CULTURE AS A MODE OF RESISTANCE

# SATYA

2021-22

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*Dedicated to the memory of Satyam Jha.*

# About the cover

The 2021-22 edition of *Satya* encapsulates the visuals of swathes of blindfolded women across the world chanting and dancing to the lyrics of *Un Violador en Tu Camino*, in unison. *Un Violador en Tu Camino* roughly translates to 'A rapist in your path', and is a Chilean protest song against the systemic nature of sexual violence against women. Originally composed by the Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis, the song spread like wildfire across the world in 2019, acquiring new layers of meaning and symbolism across nations and cultures. The song involves a unique dance routine with added use of blindfolds. Both these features add to the message the song aims to convey – the state is a rapist. For instance, one segment of the dance routine involves scenes of women squatting with hands behind their head – a position synonymous with protesting women who court arrest. The blindfolds symbolise the invisibilisation of state-sanctioned modes of violence against women. This edition of *Satya*, with its theme 'Culture as a Mode of Resistance' aims to embody the spirit of *Un Violador en Tu Camino*.

# Editors' Note

*Satya* means 'truth', doesn't it? – A concrete noun with a definite factual reality? The Gandhi Ambedkar Study Circle's *Satya* differs slightly in this regard. Our journal employs 'truth' as a verb – a constant process of engaging with realities which inhabit the spaces between the words. We do not aim to 'discover' or 'seek' truth, for ignorance can hardly be equated with novelty. What we aim to do instead, is build a body of literature that questions, challenges and wrestles with the preexisting notions of objectivity.

The 2021-22 edition of *Satya* with its theme 'Culture as a Mode of Resistance', aims to highlight a very important aspect of resistance: it does not stop once the protesters disperse, or when the fervour dies, or when the people are chained and silenced – resistance is central to our existence, the way we live, the way we sing, dance, paint, love and the way we express ourselves. With this journal we set out to provide a glimpse into different truths, to break the binary and bring its multiplicity to the forefront. We did not have any grand intentions, or lofty goals. We simply wanted to portray how people created their own

truths in the face of oppression in different parts of the world.

Culture is often relegated to the paradigms of aesthetics and heritage – an enduring reality from the past, when in reality, it is being constructed every passing second with a definite purpose. For the longest time, resistance was equated with a spectacle of swathes of people gathered on ground or debates and rebuttals within the academic spaces, with hardly any attention given to the rage that seethes through the mundane aspects of one's life, the language one speaks, the songs one sings and the stories one tells. Through this edition of Satya, we seek to highlight that culture is undeniably political, and by extension, capable of resisting power mongers at the helm of a nation's politics.

If you choose to read our journal till the very end, you will meet on the way, Mahasveta Devi's Dopdi; theatre groups where the audience acts; a song that told more stories from Kashmir than media ever did; hymns that pose a challenge to caste hierarchy; a woman who fought for emancipation, not only from oppressive state machinery, but also rigid gender binaries; a band that did not stop singing even when the state struck with an iron hand; and a form of poetry that calls into question the gender norms.

We also bring to you, a set of five poems from our contributors, each exploring the idea of resistance from a unique standpoint. Poetry has always been at the forefront of cultural and regime changes, performing the important role of organising resistance. As you read, you will come across the yearning for change and new beginnings; understand the psyche of a tyrant; discover resistance through the body; and join in an all-encompassing cry for protest.

This edition of *Satya* is dedicated to the memory of Satyam Jha, a dear friend, classmate and council member, whom we lost in the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Satyam taught us many new meanings of resistance in the span of six months we knew him for. We publish this journal with the hope that it will live up to the ideals he so deeply cherished. In his memory, we have also republished his article titled, 'Refuting the Idea of India' from last year's edition.

We acknowledge that most of our work has been done in the shelter of our homes, as the pandemic raged on around us. We acknowledge that the journal might not reach the very people we have written about.

However, there is no doubt that a group of young, sincere, diverse and aspiring individuals have worked meticulously to bring out this edition of Satya, and we remain committed to our goals of trying to undermine teleological and hierarchical narratives and try to focus on the people and their resistance.

We would like to thank our industrious group of editors, designers and compilers for their support every step of the way; the executive council members of the Gandhi Ambedkar Study Circle, for their constant support and valuable inputs; and most importantly, our Staff Advisor Dr. Sabina Kazmi, for guiding us throughout the process.

Putting together this journal has been a process of growth and learning for us and we hope you take away something meaningful from its pages as well.

**- Avishi Gupta and Rayan Chakrabarti**
**(Editors-in-chief)**

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- From the song 'Un violador en tu camino' (A Rapist in Your Path)

01

# DOPDI VS DRAUPADI: REVISITING CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIALECTICS OF RESISTANCE IN MAHASVETA DEVI'S DRAUPADI

SHARBARI GHOSH

***TRIGGER WARNING: This article contains mentions of rape and sexual assault.***

Mahasveta Devi's 'Draupadi' brings together the exclusive domains of myth and reality. While drawing a parallel between the mythical 'Draupadi' and the Santhali 'Draupadi' (modified into Dopdi in the tribal language), the story recreates myth-making as a tradition of stigma rather than an inspiration. While amalgamating the 'epic' of (Maha)bharata[1] with the 'mundane' tribal life, Mahasveta Devi (un)consciously weaves the episodic past(s) pervading the 'untouched' present (Dasgupta 203).

Draupadi of (Maha)bharata till-date, stands tall as one of the most 'romanticised' mythic heroines. Why? Is Draupadi romanticised or

deified because she 'recovers' her dignity with a male's support during the vastraharan (disrobing) scene? Parallelly, Dopdi Mejhen in Devi's landscape is, however, neither romanticised nor deified, although the latter undergoes incalculable loss and immeasurable trauma.

> In the muddy moonlight she lowers her lightless eye, sees her breasts, and understands that, indeed, she's been made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven-then Draupadi had passed out. (Spivak 401)

Exploring the dichotomy of the raped and the rapist crawls out the 'act of resistance', both in theory and praxis. Dopdi and her namesake, Draupadi, from centuries apart, get trapped in the age-old patriarchal tunnel of subjugation and 'rape', but the instances of resistance and protest differ and are magnified in either situation. When '(un)conventionally' Draupadi (wife to the five men) gets projected as a prostitute within the male world, she gets openly molested in the context of her eldest husband gambling her in a game. Quite interestingly, Draupadi, in the attempt to 'save' her dignity, prays earnestly to Lord Krishna and the length of her saree, thus never falls short of saving her name and honour. In surrendering to the male resort for protection,

sadly, Draupadi becomes a deified soul and a celebrated mythic heroine[2]. Contradictorily, while Draupadi hankers upon a male 'saviour', Dopdi shuns all-male help (both Divine and mortal) and saves herself on her own. While Draupadi weaponises her emotions and rhetoric, Dopdi uses her 'mutilated and raped' body as the shield.

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? … There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of. What more can you do? Come on, counter me-come on, counter me-? (Spivak 402)

Either of the Draupadis challenge the male hegemony as the perpetrators. Still, it is only Dopdi – or the tribal Draupadi – who declares the termination of the phallocentric leadership 'acting' as the ultimate 'Saviour'. The culture of resistance herein subtly bifurcates into ethical (former) and sexual (latter). For Draupadi in the epic voices her resistance against the male community (particularly the Kauravas indulged in reckless gambling) by raising questions with regard to the lack of ethics which foregrounds rationality and sensitivity.

Where is that virtue for which these kings were noted ? It hath been heard that the kings of ancient days never brought their wedded wives into the

public court. Alas, that eternal usage hath disappeared from among the Kauravas (Roy 148).

Her ethical stand displays an oppositional voice of vehemence; it should however, not be misinterpreted as indifference or ignorance. While Draupadi marches forth on the normative path of rationality without a 'violent' outburst of angst, Dopdi, on the other hand, opposes the male dictatorship through her sexuality. Her bruised and unclothed body, greased with Senanayak's ego to dominate, breaks off the fetters of male hegemony in the most iconic manner. Dopdi fights for herself not by hiding her body but by scaring away the male perpetrators through her naked self.

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Spivak 402)

Thus, under Dopdi's leadership, her body transcends the vulnerable asset within the phallocentric discourse and takes the form of an iron shield of resistance against the hegemonic Men.

Furthermore, on deconstructing the patriarchal and

parochial lineage of both the perpetrator and the saviour, Dopdi, unlike Draupadi, questions the relevance of 'dignity, honour and shame' of the raped. While Draupadi hurries to cover her 'dignity' (which contextually is enveloped in the body politics), Dopdi remains undeterred to debunk the traditional (read: patriarchal) norms of '(re)covery' of 'dignity, honour and shame' through her blood-soaked nakedness. (Re)covery is beneficial only when an element is 'lost' but Dopdi believes that no '(re)covery' is required since none of the three-layered treasure ('dignity, honour and shame') is lost or compromised during rape. It is the rapist, the Dussasana or Duryodhana of Mahabharata and the team of Senanayak who are at a loss; of dignity, honour and shame. Un-traditionally, Dopdi thus unfurls and re-directs the connotation of shame, sacrifice and dignity to resist not just the patriarchal dominance but also the societal wordplay of subjugation of women (under the deceitful pretext of victimhood and altruism).

Contextually, on un-romanticising Dopdi, Mahasveta Devi prepares her to be a 'powerful' mundane character. While living in abject penury and revolutionising against the legit bourgeoise with a price tag on her captivity, Dopdi mirrors an ordinary citizen (fugitive) of the Munda

tribe in Bankrajharh. What makes her powerful then? Dopdi is stationed as ordinary until her 'sexual differential' (Spivak 388) is brought to the forefront. The power-politics reverses when she is pushed into the terrain where her sexuality is the 'sole subject'; her naked body thus turns out to be more effective than the clothed flesh of the male bourgeoise. Resonating with Spivak's reference to Dopdi as a 'superobject' (Spivak 388), although paradoxically an 'unarmed target' (Spivak 402), exploration of Dopdi's resistance hereby, transcends the mutilated female body on the individual level and simultaneously the societal fetters of subjugation.

In addition to the psycho-social resistance, Mahasveta Devi, through her protagonist, showcases 'language' being capable of fabricating a 'discourse' rather than mere 'communication'. Yes! A (new or unknown) language can also lay the subtle framework for tough resistance.

> What does "Ma-ho" mean? Is this a violent slogan in the tribal language? (Spivak 395)

The instant linkage of a new language to a war cry or 'a violent slogan' (Spivak 395) draws a larger picture of 'Othering' (apart from the shallow negligence). Sadly, the

new ‘Indian’ bourgeoise with its glitz and glamour of literacy and wealth remains unequipped with empathy. The failure to comprehend the tribal language critically highlights the cultural gap in the post-colonial society’s duplicated class hierarchy (Pati 89). Intriguingly, in the mesh of the power politics of the mainstream and the culturally ‘Other-ed’ tribals, the latter uses language as a barrier. The language soon transforms from a crude weapon of the ‘Other’ into an intangible power of protest (and not of escape).

Dopdi and her husband Dulna Mejhen, while dancing to ‘Hende rambra keche keche Pundi rambra keche keche’ (Spivak 393) protect their happiness under the shield of their ‘savage tongue’ (Spivak 393). The tribal language, on being inaccessible to Senanayak and his team, no more communicates ‘emotions’ or ‘jubilance’, instead only hints at ‘protests’ and ‘challenges’. The metamorphosed meanings of the ‘savage’ (Spivak 393) language help the natives (or the tribals) to survive without surrendering the hideouts to the capitalist bellies, who are proficient in elite Bengali and English only.

