**

Equally significant are performative folk arts such as Tamasha, Nautanki, and Burrakatha, which have historically served as mediums of social satire and popular critique. Tamasha in Maharashtra and Nautanki in northern India combined humor, music, and storytelling to address social evils, corruption, and caste hierarchies, reaching audiences beyond the literacy barrier and creating spaces for collective reflection and dissent. Burrakatha, a narrative performance tradition of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, became a vehicle of revolutionary consciousness during peasant struggles and anti-feudal agitations, often mobilized by leftist and Dalit activists. Similarly, regional theatre forms like Jatra in Bengal and Yakshagana in Karnataka have been adapted as political tools, integrating mythological stories with contemporary social issues, thereby educating rural audiences and mobilizing them for collective action. These performative traditions, rooted in entertainment, thus acquire radical dimensions by transforming the stage into a site of political pedagogy where subversive narratives challenge dominant ideologies and inspire resistance.





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In the modern context, folk art has transcended its traditional boundaries and entered the domain of contemporary protest, where it serves as a visual vocabulary of resistance in public spaces. Protest posters, wall paintings, and street murals now carry forward the legacy of folk traditions while making them relevant to present struggles. During the anti-CAA and Shaheen Bagh protests, street murals and graffiti often invoked folk idioms, combining traditional motifs with slogans of equality and constitutional justice. Dalit movements have similarly employed folk painting styles to depict Ambedkar, Phule, and other icons, asserting an alternative history in opposition to mainstream narratives. Street art in urban spaces, inspired by indigenous traditions, becomes a democratic form of protest that engages passersby and transforms walls into canvases of defiance. These contemporary adaptations highlight how folk art remains dynamic, adapting to new mediums and contexts without losing its political core. By shifting from temples, homes, and village squares to city walls and digital platforms, folk art continues to carry forward subaltern narratives of resistance, ensuring that marginalized voices are neither silenced nor forgotten.

Thus, folk art as resistance embodies the convergence of tradition and politics, where visual and performative practices become tools of defiance and survival. Whether through the painted motifs of Madhubani women, the satirical plays of Nautanki troupes, or the vibrant protest murals of urban movements, folk art transcends aesthetics to engage with the realities of caste oppression, gender discrimination, ecological exploitation, and political marginalization. By retaining its accessibility and communal character, it sustains resistance as a lived cultural practice, ensuring that protest remains embedded in the everyday life of communities. From ritualistic paintings to street murals, from village performances to urban demonstrations, folk art continues to testify that culture itself can be a battlefield where injustice is contested, dignity is reclaimed, and collective hope is kept alive.

## **Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Class in Cultural Expression**

### **• Dalit Women's Voices in Literature and Songs**

The intersection of caste, gender, and class finds some of its most powerful articulation in the cultural expressions of Dalit women, whose voices in literature and songs bring forth the layered oppression of untouchability, patriarchy, and economic marginalization. Dalit women writers such as Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawde, and Bama employ autobiographies, essays, and fiction to reveal how their bodies, labor, and identities are doubly stigmatized—first by caste hierarchies and second by patriarchal norms within and outside their communities. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* exposes the exploitation of Dalit women within both familial and societal structures, while Bama's *Karukku* highlights how casteist discrimination and gender subordination shape women's lived experiences. Similarly, poetry by writers like Meena Kandasamy and Anila Dalal bridges literature and activism, turning personal trauma into



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collective resistance. In songs too, Dalit women have created spaces of resistance by articulating their struggles through folk ballads, Ambedkarite songs, and contemporary protest music, often performed in gatherings that reinforce solidarity. These songs, by centering the experiences of Dalit women, challenge the silencing of female voices within mainstream Dalit and feminist discourses, making cultural expression a site of both self-assertion and community empowerment.

