



Cultural Displacement and Staggered Identity in Premanand Gajvee's *Devnavari* and Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth

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Abstract:

Premanand Gajvee's plays Devnavari (2019) and Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth (2019) portray cultural displacement and fragmented, or staggered, identities among oppressed communities. It begins by situating Gajvee within modern Marathi experimental and Dalit theatre, highlighting his focus on caste, marginalization, and the exposure of social hypocrisy through simple and direct dramatic language. The study reads Devnavari as a powerful reworking of the Devadasi/Devnavri tradition, showing how the "bride of god" is turned into a "Dalit of patriarchy," whose body and identity are sacrificed in the name of religion and custom. Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth is analysed as a critique of the appropriation of Samarth Ramdas and saint-worship culture, where the ethical core of Bhakti is displaced into caste-ridden and survival politics. Using the concepts of cultural displacement and social realism, the paper strives to analyze Devnavari and Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth represent distorted traditional roles and belief systems, and foreground socio-political and economic realities rather than abstract spirituality. The research argues that Gajvee's theatre turns the stage into a resistant political site of culturally displaced subjects confront religious and cultural authority and articulate subversion of identity.

Keywords: Cultural Displacement, Staggered Identity, Dalit Theatre, Social Realism.

Premanand Gajvee holds a important place in modern Marathi experimental and Dalit theatre as a dramatist. Gajvee foregrounds caste, marginalization, and the social realities as a primary subject of his theatrical work. Having impact of Baba Adhav and emerging from an Ambedkarite tradition of protest, Gajvee's plays expand Dalit theatre beyond conventional victimhood narratives to expose cultural hypocrisy of diverse oppressed groups, including those marginalised through religion, gender, and caste-inflected cultural practices.

Devnavari and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* stand out as powerful interrogations of religious institutions, stratification of caste hierarchies, and the manipulation of faith in traditional cultural

assumption. *Devnavari* reworks the Devnavri tradition to reveal how women become "Dalits of patriarchy" in the name of God, rendering their bodies and identities sacrificial offerings at the altar of ritual and custom. *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* turns to the figure of Samarth Ramdas and the culture of saint-worship to explore how the ethical core of Bhakti is displaced and appropriated within modern caste of money and survival politics to sustain and render the personal interest. Taken together, the two plays dramatize how faith, rather than acting as a space of liberation, often becomes a mechanism of control that fragments subjectivity and produces staggered identities.

In order to analyze these dynamics, the present research paper strives to analyse

cultural displacement and social realism. Cultural displacement is used here to denote dislocation from traditional identities, roles, and belief systems whether through forced ritual roles like the “bride of god” in *Devnavari* or through the ideological distortion of saintly teachings in *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*. Social realism refers to a mode of theatrical representation that foregrounds everyday socio-political and economic realities, using recognisable settings, and characters to expose the operations of power at the level of the ordinary. Gajjee’s theatre exemplifies this tradition through its insistence on showing caste, gender, and religious oppression not as abstract ideas but as concrete structures that shape daily life.

Theoretical Framework:

Premanand Gajjee consistently underline his social commitment and his rootedness in Ambedkarite thought, especially through plays such as *Kirwant*, *Ghotbhar Paani*, *Dev Navari*, *Gandhi-Ambedkar*, *Tanmajori*, *Chhawani*, *Dam it Anu Gore!* and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*. Studies on *Kirwant* show how Gajjee uses the story of a sub-caste of Brahmins to expose the paradox of ritual purity and social humiliation, foregrounding themes of trauma, resistance, and the politics of identity formation under caste oppression. Scholars note that *Ghotbhar Paani* (A Sip of Water), coming at a historical moment when debates on water, land, and basic resources sharpened, dramatizes the politics of access and denial with a stark realism that links everyday deprivation to larger structures of inequality. Within this critical body, *Dev Navari* is frequently read as a text that “broadens the definition of Dalit” by representing Devadasi-like women as Dalits of patriarchy, while *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* is mentioned as part of Gajjee’s continuing engagement with the

politics of religion, history, and leadership in contemporary India.