The plot of linguistic defiance thickens with the paradoxical juggling of Dopdi’s words.

Can't you run away?

No. Tell me, how many times can I run away? What will they do if they catch me? They will counter me. Let them (Spivak 397).

Dopdi being illiterate and incapable of being a trained speaker of the 'colonised tongue' utters 'counter' in place of 'encounter' – as Mahasveta explains, it is an abbreviation for 'killed by police in an encounter,' the code description for death by police torture (Spivak 391).

The latent urge to remain faithful to her comrades in language and signs, the linguistic defiance of Dopdi, though remains paradoxical, yet is equally effective. With Dopdi countering (herein, refuting) her 'encounter', the wordplay comes face to face with her sexual reality.

When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound (Spivak 397).

Although Dopdi falls short of rehearsing the colonised linguistic archetypes, she does not suffer defeat at the hands of the Senanayak, the well-mimicked colonised protégé. In the linguistic mesh of counter-encounter,

Mahasveta Devi decentres the 'resistance regime' of counter-war and counter-violence and transforms it into a finer domain. The culturing of a new centre – the undisturbed language of the 'marginalised'.

Scrutinising the textual politics, the language as a means of flagging a protest, opens up new avenues for debate. While the author relays a linguistic cocktail of indigenous and English words combined with the mythical overtones, the short story resurrects as a 'speakerly text' (Dasgupta 202) – proposed by Henry Louis Gates. The text displays the narrative more realistically with a hint of the oral literary tradition. Though re-working upon a mythical episode, the infused reality in the short story in the form of a 'speakerly text' highlighting 'the phonetic, grammatical and lexical patterns of actual speech and produces the illusion of oral narration', (Dasgupta 202) makes the barbaric crimes visibly alive and more palpable. Mahasveta Devi consciously intermingles the beastial episodes of 'epic narrative' (usually oral) of the past with the unchanged present scenario of the degradation of both identity and body of females. The dialogic interventions scattered in bits and parts all over the short story, intriguingly refers to the overlapping domain of words, expression and conceptualisation of meanings

beyond the literal ones. Thus, on using words and phrases from both the local language and the English, Mahasveta Devi hinges upon the dichotomy of interaction (Dasgupta 202) and unconscious alienation in terms of the expressional linguistic gap between Senanayak and Dopdi. The inherent language of the literary creation thus sensitively cautions and protests against the 'brutal capability' of humans while simultaneously subverting the politicisation of sexuality, violence and body by creating a 'safe' space for the echoing protests of the 'oppressed'.

It is imperative to understand that the short story can be analysed through the microscopic lenses of 'Écriture feminine' (or women's writing) also. On the gendered aspect of narrating and documenting episodes, women's writing has been instrumental. Likewise, Mahasveta Devi in 'Draupadi' merges Maggie Humm's proposed 'Gynographic' writing which 'uses the body as a source of language and metaphor' (Nayar 139) with the realistic chapters of 'fluidity' of women's 'duty' and 'identity'. In strong opposition to the male writing, Mahasveta Devi brings to stage the 'individual' female struggles (with greater emphasis on sexual imageries and body-oriented discourses) through Dopdi rather than 'naturalising' her by reducing her sole motive of life to the preparation of a

womb. On de-commodifying the body, Devi time and again positions her protagonist as a celebratory figure and not as the 'heroine'.

On an earnest note, does crowning a character as the heroine lead to objectification? Unfortunately, yes. The character's journey from 'being' to 'becoming' the ultimate 'heroine' culminates by stagnating as an 'object' of gaze (inspirational or derogatory; as the case may be), study and discipline furnished by the creators and destroyers of social ethics; the 'Men' (Nayar 140). Conceiving the dichotomy of moral, sexual and bodily objectification, Mahasveta Devi detours from positioning Dopdi as the 'object' and celebrates her as the 'subject' of her own will, body, and resistance.

On the whole, the short story very tactfully carves out spaces for alternative myths to cast new transformations of women empowerment. The true beauty and achievement in the upliftment of female consciousness is the celebration of the newfound culture which 'too' can act as resistance through its gendered, sexual and linguistic sectors. Overcoming the recurring binary of the ideal and the rebel (or the Fallen) female, the Draupadis construct 'modes' of female 'visibility' in the male-dominated society through their individual journeys.

On a deeper note, Mahasveta Devi, while re-constructing the tribal version of Draupadi, challenges not just the existent sex-gender duality but also probes deeper onto the individual stance of body politics. The text, the author and her protagonist unanimously resist the anatomical, physiological and social connotations of female existence. Thus, it surpasses the 'exoticisation' of the female body through the exploration of the psychology, the spirit and the intellectuality of feminine figures.

## Notes

[1] To reflect upon the irony of 'greatness' embedded in the word, Mahabharata (Great India), I have bracketed 'Maha'. Putting the word in brackets I intend to decipher 'what exactly is great about India - both back then and now?' The epic portrayal of the hierarchy of discrimination continues systematically in the contemporary patriarchal society too. Both epic Mahabharata's Draupadi and Mahasveta Devi's Dopdi unanimously echo a critical query regarding respectable equality. With the blatant subjugation of females (from gambling bodies to tearing apart both body and identity), the query investigates the contemporary context of Great India, dictated by the Men.

[2] All references to Mahabharata are from 'The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa': Translated into English prose from the original Sanskrit Text by Pratap Chandra Roy, Second edition and Volume II.

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# THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

02

CALLISTINE JUDE LEWIS

Originally developed out of Augusto Boal's work with the Brazilian peasant population, the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' is a form of theatre that engages with issues that are socio-political in nature. It adopts a unique approach by making the audience 'spect-actors'; or directly engaging them with the performance. Within the Theatre of the Oppressed exist subforms such as: Image theatre, Legislative theatre, Rainbow of desire and so on, that are performed through a number of dramatic exercises. In this essay, we shall look at the origin, development and internationalisation of the Theatre of the Oppressed and how it brings systemic issues to the forefront and tackles them with analysis and questioning by directly engaging the audience within it. This form of theatre practises the democratisation of art and often returns the means of production of the art back to the person, as opposed to the finished version; thereby allowing the 'spect-actors' to participate and introspect.

We shall also look at the Indian counterpart of the Theatre of the Oppressed: Jana Sanskriti (JS)

Centre for Theatre of the Oppressed established in 1985, which was the first exponent of Theatre of the Oppressed in India.

Augusto Boal was influenced by Paulo Freire and his landmark treatise on education, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and aimed to make theatre a means to critically question systemic oppression within society. Eventually it was adopted by theatre groups across the world for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community building, therapy and government legislation. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo talks about the humanisation and the dehumanisation of the individual in a setting that is alienating. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed serves as a way to 're-humanize', to help 'unfreeze' and become aware of one's full potential for dialoguing with fellow human beings. The ability to express, communicate and use our bodies have been innate and so the theatre must honour this sense of community and participation. Using theatre games and exercises, Theatre of the Oppressed enables one to reclaim this ability to question and not just accept or give answers; to use the body to 'act' rather than just talk, discuss or debate.

Marx and Engels repeatedly mentioned how 'the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour.' Therefore, in order to subvert this hegemonisation of cultural production, Boal envisions an artform that engages not just the artists, but also the spectators and turns them into 'spect-actors', a term we will further delve into later on. To understand how the Theatre of the Oppressed manifested itself, one needs to look at the socio-political context of the time. The roots of this theatre-form lie in the Brazil of the late fifties. Boal started his career at a time when all nationalist and especially anti-imperialist enterprises were strongly encouraged by the Kubitschek government (Coudray). Boal and other actors close to student groups affiliated with the Brazilian Communist Party, came together to make 'Teatro Arena', a theatre troupe that promoted local playwrights and showed the real living conditions and struggles of the Brazilian working class. They adopted realism and remade it with the former bourgeois aesthetics that characterised Brazilian theatre at the time, allowing for more inclusivity such as, being among the first theatre companies to include black actors and those with heavy accents who were often from the countryside.

The troupe, however, didn't see its audience shift from its present demographic; that of a regular urban middle class public. Therefore, they often performed in the suburbs, favelas and rural areas, organising tours and performing in church squares, streets and even atop trucks. All of this without demanding admission fees. This development of theatre occurred at a favourable time in history, under the progressive government of the Brazilian Labour Party, headed by Joan Goulart. However, in April 1964, a military coup plunged the country into a deeply conservative military dictatorship where dissent was repressed harshly.

These challenges enabled Boal to reinvent his theatre and out of it came many different forms. First was the 'Newspaper Theatre', where the sources were newspaper articles, headlines and even books or speeches. Actors were prompted to reflect on socially relevant issues by acting them out and creating a short scene. These may include a simple reading of the news, connecting contradictory headlines and news articles (eg: Cars are becoming more environment friendly, with one about how pollution by automobiles is a threat to public health), improvising a short skit scene and finally reflecting on how the different methods and enactments helped them understand the issue at hand. This reimagination of

theatre styles allowed common people to be able to control the creation process, without needing help from artists.

Another technique that arose was ‘Invisible Theatre’. Since practising Activist Theatre openly was risky under an oppressive regime, Invisible Theatre was designed to be enacted and performed in public spaces without revealing its theatrical and fictive nature. Actors would prepare short scenes surrounding socio-political issues and then make the audience ‘react’. This was also later emulated in France to open public dialogue on homosexuality and sexual harrasment in public transport.

Raymond Williams in Resources of Hope, wrote:

‘The essential dominance of a particular class in society is maintained not only, although if necessary, by power, and not only, although always, by property. It is maintained also and inevitably by a lived culture: the saturation of habit, of experience, of outlook [...] so that what people come to think and feel is in large measure a reproduction of the deeply based social order...’

Thus, we see how by restricting the means of production of art and theatre, Theatre has historically been exclusive. Boal does the opposite and gives it back to the people.

This allows for the audience, and especially people from marginalised communities to reclaim their agency and also be within the folds of the art form, eradicating the barriers to entry to theatre that exist within the different levels of oppression.

Another form within the Theatre of the Oppressed that sought to include marginalised communities was 'Forum Theatre', where actors perform well-known scenes from their daily life, such as instances of domestic violence and then ask the audience to stand up from their seats and suggest solutions to the actors, who improvise according to it. Thus, the spectator re-writes the play while the actors still play their part. Sometimes even spectators come on stage and substitute the actors in order to find a way out of the situation; thus evolving narratives of discourse and critical thinking and urging the audience to involve themselves in the play.

Paulo Freire's influence, regarding awareness and raising critical consciousness, can be seen in the way Forum Theatre is done, along with aspects drawn from the Socratic Method. This function of making the audience interpret and analyse various situations is displayed with the presence of the 'Joker'; a person who guides non-actors
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to grasp theatre techniques and acts as a director within the play to help the audience be a part of the performance. The Joker goes ahead and encourages the audience to become a part of the play, making them act out situations according to their own decisions. There is also the creation of the 'spect-actor', who is not just part of the audience but also involved in the production of the play, as Sophie Coudray writes, '...an oppressed person in possession of theatre's means of production and who intends to use it as a political weapon against the system that oppresses him. A spect-actor is someone who used to be a witness of the world's affairs and who has become, through the practice of theatre, a protagonist.'

