

Punctuated Solidarities

Caste and Left Politics

BALMURLI NATRAJAN

There is now a lot of debate about the possibility of political solidarities across the dalit/non-dalit divide. This debate has layered on to the earlier one about the possibility of solidarities between the dalit and Left movements and the reasons for their failure. This article, using Anand Patwardhan's film, *Jai Bhim Comrade*, as a point of entry into this debate, is an attempt to find spaces for a political praxis which may allow for such solidarities to emerge and succeed, where others have failed.

I strongly believe that what "progressive upper caste people" should do is work among themselves...making their communities aware of caste realities, change the thinking of their own communities and highlight casteist behaviour of their own communities towards dalits.

– Pradeep Attri (2012)

Jai Bhim – As a "sincere Phule Ambedkarite upper caste feminist", I agree with Pradeep – the need is to learn from the voices of dalit feminist organisations to reinvent exclusive feminisms – to speak with and not for dalit feminists – so that we recognise that the liberation of women in India is inextricably linked to the annihilation of caste.

– Sharmila Rege, comment on above

...the dalit should claim the categories of secularism and nationalism and the non-dalit should associate themselves with the categories like dignity and self-respect. That is to say, classes and social groups in question should open political and intellectual corridors between these categories.

– Gopal Guru (2005)

Only when comrades get hit or die for Dalits, will Dalits accept our solidarity.

(paraphrased response by a comrade talking about Left possibilities on caste question)

Caste is both a neurosis as well as a cretinism.

– Murzban Jal (2012)

Castes are the preserve of the upper castes and they could not be annihilated by the Dalits alone. Dalit movement, as it happened, should be considered as an essential stage in the annihilation of castes.

– Anand Teltumbde (2005)

The above epigraphs, although too numerous for any article, are intended to aid us to think about the following questions: Is it necessary to have solidarity across caste groups for an anti-caste politics? On what grounds does an anti-caste solidarity across caste groups become possible? Are both, Left and dalit movements, strengthened by such solidarity? Of course, only an affirmative answer to the first question gives meaning to the second and third. This article is an attempt to work with the above questions through the "entry

point" of Anand Patwardhan's latest film, *Jai Bhim Comrade*.

Towards 'Punctuated Solidarity'

Jai Bhim Comrade is a historic contribution to thinking about caste. Minimally, it is the film-maker's ode (and elegy) to his comrade who struggled for political recognition from and solidarity with other comrades. The film is of course much more. It is a bold statement that seeks to rightfully restore a part of history that has suffered elision and continues to do so. Contrary to modes of historiography that ultimately give primacy to the "purity" of analytic categories over the "messiness" of real struggles, this film shows how struggles for emancipation literally and figuratively embody themes/thoughts/consciousness that are usually viewed as separate/discrete/unmixed. Through explorations of the figure of a "comrade among dalits" and a "dalit among comrades" (although the film explores the former much more than the latter), this film testifies to the fact that two distinct addresses, "Jai Bhim" and "Comrade", cohabit in the bodies and minds of people such as Vilas Ghoghare and continue to do so in the voices and lives of the members of the Kabir Kala Manch.¹

Others have testified to the richness of this film in different ways.² Like many others, I too watched this film in the company of a large public gathering in an Indian city. Here, I will only restrict myself to the film's remarkable title which embodies the "solidarity question". I will briefly argue that the absence of any punctuation in the title (for example, a period, comma or hyphen) prevents an understanding of the social context that produces consciousness of caste and class in different ways for dalits and non-dalits. Consequently, I submit that acknowledging and working with/through this "difference" is crucial to think about and realise the solidarity that has time and again been imagined by revolutionary poets (and film-makers).

So, what would the introduction of a comma, period or hyphen in the title tell us about solidarity and caste?

As punctuator, the *period* demarcates with precision two realms that make

Balmurli Natrajan (NATRAJANB@wpunj.edu) teaches Anthropology at William Paterson University, New Jersey, US.

sense only through their being discrete. The Russian writer Isaak Babel once wrote, “no iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place”. A title such as *Jai Bhim Comrade* would have made us sharply pause to think about such things as the distinctive, sometimes divergent and always differentiated histories of, say, a Phule-Ambedkarite politics and Left politics; about their coming close ever so tentatively at historic moments such that the *period* is needed to give solace to each to stand together yet apart, not shoulder to shoulder in the same house or street, not touching but sharing boundaries on two adjacent streets, appreciating even while deprecating, except in those moments when each discovers the presence of the Other and the need for the Other. There is “community”, but only of the potential variety. There is consciousness (of each other, of caste and class if you wish), but solidarity is far away, suspicion is much closer, perhaps rightly so.