Dalit Theatre, Cultural Displacement, and Social Realism:

Dalit theatre has been described as a theatre of “discomfiting realities” that seeks to set right “historical wrongs” by exposing the lived experiences of humiliation, exclusion, and resistance on stage. In this context, cultural displacement may be understood as the loss, negotiation, or reconfiguration of identity when inherited cultural codes ritual, caste duty, saintly tradition no longer offer meaning or protection but instead function as instruments of oppression; such displacement can be spatial (movement from home to temple), psychological (internalization of stigma, self-division), or symbolic (being recast as ritual object or political token). Social realism in Marathi theatre, from Mahatma Phule onwards, has served as a key aesthetic mode for representing these processes by foregrounding everyday exploitation, caste injustice.

Devnavari and Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth:

Devnavari and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*, the stage emerges as a crucial arena where displaced identities confront and contest religious and cultural authority. In *Devnavari*, the woman transformed into “bride of god” experiences spatial displacement from familial to temple space, psychological displacement as her selfhood is split between sacred icon and exploited body, and symbolic displacement as she is redefined within the Devadasi tradition as simultaneously holy and disposable; Dalit/Ambedkarite thinking on the extended meaning of “Dalit” provides the conceptual vocabulary to grasp this transformation. In *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*, devotees and followers inhabit a world where the ethical content of Ramdas’s teachings is displaced by their use in

casteist and communal politics; here, Gramscian hegemony and postcolonial cultural theory illuminate how saintly memory is appropriated, while social realism grounds this critique in contemporary Maharashtra's political speech and everyday religious practices. Together, the two plays demonstrate how Dalit theatre, informed by Ambedkarite ideology and realist aesthetics, becomes a medium through which culturally displaced subjects not only articulate their staggered identities but also challenge the very religious and cultural regimes that displace them, thereby justifying the present study's focus on cultural displacement and staggered identity in Gajvee's work.

Devnavari: Religion, Gender, and Cultural Displacement:

The play *Devnavari* turns on the institution of the "bride of god," a Devdasi-like practice through which a young woman is married off to a deity and permanently attached to the temple. Initially the ritual is framed as sacred dedication to the Goddess Yallama, in practice it becomes a mechanism in which her sexuality, labour, and mobility are controlled by priests, patrons, and local power-brokers who invoke tradition to justify exploitation. The central conflict, therefore, is not simply between faith and unfaith, but between a ritual that claims sanctity and the everyday violence it authorises against women offered to God in lieu of honor and favour.

Within this structure, the Devnavari woman undergoes a profound cultural displacement. She is physically removed from the familial space and relocated to the temple or math, an institutional space governed by ritual codes, priestly authority, and patronage networks. This spatial shift is accompanied by a psychological dislocation in which she must reconcile two mutually incompatible roles: as

"sacred bride" she is venerated in ceremonies and songs, while as a living body she is made available for the desires of those very men who manage the institution. Her identity fractures between the idealised figure celebrated in devotional rhetoric and the invisible, expendable woman who bears the burden of sexual and economic exploitation; it is in this gap that the play locates the staggered, unstable selfhood of the Devnavari.

Gajvee's commitment to social realism shapes how this world appears on stage. Researchers of his dramatic technique emphasise his writing for stark, simple, direct dialogue and for situations that refuse social reality forcing spectators to confront caste, patriarchy, and religious hypocrisy without pampering of mythic spectacle or traditional and cultural acceptance. In *Devnavari*, this realist mode manifests in scenes that show negotiations over money, offerings, patrons, and the woman's availability, foregrounding the economic logic of the institution rather than abstract theological debates about devotion or sin. By highlighting concrete acts of sexual coercion, financial dependency, and social stigma, the play keeps attention on material relations of power, not on idealised images of temple culture.