The internationalisation of the Theatre of the Oppressed shows its hard earned relevance in the current scenario with plays following this format being performed across continents and communities. The International Theatre of the Oppressed Organisation links other TO groups to one another, to create new centres of theatre. The largest organisation under it is the Jana Sanskriti, set up by Sanjoy Ganguly in the Sunderbans, outside Calcutta. With a membership of over 40,000 people and 30 theatre teams, the organisation has been able to enact real grassroot-level changes in the fields of healthcare,

welfare, infrastructure and education. In 2000, Jana Sanskriti, with the help of the local agricultural community conceptualised, 'Mukta Mancha', an 'open stage' in Digambarpur village, recognising the need to open theatre to everyone regardless of socio-economic disparity. It is now central to the organisation's activities. It is also often used by the local government as well as the village community for theatre, dance, drawing, painting, meetings and performances. Since 2004, they have also regularly organised Muktadhara, a bi-annual International Forum Theatre Festival allowing Theatre of the Oppressed groups from all over the world to partake and spread dialogue and techniques. A 2016 report by the Centre for Training and Research in Public Finance Policy titled 'Evaluation of Jana Sanskrit, a social-cultural intervention in South 24 Parganas' highlights the level of social change brought about in areas where the theatre groups were active in the dialogue on women empowerment in society. The research compared villages where Jana Sanskriti has been active for more than two decades (treatment villages) and in villages where JS or any other theatre group has not been active (control villages). A random sample of 123 villages was selected and a structured questionnaire assessing effectiveness of 'treatment' pertaining to issues like domestic violence and women's autonomy was shared.

The figures in the treatment villages show that responses regarding 'verbal and physical abuse' in households were far less in areas where the theatre groups were active. Thus, the study seems to point towards a trend where Jana Sanskriti has been able to give oppressed women a platform for discourse and also change the mindset of their male counterparts. Thus, the Theatre of the Oppressed practised by JS has been instrumental in raising awareness among the population regarding existing laws that protect women against violence and also instil a sense of socio-cultural change and an unwinding of patriarchal norms and customs.

The example of Jana Sanskriti as an organisation disseminating a form of theatre that allows for the emancipation of marginalised groups, further points at its current relevance in a world where culture and resistance thrive side by side. Therefore, not only is the conservation and preservation of arts important, but also their democratisation. It is essential to make sure that the modes of cultural production are not hegemonised by casteist, patriarchal and bourgeoisie forces in the society, a prerequisite for protecting the sanctity of the arts as a vehicle of reformation.

Thus, the Theatre of the Oppressed and its various forms allowed for the democratisation of the arts, especially in the fields of Theatre, to shift the cultural mode of production back to the people and not be able to be gatekept by the elites alone and also to allow for the emancipation of marginalised individuals the world over and allow for discourse and dialogue.

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# I PROTEST

03

SHIMAILA MUSHTAQ

***TRIGGER WARNING: This article contains mentions of rape, sexual assault, police brutality, state-led persecution and murder.***

Art, among other things, is an expression, and what the oppressed want the most is to tell their story – the beginning of resistance. This desire to scream one's truth exists irrespective of whether you are an artist or not, but what artists have is an audience. Therefore, MC Kash begins his song 'I Protest' with a dedication to the people of Kashmir.

In September of 2010, the year that witnessed a popular uprising against Indian Occupation, Roushan Illahi, who goes by the stage name MC Kash, released 'I Protest'. Although the hip-hop scene has been prevalent in Kashmir for a long time, this song was the first in the history of the Kashmiri political hip-hop scene, to garner mass attention. This heralded a journey for several young artists in the valley that witnessed many ups and downs, the biggest obstacle being the attempts at repressing such music by India.

Here is a breakdown of the song:

Stanza 1

They say when you run from darkness all you seek is light
But when the blood spills over you will stand and fight
Threads of deceit woven around a word of plebiscite
By treacherous puppet politicians who have no soul inside
My paradise is burning with troops left loose with ammo
Who murder and rape then hide behind a political shadow
Like a casino human life is thrown like a dice
I'll summarize atrocities till the resurrection of Christ
Can you hear the screams? Now see the revolution
Their bullets, our stones, don't talk restitution
Cause the only solution is the resolution of freedom
Even Khusrow will go back and doubt his untimely wisdom
These killings aint random, it's an organized genocide
Sponsored media who hide this homicide
No more injustice, we won't go down when we bleed
Alive in the struggle even the graves will speak.

The state draws a binary between the good Kashmiri and the bad Kashmiri. The good Kashmiri might as well be caricatured as a simpleton wearing a pheran and selling

apples. The bad Kashmiri is questioned for making the 'wrong' choices, which is what MC Kash addresses in his opening verse – it is obvious that one moves away from darkness and towards light, but when one is oppressed, resistance is the only option. The choices that the 'good Kashmiri' is expected to make don't exist in reality and the darkness that the conflict inflicts upon the valley is not a choice, but is violently imposed on the people by the occupation.

The second verse is a reminder of the promises that were not kept. 'We are not going to stay against the wishes of the people. We are not going to impose ourselves on them at the point of the bayonet.' On June 26, 1952, these were the words of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in the Indian parliament, spoken with regards to Kashmir. Today, Kashmir is the most militarised zone in the world. Indian Occupation forces have killed, tortured and raped with impunity in the valley provided to them by the state of India. Denial of human rights coupled with the agency that comes with the draconian laws like The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), The Public Safety Act (PSA), The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), etc., have been used to crush the resistance of the masses. The local puppet politicians, time and again chose

to be the foot soldiers of the state of India and betray their own people for power. A small example would be the fact that, Papa II, a detention centre operated by the Border Security Force (BSF) and once notorious for torture and abuse, was the official residence of the last Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti. The biggest of these betrayals being the Indira Sheikh accord of 1975. The agreement played a pivotal role in strengthening India's control over the disputed territory. It allowed Sheikh Abdullah to return to power as the chief minister but only after giving up his demand for a plebiscite which was also promised by India in the cover letter of the Instrument of Accession and assured that eventually the issue of accession will be settled according to the wishes of the people. The politicians might have, but the people of Kashmir have still not given up the demand for a free and fair plebiscite, which will finally let them be the masters of their own fate.

Next, Kash laments the presence of the Indian army soldiers in his homeland, whose numbers have grown considerably since the song came out. In fact recently, women soldiers were deployed in the valley for the first time, which was portrayed as good news by the Indian media. The irony here is too obvious. Kash doesn't mince

words while stating what Indian forces have done to the people here. From the rape of a bride on her wedding night, the double rape and murder of Aasiya and Neelofar, and the unfathomable rapes of women of the villages of Kunan and Poshpora and more, to killings of civilians, custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, blinding of protestors by the use of pellet guns and fake encounters, Kashmir has seen it all. These are not isolated incidents, but consequences of a system that turns a blind eye to them and guards those who have been, as M C Kash puts it, 'let loose with ammo'.

Next, he gives voice to the helpless Kashmiris, who feel as if their life has no value and find themselves trapped in this never ending cycle of violence. But, in the very next line, he reestablishes himself and his people as those who refuse to submit to injustice, and promises to keep speaking up.

The next verse deals with a very important aspect of the 'conflict'. The occupying regime has guns and the people merely have stones. Yet in India, the former is a hero and the latter is like a slur, 'pathar baaz/baaj'. He speaks of the massive power imbalance and the futility of offering any compensation other than an end to oppression. He rejects

any compensation and in the very next verse, he explains that the only solution is freedom.

There is also a reference to the very well known saying by Amir Khusro:

Agar firdaus bar ru-ye zameen ast
Hamin ast-o hamin ast-o hamin ast

If there is paradise on earth
It is here, it is here, it is here.

Kash highlights that this statement doesn't stand anymore as the oppression has forced the valley into darkness. This can also be seen as an attack on the romanticisation of the valley and its people and the promotion of it as the perfect tourist destination, as part of state propaganda to cover up its crimes.

The last two verses directly call out the genocide and question the role of the media, which is clearly biased in favor of the oppressors and in fact, works for them. The state clamp down on dissent might tempt some to reminisce about the good old days when news wasn't this biased and false. The truth is that this nostalgia is a myth.

Marginalised communities like Dalits, Muslims, etc., have been under-represented in the mainstream Indian media for the longest time and hence their issues seldom received the coverage they deserved. In fact, the media in many cases has actively vilifed them, which no doubt has increased lately for the Muslim community, a pattern shockingly similar to one that precedes genocides in other places. The voices from Kashmir have never made it to India's mainstream media, which is heavily influenced by military jingoism. Platforms which have always been at the disposal of the state for glorifying the army cannot cater to the needs of those oppressed by the same institutions. This song, released in 2010, before BJP came to power, is yet another proof that the media has always ignored and even contributed to worsening the plight of Kashmiris and that it is not an issue ushered in solely by the rise of the BJP.

In this context, M. C. Kash challenges the credibility of the media and throws light on their involvement in facilitating the killings in the valley. The last line of this stanza reiterates the will to fight and resist. It mentions that even the dead will speak – which has a particular significance in the valley, the land of enforced disappearances and unmarked graves. According to

various civil society reports, about 8000 people have been picked up by the Indian security agencies between 1989 and early 2000s; who have 'disappeared'. Many of these people left behind 'half widows', a term referring to women whose husbands were the victims of enforced disappearances. They are presumed dead (killed in extra judicial killings or tortured to death) but there is no proof to back this up under a regime that refuses to take accountability for its crimes. Therefore, along with facing countless problems from financial to social struggles their lives are also plagued by a longing for the return of their husbands. It was only after the civil society investigations revealed the presence of unmarked graves, that the State Human Rights Commission came out with a report backing their claims and acknowledging the presence of unmarked graves. The report also identified 574 bodies being of local Kashmiris.

Chorus:

I protest
Against the things you done
I protest
For a mother who lost her son
I protest I will throw stones and never run
I protest

For my brother who is dead
I protest
Against the bullet in his head
I protest
I will throw stones and never run
I protest
Until my freedom has come

This strongly worded chorus is a reminder that victims of India's brutality, and those they have left behind have not been forgotten. There will be protests until justice is delivered and these protests, instead of trying to adhere to the binary of good and bad protest, very openly embrace the method of resistance that people have chosen time and again to make their voice heard. For the longest time, use of lethal weapons, from bullets to pellets have been justified by drawing false equivalence between people carrying stones and the second largest army (in terms of size) in the world. Although peaceful protest has never stopped the state from using fatal force, incidents of stone throwing have been used by the state as a leverage to excuse it's trampling over the human rights of the people of the valley. M C Kash instead of taking an apologetic tone, asserts that the stones are thrown when bullets are used and by doing so exposes the hypocrisy in demonizing the self defense of a community against the Indian army.

Democratically had elections, now that's completely absurd
I will tell you some stuff that you obviously never heard
A ten-year-old kid voted with all his fingers
A whole village gang raped, a cry still lingers
These are the tales from the dark sides of a murderous regime
An endless occupation of our land and our dreams
Democratic politics will cut our throats before we speak
How they talk about peace when there is blood in our streets
When freedom of speech is subjected to strangulation
Flames of revolution engulfs the population
The rise through suppression and march to be free
Face covered in a rag labeled a revolutionary
Through this fight for survival I want the world to see
A murderous oppression written down in police brutality
Stones in my hand, it's time you pay the price
For plundering and rape in a beautiful paradise.