- **Tribal Women's Role in Resistance through Folk Narratives**

Tribal women, often marginalized by caste society and state policies, have also used folk narratives to resist oppression and assert their cultural identity. Oral traditions, mythic retellings, and folk songs performed by tribal women preserve histories of resistance against displacement, forest alienation, and ecological destruction. Women in Adivasi communities, for instance, employ songs and storytelling as part of everyday resistance to projects that uproot them from their land, thereby merging ecological consciousness with gendered resistance. In the Santhal and Gond traditions, women's songs narrate stories of colonial exploitation, sexual violence, and dispossession, ensuring that these struggles remain etched in cultural memory. The Chipko movement of the 1970s highlighted how tribal and peasant women used folk idioms, songs, and symbolic gestures—like hugging trees—to resist ecological destruction and corporate intrusion. Similarly, tribal theatre and dance often center women as bearers of cultural continuity, who not only perform but also safeguard the political consciousness of their communities. These cultural practices demonstrate how tribal women resist both external exploitation and internal gender hierarchies, ensuring that resistance is rooted in community survival and ecological justice.

- **Gendered Experiences in Protest Art and Performance**

The gendered dimensions of cultural resistance are also visible in protest art and performance, where women use their creative labor to foreground their struggles while participating in broader social movements. In street theatre, visual arts, and protest songs, women not only articulate demands for equality but also draw attention to the specific burdens placed upon them by caste and class structures. For instance, women artists in movements such as Shaheen Bagh (2019–20) used murals, poetry, and folk songs to assert their voices against state violence and discriminatory citizenship laws, transforming public protest spaces into cultural sites of gendered resistance. Performance traditions like Tamasha, Nautanki, and Burrakatha, when taken up by women, often subvert their conventional roles by inserting sharp critiques of patriarchy and caste. Visual protest arts—ranging from Dalit women painters reinterpreting Madhubani motifs to muralists depicting Ambedkarite icons—infuse gender consciousness into broader struggles for equality. Gendered experiences are also reflected in global protest art, such as the feminist performance *Un violador en tu camino* (“A Rapist in Your Path”) in Chile, which inspired similar adaptations in India, showing the interconnectedness of women's cultural resistance



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worldwide. These performances create solidarity networks that cross caste, class, and national borders, highlighting that women's oppression, while context-specific, resonates globally in its demand for justice.

The intersection of caste, gender, and class in cultural expression reveals how marginalized women, particularly Dalit and tribal, turn their creative energies into instruments of resistance that challenge both external oppression and internal silencing. Their literature, songs, and folk narratives foreground lived experiences of discrimination and resilience, while protest art and performance bring visibility to the burdens of gender within larger movements for social justice. By embedding personal struggles into collective cultural forms, women ensure that resistance is holistic—addressing not only caste-based exclusion and class exploitation but also the everyday realities of patriarchal control. In doing so, they broaden the scope of cultural resistance, making it more inclusive, more representative, and deeply rooted in the experiences of those at the intersections of multiple oppressions.

## Conclusion

Resistance movements and their cultural expressions in songs, literature, and folk art reveal that the struggle for justice is never limited to political mobilization alone but is equally sustained through the creative spirit of communities who transform their pain, anger, and hope into cultural forms. Songs—whether the rebellious verses of Kabir and Ravidas, the fiery ballads of Gaddar, or the chants of women at Shaheen Bagh—have provided rhythm and voice to collective defiance, ensuring that resistance is carried into the everyday lives of the oppressed. Literature, through Dalit autobiographies, feminist writings, and revolutionary texts, has documented silenced histories and articulated alternative visions of dignity, equality, and social transformation. Folk art, both visual and performative, has embedded resistance in ritual, performance, and now in public spaces, making walls, canvases, and stages platforms of protest and assertion. Together, these cultural practices highlight how resistance is not only about overthrowing structures of domination but also about creating new identities, solidarities, and possibilities. They serve as living archives of struggle, transmitting political consciousness across generations, ensuring that even when movements are suppressed, their spirit continues to survive in collective memory. In contemporary times, the digitalization of cultural expression—through rap, online literature, protest murals, and social media performances—demonstrates the adaptability and continuity of resistance, connecting local voices to global solidarities. Thus, cultural expression sustains resistance by merging creativity with activism, ensuring that struggles for justice are not forgotten but reimagined in every era. Ultimately, it is through this symbiosis of art and protest that resistance movements gain emotional depth, moral strength, and historical continuity, turning culture itself into a weapon against oppression and a beacon for social change.





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