At the level of critique, *Devnavari* exposes the tight collusion of religion, caste, and patriarchy in sustaining the system. The ritual is sanctioned by *Pujari* (Temple authority), endorsed by *Inamdar* local elites whose status is enhanced by their association with the temple, and indirectly supported by families who sacrifice daughters in the hope of divine favour or survival. The play also gestures to the wider silence and complicity of society and the social hypocrisy that treats Devdasis as both sacred and sexually available remains largely unchallenged due to fear of Gods wrath. In presenting this landscape without

sentimental consolation, Gajvee suggests that cultural displacement of such women is not an accident but a structural outcome of intersecting religious and caste hierarchies.

Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth: Faith, Politics, and Ideological Displacement

Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth shifts attention from the body of the “bride of god” to the body of saintly memory, focusing on the legacy of Sant Ramdas Swami and the ways his image and teachings are mobilised in contemporary politics and cultural discourse. The play charts interactions among disciples, political figures, and religious functionaries who invoke Ramdas’s name and slogans such as “*Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*” to lend moral authority to their projects, ranging from spiritual gatherings to overtly political programmes. This play comments on the emotional and ideological entanglement of the extremely blind and streams of thought regarding the devotional sect of Samarth Ramdas Swami and the fact that the stratification of the exploiting class is cruel and emotionless to preserve its self-respect.

Here the dominant mode of displacement is ideological and cultural. The Bhakti tradition associated with Ramdas centred on personal devotion, ethical discipline, and a critical engagement with power is progressively narrowed into politicised or caste-coloured agendas that privilege certain communities as “true heirs” of the saint. Genuine spiritual–ethical values are pushed to the margins as Ramdas’s image, slogans, and stories are enlisted to mobilise crowds, justify policy, or sanctify existing hierarchies, thereby displacing the saint from a complex historical thinker into a convenient emblem for contemporary power structures. The play repeatedly returns to the tension between inward faith and outward

spectacle, between Ramdas as moral guide and Ramdas as brand or banner.

Social realism again provides the texture of this critique. Characters speak in idioms recognisable from present-day caste-based politics and cultural nationalism, echoing the kind of “upper-caste power games” and obsession with mythological histories that Gajvee elsewhere criticises in interviews. Meetings, negotiations, speeches, and ritual programmes are staged in ways that mirror current social fractures rather than mythic idealisation; there are no miraculous interventions, only strategic uses of devotion, patronage, and media to consolidate influence in Ramdas’s name. Through such realistic scenes, the play demonstrates how religious language circulates through political institutions, party offices, and local networks, shaping everyday decisions and alignments.

In doing so, *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* dramatizes the conflict between faith as personal ethics and faith as public ideological weapon. For instance, for few characters like Raghav and Govind Ramdas’s teachings demand introspection, humility, and a commitment to peace of mind, but for some followers like Acharya, Barve, Keshav ‘Ramdas’ means medium of earning. This materialistic approach of faith leads to a further marginalisation of lower-caste followers, women characters like Devaki, Shraddhadevi find their interpretations continuously silenced or appropriated within dominant narratives that claim to speak for “true tradition.” The play thus reveals how ideological control over a saint’s memory can reproduce the same exclusions that Dalit and subaltern movements seek to contest.

Comparative Analysis: Staging Cultural Displacement:

Devnavari and *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* stage two complementary forms of

cultural displacement. In *Devnavari*, displacement is visceral, bodily, and gendered: a woman is removed from her home and absorbed into a religious institution that both venerates and violates her, producing a staggered identity caught between sacred title and exploited flesh. Her dislocation is inscribed on space (home to temple), on social role (daughter to “bride of god”), and on self-perception, as she is compelled to inhabit conflicting meanings of purity, sin, and service.

In *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth*, displacement occurs at the level of ideas and collective memory: Ramdas’s Bhakti teachings and historical complexity are shifted into ideological frameworks that serve caste and communal politics, leaving those who seek a more ethical, egalitarian reading of his work on the margins. Where *Devnavari* shows how religious institutions can displace living women, *Jay Jay Raghuvir Samarth* shows how the memory of a saint can be displaced from critical spirituality into cultural nationalism, with real consequences for who belongs in the imagined community shaped around his name. Across both plays, Gajvee uses social realism to insist that these displacements are not abstract

metaphors but lived processes through which bodies, beliefs, and identities are reordered in contemporary Maharashtra.

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