In the 1987 Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly elections, the parties which had opposed the National Conference asserted that the elections were rigged when a coalition government between the Congress and the National Conference headed by Farooq Abdullah was

formed. It is widely accepted that the elections were in fact rigged by Farooq Abdullah himself, although he claims he was not involved in it. There is no consensus on the extent to which the electoral malpractice altered the result. These words of a Congress leader at the time, Khem Lata Wukhloo, are quoted in a BBC report from 2002: "I remember that there was a massive rigging in 1987 elections. The losing candidates were declared winners. It shook the ordinary people's faith in the elections and the democratic process." Hence any claim about democratically held elections is absurd for Kash.

This stanza also refers to the deplorable incident of Kunan Poshpora in 1991 – the year usually associated with the LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) reforms in India. For Kashmiris, this is the year when the army raped between 23 to 100 women in the villages of Kunan and Poshpura. The use of sexual violence is not only limited to women, men too have been tortured and sexually abused by the men in uniforms.

A very important feature of a democracy, apart from free and fair elections, is freedom of speech, which has long been denied to Kashmiris, from whom access to the internet is snatched as per the whims of the regime,

journalists are incarcerated, students are harassed for things like graffiti and celebrating sports victories, right to protest is denied, etc. This is why Kash mocks the 'democratic' politics for quashing dissent when he says, 'democratic politics will cut our throats before we speak.' He calls the struggle of the people a 'fight for survival', which goes on to show that it is not really a conflict between two stakeholders but that between the oppressor and the oppressed. Towards the end, he pays a tribute to all the civilians killed in 2010 – including Sameer Rah, the eight year old beaten to death by Indian forces – the most impactful and heartbreaking part of the song.

# 04

# BHIMGEET: AMBEDKARITE RHYTHM AGAINST BRAHMANICAL NOISE

SARANSH NAGARE

तुम्ही किती बी लावा शक्ती,
अन किती पण लढवा युक्ती ।
तुम्ही कराल किती हि हल्ला,
लय मजबूत भिमाचा किल्ला ।

The above lines are part of a song by Arun Yewle, which mean that no matter how much they push themselves, no matter how big chaos they create, Bhim's castle is and will remain impenetrable. These songs, popularly known as ‘Bhimgeet’, form the heart and soul of Dalit-Bahujan community's cultural expression. Over the years, many new forms of musical expressions have emerged, ranging from Tathagata Buddha songs and *Bhimgeet* to Chamar Pop and Dalit Rock. These songs not only enabled the Dalit masses to rebuild their identity, but also reclaim the social space that was historically inaccessible to them.

The Brahmanical structures have oppressed the Dalit masses for centuries. Their position in the caste hierarchy was fixed, which denied them access to education, material resources and dignity, and strictly demolished the chances of social mobility. So, for a long time, Dalits were carrying the burden of an alien identity, that was built by the exploitative Brahmanical order, which rendered them subhuman. While the Bhakti tradition tried to incorporate different marginalised sections of society under its fold, it simultaneously attempted to ground them in the same religion that was oppressing them.

Babasaheb Ambedkar addressed the issue of division of Untouchables into many jatis and united them under the term 'Dalit' (the broken people). 'Dalit' emerged as a common identity and infused them with a sense of an indigenous, ethnic identity and a religious affiliation to Buddhism.

Ambedkar knew that there was no salvation for Dalits in Hinduism. Therefore, he came up with an idea that played an indispensable role in redefining the fate of the Dalit community. Ambedkar decided to give up the religion that reduced them to a life of servitude and decided to convert into Buddhism. The choice of Buddhism carried a

lot of historical value because it was Buddhism that had once tried to rival the Brahmanical order and had created an inclusive space for many marginalised sections. This is why Babasaheb Ambedkar, with lakhs of other Dalit people, converted to Buddhism on 14th October, 1956, the day popularly remembered as the 'Dhammachakra Pravartan Diwas'. This new form of Buddhism came to be known as 'Navayana Buddhism'. This Dalit unity had workers, middle castes and peasants at its core. Post independence, this space was marked by the rise of the Republican Party of India in 1957. However, it later witnessed factionalism and rise of other radical alternatives like Dalit Panthers in 1972, who have left a rich legacy of literature. The rise of Bahujan Samaj Party, led by Kanshiram, is another trajectory that sought to capture state power to rectify the historical wrongs and establish a new socio-economic order from above through social engineering. These developments helped build a sort of 'Dalit Consciousness'. But the focus was shifted back to songs and other artistic ways of cultural resistances with the coming of Sambhaji Bhagat, the legendary *Bhimgeet* singer.

The roots of *Bhimgeet* can be traced to the transition from Dalit *tamasha* to Ambedkarite *jalsas* (*tamashas* and *jalsas* are traditional art forms that incorporate dance and music

performances, sometimes mixed with drama). These performances (*tamashas*) by the Mahar community incorporated 'Lavani' (a popular folk dance of Maharashtra) but they went into decline with the accusations of 'vulgarity' of the dance. The state started shutting down *tamashas* in 1940s, with the claim that 'prostitution was being practised in the name of art'. The demise of *tamasha* was marked by the growth of Ambedkarite *jalsas*. The history of Ambedkarite *jalsas* is closely linked to Dr. Ambedkar's call to artists in 1931, within the Dalit community, to use their art to create anti-caste awareness. As a result, Bhinrao Karadak and his group performed a Shahiri jalsa in Bombay. This marked the beginning of Ambedkarite *jalsas*. *Bhimgeet* and Tathagata Buddha songs originated in the 1950s after Ambedkar's 'Mahaparinirvana' or death. These songs eulogise Babasaheb for his efforts and preach Buddha's message of equality and fraternity. Most popular in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, these songs marked a new cultural wave with widespread mass appeal. One could hear these songs being played in Dalit localities, sometimes on their personal television sets (on channels like Bahujan TV, Awaz India, etc) or else in the form of concerts by Dalit artists, mostly singing in Marathi or Hindi. These songs are often circulated in the

form of booklets or audio cassette tapes. Over the time, various other popular forms developed.

These songs played a very crucial role in building a community from scratch and gave many oppressed people an identity. These songs reflected their history, their stories and their leaders. They could easily give up the culture borrowed from their oppressors, now that they had a culture of their own. These songs are not only a language of resistance but also a reply to the hegemony of upper caste domination which is visible everywhere. *Bhimgeet* is a cultural assertion that tries to unite people under the rhythm of Buddha and Ambedkar's teachings, against the noise of Brahmanical order.

*Bhimgeet* often involves adaptation of mainstream Bollywood songs, as they retain the tune but change the lyrics, to reflect their culture. Such adaptations are mostly done to increase the circulation and popularity of the songs. But other than commercial reasons, it is mostly done for resignification, so as to gain the social space that the Dalit community deserves. For example, if there is a mainstream *bhajan* (devoutional song) dedicated to a Hindu God, Tathagata Buddha song will have similar form but lyrics will emphasise on the teachings of Gautam Buddha. Another example is the following *Bhimgeet* that

tries to claim Ambedkar's place on the Rupee (with a suit and tie), with the logic that when we follow the law of Babasaheb, then why do we have Gandhi on the Currency notes?:

कायदा भीमाचा पन फोटो गांधीचा
शोभून दिसतो का नोटावर
किती शोभाला असता भीम नोटावर
टाय आणि कोटावर

Some of the common *Bhimgeet* singers and artists include Sambhaji Bhagat, Anand Shinde, Vishal Gajipuri, Pramita Gautam, Shanti Swaroop Baudh, Milind Shinde, Ginni Mahi, etc. Sambhaji Bhagat, one of the most popular Dalit Lokshahir (singer-poets), recreated the traditional Dalit music and infused it with revolutionary ideas. He starts many of his performances by proclaiming 'We are not here to entertain you, we are here to disturb you'. In his performances, Bhagat engages with the audience and tries to invoke 'Dalit Chetna' (Eleanor Zelliot describes 'Dalit Consciousness' as the elements in Dalit collective culture which allow pride, self respect and vision of the future).

Dalit music has especially empowered the Dalit women singers, who actively take part in the production of Dalit

music. These singers earn recognition in their community and their music is valued as an important means for creating a sense of solidarity among the Dalit people. The process of singing also allows these Dalit women to capture the public spaces that would have been otherwise inaccessible to them. For example, Kadubai Kharat, a single mother of three, who earns a living by performing *Bhimgeet,* is a renowned singer from Aurangabad. She eulogises Ambedkar in her songs, to an audience waving flags with Jai Bhim written on them, thus building a counter space against the upper caste hegemony. Similarly, Punjabi folk and hip-hop singer Ginni Mahi became a global sensation with her songs 'Fan Baba Sahib Di' and 'Danger Chamar'.

Many of the Tathagata Buddha songs are produced by organisations like Youth for Buddhist India (YFBI) that seek to spread awareness among the Dalit people. Many new bands are also surfacing, who have started dominating the domains of Dalit Rock and Bhim Rap world. Dhamma Wings is the first Buddhist band of India that holds regular concerts and has gained widespread repute. Another one is The Casteless Collective, which is a 12 member band and is supposedly the largest political band in the country. They aim to educate their audience with Ambedkarite thought.

But these Dalit artists have to often tackle state's repressive powers in the course of their continued cultural resistance. Their songs are often sabotaged and they are put behind bars.

'Dalita re halla bol na….Shramika re halla bol na' (Dalits, proclaim the attack…. Workers proclaim the attack) was a song that changed the face of anti-caste struggle in the 2000s. The song was sung by Shahir Shantanu Kamble. In 2005, he was accused by police of having links with the Naxalites and was put in police custody for almost a 100 days. Following this torturous time, his health deteriorated, however, he continued writing and singing. Similarly, *Bhimgeet* singers Vishal Gajipuri and Sapna Baodh, known popularly for their album *Yuddh nahi Buddh chahiye* (We want Budhha, not war), were arrested in January 2021 by the Uttar Pradesh police for having joined a sit-in protest.

*Bhimgeet* has thus contributed immensely to the creation of a counter public sphere which has helped Dalits to come out of their traditional roles of servitude (created by the Brahmanical order), using oppositional narratives. Bhimgeet constitute an important part of the multi-dimensional Dalit Movement.

The songs helped in regaining the identity that was institutionally erased by Savarnas. Although lack of finances has always been an issue, with the continued production of Bhimgeet and its growing popularity on platforms like YouTube, artists and their audience are getting more confidence to step out and normalise these songs as much as other mainstream songs. While these songs spread the message of Buddha and Ambedkar, the Dalit community hopes to soon achieve the dreams that once Babasaheb saw, with each coming generation bringing new hope.

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# DREAMING FREEDOM: REMEMBERING KATERINA GOGOU

05

SOUMYA SINGH

***TRIGGER WARNING: This article contains mentions of homophobia, substance abuse, death and brutality.***

The Anarchist Movement in Greece is one of the strongest of its kind in the world. It is also well documented, to a certain extent at least. However, the role of women and LGBTQIA+ communities in the movement has not been the subject of any rigorous study and is preserved in very few pockets of digital memory. The Movement has had its crests and troughs, and one of them was in the 1980s and 1990s, in the years following the Greek military junta. This was a result of widespread disillusionment with the country's politics and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Exarchia, a neighbourhood in Athens, was one of the centres of this movement. Historically, it has been a centre of the intellectual left, and is still a centre of controversy and government crackdowns. Despite the long, winding and turbulent decades

it still breathes the spirit of revolution. It is in this town that the legacy of Katerina Gogou lives on.

The attempt in this essay is to undertake a brief remembrance of a woman who should have found her place in history, memory and popular imagination quite some time ago, whether in Greece or in pan-national socialist movements and solidarities. Whether due to her political affiliations or a general disregard towards women in history, the events of her life are only preserved in scattered articles and blogs on the Internet. Almost no formal research has been done, whether in the form of simple biographies or analysis of her complex political motivations. Most of her poems also remain largely untranslated. Therefore, an attempt at contextualising her poetry in historically accurate socio-political processes may prove difficult. The article, therefore, only has excerpts and conjectures; parts of her poems, and certain assumptions on the motivations behind them. These excerpts are not chronological or all-encompassing. They are a few unmethodical picks, meant to convey the need to make Katerina Gogou the centre of history of the times she lived in, whether in the form of a microhistory or a part of the history of mentalités or a part of any of the momentous developments that have taken place in history.

In her lifetime, Gogou published six collections of poetry – *Three Clicks Left, Idiomini, Wooden Overcoat, The Absentees, The Month of the Frozen Grapes* and *The Return Journey*. She was an important figure in a generation of radical-left poets of Greece and a product of the youth anarchist culture that had developed in the later decades of the twentieth century. Even within the leftist frame, she was one of the few to address the issues of social reproduction of gender norms, male ideas of femininity, stereotypes in cinema and prostitution in Athens. Her feminism was complex and radical, and stood at the intersection of constructs like sex, gender roles, patriarchy, sexuality and queerness.

In her second collection, *Idimiano,* she writes,

*"She is dangerous – when god is bringing down the world with hail and rain she comes out on the streets without socks and whistles at the men she throws stones at the police cars and lies like a squirrel on trees lighting her cigarette with thunders.*
*The last time she was spotted at the same date and year in three different places – based on valid information the blown up bridge of Manhattan the delivery of weapons to anarchocommunist movements as well as the exportation of top secret state information are to be attributed to the same person. She is believed to be wearing a red or black military woolly jumper*

*childish pearl ribbons in her hair with her hands in the pockets of a borrowed jacket.*
*Place of birth: unknown*
*Sex: unknown*
*Vocation: unknown*
*Religion: atheist*
*Eye colour: unknown*
*Name: Sofia Viky Maria Olia Niki Anna Effie Argyro*
*Darius Darius. To all patrol cars Attention she is armed. Dangerous. Armed. Dangerous*
*Her name is Sofia Viky Maria Olia Niki Anna Effie Argyro*
*And she is Beautiful Beautiful Beautiful Beautiful my god...”*

The next poem under consideration is said to be dedicated to her friend Sonia. Sonia was a transvestite radical and an important figure in the gay liberation movement of the 1980s. The gay liberation movement of Greece in the 1980s had its peculiar aspects, such as the Kraximo, a one of its kind magazine to be published at that time. These aspects of the anarchist movement in Greece lack proper documentation, despite the fact that these are stories worth the attention of historians and of immense cultural value to the queer community. The transvestites are said to have constituted the most militant part of the struggle. They had no one on their side, the right wing government had proposed a law for displacing ‘homosexuals’ to barren

islands in 1979 and the traditional communists believed homosexuality to be a 'bourgeois perversion' (The words RED KNIVES in the excerpt below is said to be a reference to this). Sonia was also a close friend of Paola Reveniti, the leading figure in the movement.

Sonia was brutally assassinated and her body was mutilated and left on display on the Atikki coastline. In 1986, Gogou in the memory of her friend wrote,

*'She bent her pale head with a sigh*
*and fell asleep*
*for ever*
*Above her the sky mountainous*
*Barren landscape –dark-*
*stones only and rocks not even rain...*
*Bride you with the plastered mouth red*
*Brocade hands melted handiwork*
*Offered pleadingly*
*Some lilies*
*Around the fresh earth your girlfriends*
*Sad and over-painted*
*Making strange noises*
*As craving attention*
*In order to play in some film*
*Here this ring child poem*

*Word of Honour*
*This hour that the future-ones*
*Learn the eagle's flight*
*This hour that your forehead*
*Reveals what is hidden*
*Always the same hour*
*That the RED KNIVES*
*Kill the Different ones…'*

Gogou lived through a lot in her life; the German occupation of Greece, subsequent National Resistance movement, the Civil War, the far right Greek military junta, the anarchist movement, abolition of the monarchy and a transition to 'democracy'. She died in 1993, from an overdose. She is said to have spent a major chunk of the last years of her life in clinics, perhaps as a result of the collective psychological trauma that the country went through. This trauma resurges in a lot of her works, one of them called *What I fear most is becoming a 'poet':*

*What I fear most*
*is becoming "a poet"…*
*Locking myself in the room*
*gazing at the sea*
*and forgetting…*
*I fear that the stitches over my veins might heal*

*and, instead of having blur memories about TV news,*
*I take to scribbling papers and selling "my views"...*
*I fear that those who stepped over us might accept me*
*so that they can use me.*
*I fear that my screams might become a murmur*
*so that to serve putting my people to sleep.*
*I fear that I might learn to use meter and rhythm*
*and thus I will be trapped within them*
*longing for my verses to become popular songs.*
*I fear that I might buy binoculars in order to bring closer*
*the sabotage actions in which I won't be participating.*
*I fear getting tired – an easy prey for priests and academics –*
*and so turn into a "sissy"...*
*They have their ways ...*
*They can utilize the routine in which you get used to,*
*they have turned us into dogs:*
*they see to us being ashamed for not working...*
*they see to us being proud for being unemployed...*
*That's how it is.*
*Keen psychiatrists and lousy policemen*
*are waiting for us in the corner.*
*Marx...*
*I am afraid of him...*
*My mind walks past him as well...*
*Those bastards...they are to blame...*

*I cannot -fuck it- even finish this writing...*
*Maybe...eh?...maybe some other day.*

There is a sense of loss, injustice, anger and will for radical change in her poetry. In one of her relatively more well-known works, which was discovered and translated after her death, she writes of inequalities, injustice, the reasons for violence, and the prospects of freedom and harmony.

The poem reads,

*'Don't you stop me. I am dreaming.*
*We lived centuries of injustice bent over.*
*Centuries of loneliness.*
*Now don't. Don't you stop me.*
*Now and here, for ever and everywhere.*
*I am dreaming freedom.*
*Though everyone's*
*All-beautiful uniqueness*
*To reinstitute*
*The harmony of the universe.*
*Lets play. Knowledge is joy.*
*Its not school conscription.*
*I dream because I love.*
*Great dreams in the sky.*
*Workers with their own factories*

*Contributing to world chocolate making.*
*I dream because I KNOW and I CAN.*
*Banks give birth to "robbers".*
*Prisons to "terrorists".*
*Loneliness to "misfits".*
*Products to "need"*
*Borders to armies.*
*All caused by property.*
*Violence gives birth to violence.*
*Don't now. Don't you stop me.*
*The time has come to reinstitute*
*the morally just as the ultimate praxis.*
*To make life into a poem.*
*And life into praxis.*
*It is a dream that I can I can I can*
*I love you*
*And you do not stop me nor am I dreaming. I live.*
*I reach my hands*
*To love to solidarity*
*To Freedom.*
*As many times as it takes all over again.*
*I defend ANARCHY.'*

She was an exceptional woman. She dreamt of freedom and she did so, steel in her words and actions. These dreams, and her life, are worth acknowledging and

documenting. As a woman in a politically charged climate, her poems were moulded by complicated ideas of resistance, freedom and change. To study and analyse them as socio-historical objects or as cultural entities is to reconceptualise the limited and biased ways in which we characterise our past, present and future.

# Notes

1. For a glimpse of this digital memory see - the Working Class History post on Katerina Gogou https://www.instagram.com/p/CUkdPu_gAUB/?utm_medium=copy_link

2. The Greek junta, also known as the Regime of the Colonels, was a period during which Greece was ruled under a military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974, following a coup by far right authoritarian members of the military.

3. For more Information on Kraximo and Paola Revenioti see:
Kraximo Archive https://web-archive org.translate.goog/web/20010414042140/http://www.geocities.com/kraximo/kraximo/contkraximo.htm?_x_tr_sl=el&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-GB&_x_tr_pto=nui,sc

Butt Magazine:
https://www-buttmagazine com.translate.goog/magazine/pictures/kraximo/_x_tr_sch=http&_x_tr_sl=el&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-GB&_x_tr_pto=nui,sc

The Breeder Magazine: https://thebreedersystem-com.translate.goog/activity/paola-curated-by-andreas-angelidakis/?_x_tr_sl=el&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en-GB&_x_tr_pto=nui,sc

4. While the term 'Transvestites' has been reclaimed to an extent from its derogatory connotations, the term 'Cross-dressers' is preferred by certain members of the community.

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06

# MUSIC, POLITICS AND DISSENT
# PASSIVE REVOLUTION IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

KHUSHI ANUPRIYA DUDI

***TRIGGER WARNING: This article contains mentions of drug use.***

'I am one of those whose cultural actions, not political actions, were sufficient to make me a subversive. The politicians made us political…'

This statement was made by Vratislav Brabenec, the saxophonist of the underground, anti-communist, psychedelic band called The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU), formed during the communist regime of Czechoslovakia. The band expressed the appeal of a particular cultural element – rock-jazz music – to bring about a change in the political scenario of Czechoslovakia and witnessed one of the turning points in the history of the nation – the Velvet Revolution. The band's existence, its obstinate nature and actions, its expression of a subverted

opinion and culture, and its success in amassing political support, makes it an apt example of using culture as a mode of resistance.

The history of Jazz in Czechoslovakia was riddled with troubles, including its strict prohibition by the Nazi party in 1938. The revival of Czech jazz happened during the Communist regime in 1945 but the repressive censorship laws of Antonin Novotný soon suppressed this 'Jolt of Democracy' as jazz was considered a symbol of American culture. Between January and August 1968, Czechoslovakia witnessed the 'Prague Spring' – a period of democratic and liberal reforms under the leadership of Alexander Dubček, who replaced former President Antonín Novotný. The repression of jazz was undone by Dubĉek's reforms, paving the way for the proliferation of drugs and music. However, the Warsaw troops and Soviet invasion soon crushed the Spring. After a month of the invasion, inspired by American bands like Velvet Underground (VU) and the singer Frank Zappa, Milan Hlavsa formed the band, The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU) in 1968.

However, after the invasion and the consequent communist crackdown in the form of censorships, they were forced to go underground. In the 1970s, their license was revoked and they were demoted to an 'amateur status'

which meant that they could no longer rehearse openly. There was an acute paucity of rehearsal spaces. Ivan Martin Jirous, PPU's creative director, an art critic and a member of the Union of Artists, used to deliver lectures on Andy Warhol, the founder of Velvet Underground (VU), in the convention halls and thus, often helped stage PPU's performances in the name of 'demonstrating' the music of VU.

PPU's journey took a major turn after Vratislav Brabenec joined the band. A generation older, Brabenec directed the band towards playing originally composed music in Czech (whereas earlier it was in English). They applied for the 'professional status' again, which was temporarily given but withdrawn only two weeks later, on the grounds of the 'morbid' nature of the band leading to 'negative social impact'.

Despite this, they refused to change the American nature of their songs and went underground, outside the control of the government, in the Bohemian villages. Even though the concert settings were remote, police crackdown was brutal. Nevertheless, they went ahead and organised the First (and eventually Second) Music Festival of the 'Second Culture'. They defined the Second Culture as 'the culture that would not be dependent on the official channel of

communication, social recognition, the hierarchy of values laid down by the establishment' and, hence, would present an alternative to the mainstream propagated culture.

However, there was a severe crackdown in 1976, wherein major leaders of the bands were arrested and tried for 'organized disturbance of peace'. Vaclav Havel, a major dissident leader who went on to serve as the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first of the Czech Republic, resolved to make a difference. In 1977, he formed a Human Rights Organisation called the 'Charter 77' that aimed to propagate the authentic and sovereign right to express. After their release, PPU organised the Third Music Festival of the Second Culture in Havel's country home where the police circled the barn and kept a close watch on the band's activities. Thanks to the Charter 77, albums like *Hundred Points* (1979), *Passion Play* (1980), *Leading Horses* (1981), *Slaughterhouse* (1983) and *Midnight Mouse* (1986) were released and PPU were encouraged by the government to organise Rockfest '86 (the national rock festival). The bands that had previously been banned were now allowed to perform as the communist regime wanted to counter the influence of the emerging 'Punk Rock,' – the so-called leather-clad, bad attitude teenagers, with spiky tri-coloured hair. In 1988, the band broke up over a dispute regarding changing the band's name, to secure a

license from the government. Following this, Hlavsa formed 'Pulvoc', a band comprising a younger generation of artists and the core of the PPU. They travelled and performed abroad, dedicated their songs to Jirous (who was in prison for eight out of the past fifteen years) and had a seven-city national tour of the USA.

On 17 November, 1989, the Velvet Revolution was ignited as a result of the anti-communist protests and revolutions following the fall of the Berlin Wall. This led to the release of Jirous and also the staging of the most famous concert in the country's history by the Czech Philharmonic. Finally, on 29 December 1989, Havel became the nation's president, replacing the communists. By encouraging the band and inviting PPU's inspiration like Frank Zappa and Lou Reed (founder of VU), the government tried to make the 'human community meaningful' and pursue 'anti-political politics.' The band reunited on the 20th anniversary of Charter 77 in 1997.

The band had a substantial influence on the country's politics and vice-versa. Even if not central, it still played an important role in endorsing an alternative culture and challenging the mainstream, simply by the virtue of its existence. As far as my analysis goes, it made use of certain crucial tools within the culture to resist. They can be broadly classified as ideology, music, lifestyle and

morality.

In terms of ideology, they posed a challenge to the communist order by critiquing it. The name 'Plastic People' was taken from a song with the same name by Frank Zappa, implying the desire for a plethora of choices and promoting consumerism. This simply countered what the communist regime stood for, thus, the band was deemed 'corrupt'. In terms of music, the genre of their music was rock-jazz and seemed to represent the global taste. Given the western influence, this was strictly against the regime's local/national view of culture. Interestingly, even the communist regime encouraged jazz after the Nazi prohibitions were lifted because it wanted to promote the development of Czechoslovak Jazz. However, with jazz increasingly taking up an American character and English being used as the language of the music, it posed a challenge to the culture that the state wanted to promote. In terms of lifestyle, there was a combined influence of the American way of life in the years of the Cold War and the consequent soft power supremacy or people's yearning for a 'modern' lifestyle free from impositions and controls of the Soviet regime.

This was reflected in people wearing blue jeans, keeping long hairstyles and performing Beatles' 'Happenings'

following the Beatlemania of the early 1960s and the influential visit of Allen Ginsberg. As far as morality is concerned, the PPU played a major role in the sustenance and promotion of a way of living not just in the everyday culture of dressing, but also in the consumption of drugs as bands like PPU were psychedelic bands composing original, dark, atmospheric music. They also challenged the established norms of morality by the usage of explicit lyrics that were considered vulgar, corrupting, and anti-social for the youth and society.

The task here is not to critique or appreciate the cultures – mainstream or underground – but to understand how the existence of a culture was a way of channelising resistance against the imposition of a hegemonic culture and repression of the desires of the people. This counter-culture subverted the mainstream. It helped galvanise the Velvet Revolution. The Revolution is distinguished by its peaceful agitations and clenched fists wearing velvet gloves. The Revolution has a symbolic value of referring to VU, the American band that stimulated the growth of hundreds of similar bands in the country, including PPU. This is a testimony to the impact that can be made by using culture to channelise the unwillingness to give in to oppression. It is still one of the most non-violent transitions of power. It represents a climax in the

evolution of dissent in the region – from the formation of a band to express the love for the music (in fact, Havel described the band as ‘pre-political’ and ‘part of innocent youth culture – uncompromised, uninterested in the corrupt world of 'politics'...’) to actively using music to unite people by conducting concerts. Havel himself chose the lyrics of some songs and harboured semi-professional, illegal recordings at his cottage.

The unyielding nature of the musicians in the band against police animosity very softly turned the wheels of change and mobilised the masses. What was personal to them, became political.

The unyielding nature of the musicians in the band against police animosity very softly turned the wheels of change and mobilised the masses. What was personal to them, became political. The political arena was not just local, but subliminal. This culminated in them propagating the Second Culture to resist and also effectively change the regime. In conclusion, the culture which dissents against the conventional always inspires dissent from the status quo; even if the culture comes to dominate the ideas, the history of the culture always inspires people and brews resistance innovatively, transforming its existence into resistance.

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07

# OF DECADENCE AND GLORY: REKHTI, WOMANHOOD AND THE CHANGING SOCIAL ORDER OF 19TH CENTURY NORTH INDIA

DEBANJAN DAS

Cultural expression of love has a long history in the Indian subcontinent, with the same taking many forms across different socio-cultural and temporal contexts. Love, though a universal feeling, depends extensively on the culture and language, with the prevailing norms of comportment being a crucial determinant of how love is expressed between two or more individuals. Evolution and decline of various literary genres can provide us an insight into the pervading notions of love, comportment and sexuality and how the same can be located against the backdrop of socio-political changes.

The *rekhti* form of poetry written in Urdu flourished for a rather short period of time between the late 18th century to mid-19th century, mainly in Awadh, where a vibrant Urdu

literary culture flourished under the rule of the nawabs who had broken away from the Mughal state, but retained certain cultural aspects of it, assimilating it with local traditions. The short life of *rekhti*, along with its eventual erasure and purging can reflect its disruptive nature, which sought to subvert the existing norms of Urdu poetics, earning it significant condemnation from the literary critics from the 19th century onwards.

The *rekhti* genre is believed to have been an innovation of the Urdu poet, Sa'dat Yar Khan 'Rangin', emerging out of his multiple liaisons with the *kangils* (clandestine prostitutes, often married and behind the purdah) in Lucknow, which helped him acquire a sense of the *begumati zuban* (the language of the begums) or the *auraton ki boli*, (the language of the women) which is the distinguishing feature of *rekhti*. Unlike the other forms of Urdu ghazal, *rekhti* was in a feminine voice, and was usually directed towards a feminine subject as well. Gail Minault points out that there was a distinction between the Urdu spoken by the men and the women, given the rigid differentiation of gender roles among the ashraf elite of the period. The language spoken by men became the language of the public discourse (and thus of the literary sphere) and their Urdu was marked by refinement and gentleness, borrowed from the Persianate culture. The begumati zuban, used by women in the absence of men

on the other hand was 'earthly, graphic and colourful' (Minault), devoid of the courtesy and the gentleness that characterised men's language. The *zuban* was characterised by endearment towards women but was also marked by rather innovative curses that were hurled during times of conflict between the women.

The *rekhti* was mostly physical and non-mystical in nature, – the nature of love being this-worldly – with sometimes graphic descriptions of exchanges between the lover and the beloved. *Rekhti* was often set in an urban setting, with descriptions of the mundane existence of women being a crucial component of the poems. However, the poems were not only based on the experiences of the *tawaif*, who occupied a prominent position in the public sphere of 18th-19th century Awadh, but also often reflected the desires of the women hidden from the public sphere, and thus from the literary sphere as well – that is that of the *sharif* women, often behind the *purdah* in the *zenana*. However, in spite of their seclusion from the public sphere, these women were able to create intricate kinship networks among themselves, which for instance, became rather important to arrange marriages.

Ruth Vanita, in her study of *rekhta* vis-a-vis *rekhti*, critiquing the traditional view that *rekhta and rekhti* represent binary opposites, has argued that the two

cannot be hermeneutically separated from each other. In many cases, the poets were the same, as was the rhythm and form, and also in some cases, entire *rekhta* verses were written in *rekhti* form by simply changing a few words. She viewed that both the *rekhta* and the *rekhti* in this period often defied the poetic conventions for the *ghazals*, by making the gender identity of the lovers explicit, making the actors enjoy pleasures and have happy endings to their love, instead of the pining and suffering that was characteristic of the *ghazal*. The contravention of the conventions also earned the ire of the orthodox elite in the 19th century (Vanita 144-173).

The Urdu literary sphere was overwhelmingly homosocial in nature, with the poets and their audience being overwhelmingly male, even though there were few instances of women writing poetry in the *rekhti* form, and also being patrons of the same. This can be seen from the way the identities of the lover (*aashiq*) and the beloved were always male, with the latter's gender identity being kept somewhat ambiguous, since the beloved was in many cases, a mystical figure. Carla Petievich has argued that *Rekhti*, in this context, can be seen as disruptive because it challenged the established binaries of courtesan/respectable woman, mistress/servants, high/low language, and lover/beloved (Vanita 3).

*Rekhti*, according to C.M. Naim, evolved from being a poetic form which only dealt with erotic desires or love between two women or between a woman and a man, to one which began to deal with issues concerning day to day life, including socio-political issues. The sexual component of the poetry was erased over a period of time, even though the strong feminine voice was retained.

The shift to more mundane issues, Naim argues, was brought about by Jan Sahib, and this was distinct from the explicitly erotic verses of Rangin, Insha, Ju'rat and others (Naim, 47-48). In spite of this apparent shift in the themes of the poetry, Jan Sahib's performances were often rather theatrical. In order to add a more real-life effect to his performance, he would often dress up as a woman and speak with feminine intonations and gestures. Later, *rekhti* poets are also known to have undertaken rather elaborate performances of their poetry.

Naim has argued, in this context, that the *rekhti* was a transvestic verse, with the male poets acquiring a feminine self only temporarily. The poets were often described as having a hyper-masculine self outside the *mushaira,* while behaving in an effeminate manner inside it, which was in consonance with the prevailing forms of entertainment in Lucknow at that point of time (Naim 60-64). Therefore, for Naim, it did not represent a break from

existing socio-cultural structures, but represented a reinforcement of the patriarchal structures. However, Ruth Vanita has countered Naim by problematising the category of the 'woman' – she has argued that while *sharif* women were unlikely to have attended any of the *mushairas*, a number of courtesans did, and some of them also wrote poetry.

The rich patronage offered to *rekhti* suffered a decline over the course of the 19th century, against the backdrop of the entrenchment of the colonial epistemes, which were imbued by the local ruling elites as well, as these ruling elites began to model themselves on the image that the colonial rulers had created of them. In order to legitimise the colonial rule, the colonial rulers systematically evolved a hierarchy of races. Such a classification was highly gendered in nature, with certain races and their cultures being seen as effeminate, thus debased and therefore, in need of reform. The colonial elite, internalising such stereotypes, began to purge or marginalised parts of their culture which were perceived as effeminate in an attempt to masculinise their culture, to live up to the ideal set forth by the colonial ruling elite. Among other things, this involved condemning those aspects of popular culture which were explicitly erotic in nature. Therefore, any expression of women's sexuality, whether by women themselves, or – in case of *rekhti* – by men earned

significant censure from the reformers. Not only were these aspects of popular culture erased, but also newer codes of conduct, especially those for 'respectable' women, began to be articulated from the 19th century onwards, as the various communities began to redefine their identities, the articulation of which heavily rested upon these women now.

As the *ashraf* elite became marginalised in the public sphere, owing to the emergence of the new colonial power structures, the home became the bastion of the Muslim civilisation. (Waheed 990-991) The loss of political power meant that the *ashraf* elite stood emasculated vis a vis the colonial ruling elite, as a result of which, the Muslim man began to assert his authority in the domestic sphere, which he sought to now re-envision in keeping with the larger socio-political context. New literary genres had begun to emerge, which articulated a completely different form of womanhood for the *sharif* women, who were now pushed to be educated and be rational, rid themselves of superstitions and become chaste housewives. Simultaneously, they were now relegated to the sphere of the household. As a distinct public sphere, the world of the *bazar* emerged, which was closed off to the reputable women. The *bazar* was the place of the fallen women, namely the *tawaifs*, who were relegated to the status of the common prostitutes as the older ruling classes lost

their socio-political status, which led to the relegation of these women to the class of the common prostitutes. The *tawaifs* earlier were among the highest tax payers, as well as owners of large amounts of property. They were also accomplished in the performative arts, more educated than the average *sharif* woman, wrote and recited poetry, making them a prominent aspect of the public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries. However, now, the new *ashraf* elite saw these *tawaifs* as the remnants of the past. They were seen as decadent, and a threat to the new social order that had emerged. The previous regimes, especially that of Awadh, were perceived as effeminate in nature, and this effeminacy was seen as a major reason for the downfall of the ruling elite. Petievich notes that there emerged among the Urdu elite, a clear distinction between the poetic cultures of Delhi and Lucknow, with the former being idealised and seen as masculine, while the poetic culture of the latter was seen as decadent because of its effeminate monarchs who were great patrons – and at times, performers – of various forms of arts. However, as Ali Javed Zaidi and Carla Petievich have argued, the notion of there being separate Delhi and Lucknow schools of Urdu culture does not hold much water, given that the poets often travelled between the two cities (Vanita 23). Rangin, for instance, hobnobbed with the courtesans of Delhi, and not those of Lucknow (Petievich 285).

Against this background, the highly erotic *rekhti* poetry earned the censure of the new ruling elite, more so because the *rekhti* poetry's unabashed sexuality went against the notion of the chaste and desexualised woman envisioned by the ruling elite. There was an attempt to desexualise the popular culture, and an attempt was made to exalt those aspects which were in consonance with the norms of conjugal love. Therefore, both the *ghazal* and the *rekhti* became targets of the reformers for their celebration of non-conjugal love. However, since the *ghazal* was mystical in nature and not overtly sexual, it survived most censures. The *rekhti*, on the other hand, because of its celebration of this-worldly love, became an object of censure; more so because of its depiction of love between women. (Vanita 21). Non-mystical *rekhta*, some of which dealt with this-worldly love, and was sometimes of homoerotic nature, was also censured (for details on homoeroticism in *rekhta*, see Naim).

Often in their censure of *rekhti*, Urdu literary critics used to consider Ghalib as the yardstick for fine Urdu poetry. Rekhti poets like Ju'rat and Insha, and *rekhta* poets like Nazir Akbarabadi were also censured. This can be seen in the criticism of Shefta, and also in the history of Urdu literature by Muhammad bin Azad, both of whom exalted the so-called Delhi school, represented by Ghalib. Altaf Hussain Hali derided Urdu poetry in general by calling it

as foul as a cesspool, while he called the performers *bhand*. Insha was labelled as a *bhand* and *bhar'ua* (pimps) by one of his contemporaries (Vanita 22-23). Their rather theatrical performances were derided as effeminate, a menace which had spread to the common people as well – this spread of effeminacy, in turn, was blamed for the decline of the previous social order.

The eclipse of the erotic in Urdu literature resulted in the changes in the representation of women in the texts of the 19th century, in keeping with the newer norms of the ideal womanhood articulated by the *ashraf* elites of the period. The novels of Nazir Ahmed can be seen as a case in point. In his novels like the *Taubat un-Nusuh* and the *Mirat ul-Urus,* two women characters of opposite temperaments were a means of articulating what represented appropriate behaviour for women. The *tawaif* was now portrayed as a source of not only decadence, but also a source of disease, post the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act, 1868. Literature of the late 19th century made the *tawaif* a villian, ostracising her from the respectable urban spaces, even though a tinge of nostalgia was also inherent in such literature, reminiscent of a different epoch when the ashraf elite enjoyed power and privilege (Waheed 992-996; for the nostalgia inherent in such texts, see pp 996-1002). These didactic texts were extremely popular among women and young girls at the

time, and their popularity can simply be attributed to their conformity to the family values of the time (Minault).

Therefore, the changing attitude of the ruling elite on *rekhti* and explicitly erotic Urdu literature is a reflection of how what may be considered fine literary outputs enjoying the patronage of the ruling elite can be seen as subversive and detrimental to the interests of the elite in their attempt at articulating an alternate civilisational vision, against the backdrop of attack on and denigration of the existing cultural attributes by an entirely alien ruling order. As many scholars have pointed out, *rekhti* was in keeping with the contemporaneous cultural traditions, with its roots tracing back to other medieval poetic traditions. It became a threat only when new epistemological and legal regimes took over, which sought to ostracise same-sex relations (and relations beyond conjugality) in the cultural and legal contexts. *Rekhti*, a marginal genre in itself, thus, needed to be purged, for it reminded the new elite of a period that was now seen with much shame, and a means by which the new ruling groups could subjugate them in the cultural sphere, after having already done so militarily.

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# REFUTING THE IDEA OF INDIA

08

SATYAM JHA

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Despite the fact that British imperialism was resisted by a diverse cross-section of the population, the freedom struggle was led by the national bourgeoisie, and hence, the cultural character of the movement had a distinct Hindu upper-class tinge. As BT Ranadive has pointed out, during the formation of a collective national imagination in a sea of precapitalist relations, the national bourgeoisie led by the Indian National Congress, colluded with the feudal landlords to ensure that its hegemony was protected. This meant that while the national bourgeoisie could preach tokenistic ideas of social reform (attacking untouchability, etc.), it never pursued policies that improved the material conditions and attacked the root of the problem- liquidation of the feudal land relations and an attack on Hinduism.

In the run-up to independence, the national bourgeoisie effectively managed to forge a messy social contract, uniting the broader society into one homogenising idea of India. However, wide sections of the population never got a chance to negotiate their part in the social contract. The idea of India was an exclusively upper-caste creation and denying this truth has been one of the legacies of what Perry Anderson has called the 'Indian Ideology.' This notion of the social contract was manifested in the constitution. As Randive says, "The Constitution has declared equality of all before the law, irrespective of caste; Parliament has declared untouchability a penal offence. But the basic structure of land relation, overhauling of which would have given a blow to untouchability and caste system, has not been changed."

Another enduring idea that has enjoyed widespread consensus across the political spectrum is the idea that the Indian constitution is a sacrosanct document, embellished with secular credentials. However, as Pritam Singh has pointed out, the constitution is fundamentally a Hindu-tainted document and "its Hindu bias must be read as symptomatic of the depth of institutionalised Hindu communalism in India and the shallowness of the secular foundations of the Indian republic.

The existence of institutionalised Hindu communalism means that the power of Hindu communal sectarianism is greater than that which is merely represented by Hindu nationalist organisations." The fact that the constitution has a decisive Hindu bias can be seen in its imagination of the nation itself, wherein the constitution invokes the idea of ancient (and pre-Muslim India) and equates it with the modern nation (Article 1). Many scholars like Kancha Shepherd and Sharjeel Imam have also pointed out that the cow protection provisions in the constitution are an abandonment of secular values. Anwar Alam in his paper 'Secularism in India: A Critique of the Current Discourse" has examined how the definition of who is a Hindu was formulated, especially in the context of the Hindu Code Bill of 1955. According to him, the Bill was an attempt towards Hindu homogenisation and assimilation but what was especially striking was that it took place in the Nehru era, a phase "most often advertised as the golden period of secular Indian nationalism." The Bill classified Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs as Hindus, despite their protests and included as Hindu anyone who was not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew. The negative description of a Hindu, as one who was not a member of the four excluded religions, 'produced a Hindu so tightly manacled to his/her birth that even non-belief could not provide an exit.

This was clearly a legal move by the Indian state to construct a consolidated, homogenous and assimilationist Hindu identity.' Anwar Alam goes on to remark that "the Brahmanical features of Hinduism were deliberately selected, promoted and projected at the national level in a manner that, for all practical purposes, blurs the distinction between Hindu nationalism and Nehruvian secular composite nationalism."

In 'The Indian Ideology', Perry Anderson mentions how the romanticisation of the independence movement is one of the key components in the creation of the Indian ideology. However, what this glorification ignores is the intense repression and bloodbath that went into the whole nation-building process. The duplicity by which the Indian government colonised the people of Kashmir and established one of the most brutal and most militarised zones in the world is well known and does not merit mention here. Similarly, it is well known how the nascent Indian state brutally suppressed self-determination movements in the North East and forcefully integrated them into the confines of the new nation. The sanitised and hegemonic narrative around national integration paints it as a glorious endeavour to unite seemingly feeble states and kingdoms under unitary rule.

What remains occluded is the violent imposition that this project entailed and how it was built on subverting popular mandate- not infrequently leading to entire massacres and pogroms as in the case of integration of Hyderabad. It is important for our discussion to understand the role that sovereignty plays in the conception of the nation. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson mentions how sovereignty is integral to the imagination of a nation because it was "born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state."Because of how the Indian nation was essentially a British creation, this obsession with sovereignty was integral to the idea of India as well. Sovereignty, however, has always acted as a death knell for any popular mobilisation because though they have challenged specific exploitative policies, the embedded notion of sovereignty in the popular culture has prevented movements from explicitly questioning the legitimacy of the Indian state to rule.

Moreover, it has ensured the existence of the settler-colonial relationship between Indian citizens and the victims of Indian imperialism. The contradiction this has for popular movements was aptly highlighted when during the recent farmers' protests, the news about the 'martydom' of a protesting farmers' son in Kashmir was packaged and sold as a tale of valour and sacrifice, conveniently ignoring the genocidal role of the Indian army in Kashmir. At the same time, it should be highlighted that the misplaced focus on constitutionalism and the principle of sovereignty of the state also places an ideological barrier by which imperialism becomes a multiparty venture, irrespective of the government in power. Nobody can possibly hope to unconditionally reject Indian imperialism within the limits of parliamentarism and constitutionalism without effectively being marginalised from the political discourse. The criminalisation of speech that the state considers threatening and 'seditious' means that no mainstream political leader or party can hope to win elections without giving in to the terms of the state, The message is clear- all political activity should effectively be constricted within the parameters that uphold the legitmacy of the state.

Beneath the rhetoric of unity, the post-independence Indian nation was marred by deeply entrenched faultlines of inequality.

The edifice of state power was shaken, however, with the spark at Naxalbari. Situating the movement within a broader culture of resistance, Radha D'Souza notes that tribal rebellions and peasant uprisings have posed an unwavering challenge to the nation-building process right from the colonial period. "When the rebellions and uprisings subsided they continued to bubble away beneath the surface, forming the volcanic fault-line upon which Indian society is founded." The pitiless brutality with which the state crushed the Naxalbari rebellion came as a rude shock for middle-class Indians, who were still clinging to highfalutin notions of constitutionalism and the misplaced idea of an equitable India. This led to another pusillanimous formulation- the idea of what D'Souza calls the 'sandwich theory'- a recurrent motif that would now be grafted onto all popular struggles in India. Explaining the 'sandwich theory', D'Souza says, "Most people in middle India today agree that the Adivasis and rural poor have real and legitimate grievances against the economic policies of successive governments. According to the 'sandwich theorists' the Maoists exploit their grievances to further their own ends. This precludes the possibility that at least a section of the Adivasis and rural poor may have chosen to go with the Maoists. The argument denies the Adivasis and the rural poor their agency, their capacities to determine what is and is not good for them and to decide whom they

wish to support and why. The attitude implicit in the 'sandwich theory' masks the latent authoritarianism that lurks beneath the facade of compassion for the poor… By portraying them as hapless victims of Maoists and the State alike, middle India can avoid engaging with the Adivasis and rural poor as political equals." However, D'Souza establishes that the Adivasis have always stood up to the exploitative state which in turn has lost no opportunity of brutalising them- ravishing their lands and imposing draconian laws. Given the consistency of these two combatants, it is not the Adivasis but 'middle India' which is 'sandwiched' feeling beleaguered by the blatant authoritarianism of the state and yet too tied to its idealistic gibberish of constitutionalism and 'non-violence'. As D'Souza states, "The nation-state structure and constitutionalism makes it difficult for middle India to rationalise colonisation of her own people. What should middle India do? Launch a new freedom struggle? Forge a new social contract? These are difficult questions by any measure. How much easier to flog the Maoists using imperialist labels like 'war on terror' to mask their own inability to re-envision the nation? How much easier to ride the 'globalisation' wave on the moral high tides of non-violence? Middle India is wistful. If only the volcanic fault-line on which modern India is founded will go away; if only the Adivasis will put on hold their insistence on jal, jangal, jameen."

Having outlined the fundamental underpinnings of the idea of India, ie., belief in the unity and integrity of the nation, shortsighted constitutionalism and delegitimisation of struggles to challenge national hegemony, it is important to focus on the material ramifications that it has for the people of the nation. Audre Lorde had famously proclaimed, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." It is imperative to meditate on how the internalisation of the idea of India, which is in essence, a phantasm created by the Brahmanical-capitalist class, is the most sinister roadblock confronting the possibility of collective liberation in today's world. Not wholeheartedly challenging this idea and buying into the paradigm set by the oppressors is what Perry Anderson considers to be one of the major failings of the Indian left. Anderson argues that India is a 'caste iron democracy' and that despite the flowery promise of political equality in the constitution, India remains a deeply casteist enterprise because the state never challenged the hegemony of Hindu practices in the social realm. Not only has the idea that the Indian state is the manifestation of the Brahmanical order been voiced by Dalit-Bahujan scholars like Anand Teltumbde, but objective evidence about the integration of oppressed castes into the state machinery also corroborate their theses.

Furthermore, it is well known how the oppressed castes are also used as footsoldiers for Indian imperialism and how most of the soldiders killed in army operations are people from the disadvantaged socio-economic background. In this context, the idea of India imposes a criminal shackle on these marginalised groups wherein they have to appeal to these exploitative institutions and use their imagery (notice the preeminence of the tricolour at protest venues) for amelioration, thus operating within the paradigm set by the oppressors. The enduring faith in parliamentarism and constitutionalism are the hideous offspring of this conception of India. For decades, we have allowed the state to carry out its carnage and destruction while it blithely evades moral responsibility by rigidly controlling the terms of the opposition. It is imperative for us to resoundingly reject the idea of the Indian nation and all its malignant manifestations as farcical and oppressive. It is only by actively undermining this perniciously tenacious idea can we effectively open up new possibilities for resistance and victory.

# *poems*

*Who? Who? Who?*
*Mahatma. Sorry no.*
*Truth. Non-violence.*
*Stop it. Enough taboo.*

*Gone half-cuckoo, you called us names,*
*You dubbed us pariahs—"Harijans"*
*goody-goody guys of a bigot god*
*Ram Ram Hey Ram—boo.*

*Don't ever act like a holy saint.*
*we can see through you, impure you.*
*Remember, how you dealt with your poor wife.*
*But, they wrote your books, they made your life.*

*Bapu, bapu, you big fraud, we hate you.*

- excerpts from Meena Kandasamy's *Mohandas Karamchand*

# অবলা গল্প

## An unspoken story

01

Parakbritta Hazra Dutta

Translated into English by Rajarshi Adhikary

পাবকে শুদ্ধ
হলুদ বসন্তের প্রতীক।
রক্তের ছিটে ফোঁটা লাগা, নোংড়া পাপড়ি;
অনেক গল্প বলে যায়, ব্যর্থতার।
এবার আগুনটা ধাউধাউ করে জ্বলবে।
দিনের শুরু হবে,
ফুটবে রাধাচূড়া।

Sanctified by fire
In the yellow of
Spring petals; blood-stained
And dirty.
Many tales of sorrows
Can be recounted.
But this time around,
Fire of passion will burn
Welcoming a new dawn
With the flametrees blooming.

# Tyrant

02

Kevin Joy Varghese

I dreamt,
I aspired,
I could have never imagined but I,
I became a clerk in the palace
didn't deserve it, if I'm being honest,
but I got the job
the tyrant on the throne,
all his power assimilated in his sceptre,
the tyrant has money,
he's seated at the highest place,
he shows that he cares, I believed, and yet, he doesn't,
the tyrant destroyed the family that could be mine,

he hides his truth under his long cape
leaves the poor to their own virtue,
there was a revolution,
mind it, it was a revolution and not a revolt,
I lost the war,
I was exiled,
the tyrant, he's still in power,
the new land is a blessing in disguise,
I dream,
I aspire.

# A Rebellion By Heart

03

Shrey Verma

Our bodies belong to our oppressors
Our bodies are moulded by our oppressors,
For this tongue of ours recites their words
From their benighted language to their bigoted literature,
For these ears of ours hear their assertions
From their dogmatic opinions to their beguiling melodies.

Our bodies belong to our oppressors
Our bodies are legitimised by our oppressors,
For these eyes of ours see what they want us to see
As they hide their atrocities behind hollow dreams,
For these hands of ours toil day and night to build their empires
As they superciliously relish on our labour.

Like our lands, our bodies have also been conquered
For our minds trick ourselves into becoming like them
As noble elites and crème de la crème of the society.

But our heart,
Our heart is pure and untouched by our imperious oppressors.

This heart of ours beats vociferously to the tales of our ancestors
This heart of ours lights a spark to honour the struggles of our people,
This heart of ours enrages like

Sathe's *Fakira* at every injustice
This heart of ours bows to the affliction borne by Valmiki's *Jhoothan* and Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

This heart of ours rejoices at the stories of
Angelou and Baldwin
This heart of ours pays obeisance to all the
rebels
From Birsa Munda to Phulan Devi,
For this heart shall die as a rebellious
brute
Than a civilised ignoramus.

Through this heart only,
Runs the path of freedom and resistance.

# মে দিনের কবিতা

## Mayday

Subhash Mukhopadhay

Translated into English by Ananyo Chakraborty

04

প্রিয়, ফুল খেলবার দিন নয় অদ্য
ধ্বংসের মুখোমুখি আমরা,
চোখে আর স্বপ্নের নেই নীল মদ্য
কাঠফাটা রোদ সেঁকে চামড়া ।

চিমনির মুখে শোনো সাইরেন-শঙ্খ,
গান গায় হাতুড়ি ও কাস্তে
তিল তিল মরণেও জীবন অসংখ্য
জীবনকে চায় ভালোবাসতে।

শতাব্দীলাঞ্ছিত আর্তের কান্না
প্রতি নিঃশ্বাসে আনে লজ্জা;
মৃত্যুর ভয়ে ভীরু বসে থাকা, আর না --
পরো পরো যুদ্ধের সজ্জা।

প্রিয়, ফুল খেলবার দিন নয় অদ্য
এসে গেছে ধ্বংসের বার্তা,
দুর্যোগ পথ হয় হোক দুবোধ্য
চিনে নেবে যৌবন-আত্মা।

Beloved, today isn't the day to pluck flowers
Faced we are with doom
Eyes ain't blue with dreamful liquors
Our skin in sun rays fumed

Hear the sirens blow from chimney
Hammer and sickle singing
Many lives with their death in bounty
Want to love their living

Offer the gift of love to the hurdles
Conquer death with resolve
Rhyme of rising will break huddles
The brighter day shall evolve

Age-old tears shed of suffering
In every breath brings shame
Afraid be no more of dying
Wear clothes of war to maim

Beloved, today isn't the day to pluck flowers
Arrived has the call of doom
With difficulties, the path be showered
The spirit of youth shall bloom.

# जाने दो क्या करना हैं

## Let go of it, what to do?

Virendra Jour

Translated into English by Siddhant Dass

05

ताले में कश्मीर पड़ा है
जाने दो क्या करना है
मंदी से बाज़ार घिरा है
जाने दो, क्या करना है

लाखों जिंदा लोगो के
होठों पर मुर्दा ताले है
लाखों निगाहें सूनी
पैरों में अनगिने छाले है

लेकिन दुनिया में तुम्हारी
सुंदर सा बाज़ार सजा है
जाने दो, क्या करना है

गई नौकरी,थाली खाली
सूने दिये से मनी दिवाली
खेत खेत में लाश उगी है
सड़के भरी है फैक्ट्री खाली

आई है तनख्वाह तुम्हारी
वीकेंड है और मूड बना है
जाने दो, क्या करना है

लगे आग तो जल जाने दो
मरता है कोई तो मर जाने दो
जब तक अपने घर ना पहुंचे
धुआं शहर में भर जाने दो

अपना नंबर जब आएगा
जब आएगा तब आएगा
जाने दो,क्या करना है

Kashmir lies locked away
Let go of it, what to do?
The market is engulfed in a slump
Let go of it, what to do?

On lips of millions living
There are dead locks
Millions of lonely eyes;
Blisters on countless feet

But in your world
Lies adorned a beautiful mart
Let go of it, what to do?

Jobs are lost, plates are empty
They celebrate Diwali with
Cheerless earthen.
Corpses are growing in every field;
The roads are crowded, factories empty

Your salary has come,
It's weekend and the is mood set,
Let go of it,what to do?

If a fire is lit, let it burn.
If someone is dying, let them.
Unless the smoke reaches our home
Let it engulf the city

Our turn will come
When it will,
Let go of it, what to do?

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CULTURE AS A MODE OF RESISTANCE

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