On the other hand, the *comma* acts as a gentle yet firm separator. Thus, a *Jai Bhim Comrade* would have brought together two historically charged addressings (or interpellations) of different subjects (each responding to their preferred calling) – recognising their difference yet bringing them together. The comma demarcates not a boundary or chasm that separates or divides, but a conscious breath that allows for the space in-between to be different, even discrete if not distant. This title acknowledges, at least dimly, a realisation of sharing. Yet, to extend Jean Luc-Nancy’s insights on “community” (Nancy 1991), it is not necessarily a sharing of a “commonality of being” (caste ensures different experiences precisely due to the practices of casteism, and herein lies its ideological power to produce different identities) but instead a sharing of “being *in common*” (for example, coming together without assuming an essence that is shared or held in common). The comma then shyly, almost reluctantly, allows for the possibility of a community that contains difference within, precisely by inviting reflection on the process of difference production or differentiation

(i.e., caste as process). Caste consciousness here is a potentially anti-caste consciousness.

In contrast, the absence of any punctuation in the official title of the film, *Jai Bhim Comrade*, makes a bald, albeit bold assertion. Whereas this title precisely captures the meaning of the term *comrade*, which etymologically is about *cohabitation* – a central problem within caste³ – one would have wished for the film to have more seriously explored why and how such a cohabitation poses threats to some comrades and how a deep blindness on one side of a power divide makes this category (*Jai Bhim Comrade*) crumble even as it is constantly reborn in the songs of the Kabir Kala Manch. It makes the film appear to be in a rush (despite its 14 years in the making, and its length) to remove another kind of punctuation – the hyphen – which accompanied Vilas Ghoghare’s history-making.

Arguably, it is another title *Jai Bhim Comrade* which would have best recognised the lived reality of Vilas Ghoghare, the comrade whose struggle to hold the two identities together (not collapse them into one) was never socially permissible nor politically acknowledged, both, for its use value (Ghoghare’s own political subjectivity and identity, his lived reality until the end) or its exchange value (mutual recognition and identification by comrades and Ambedkarites). Hyphens seek to join or forge a relationship without ever assuming they were one to begin with, nor assuming them to be so radically different so as to have no affinity or possibility of coming together. A hyphenated identity then signals the seeking of a community, not in the sense of coming “together as one” but in the sense of a social contract, a bond, an indebtedness or sharing that needs to be made explicit (Van den Abeele 1991).⁴ The hyphen then recognises Ghoghare’s right to retain the right to come together (with non-dalit comrades) on his own terms.

We may thus call for the need to build a “punctuated solidarity” – solidarity that is punctuated by incorporating an understanding of how “difference” is produced and demanded by structures

of power, and how this “difference” cannot simply be wished away as a distraction but has to be worked with/through in creative ways as part of the struggle to annihilate the structures that produce and thrive upon “difference” and transform that into inequality. The mis- or non-recognition of “difference” will haunt all efforts at solidarity. Here, the epigraphs introduce us to the “political responsibility” of comrades vis-à-vis “difference”.

‘Difference’ and ‘Political Responsibility’

Pradeep Attri’s provocative assertion in the first epigraph is not dissimilar to Black consciousness histories in the United States of America where the demand for separate spaces (to organise, think, heal, restore dignity and to strategise) were routinely made by Black activists from different hues (including comrades). This was also accompanied by calls to white activists seeking to be in solidarity with Blacks, to begin at “home” – within white communities – by recognising how racism operated as a system that overtly and subtly made whiteness into property and privilege, and to intervene through praxis, deeply entrenched practices that reproduced privilege, power and prejudice. The fact that many whites (albeit nowhere close to a majority of the white population even in the us “North”) publicly marched shoulder-to-shoulder with Blacks during the civil rights movement need not mask for us the fact that much solidarity work was carried out in separate spaces – some structurally imposed but others actively chosen by activists, both black and white.

The response from Rege is an example of serious recognition of the presence of what W E B DuBois (1903), in the context of Blacks living in a racist society, famously termed a “double-consciousness”⁵ that inheres to those suffering racial domination and exploitation, and an interrogation of the “veil” (DuBois again) that prevented white folks from accounting in self-reflexive ways for the “difference” between Blacks and themselves. DuBois is only one of a long line of thought and practice that insists on

foregrounding this “difference” – as a structurally produced and culturally embodied mode of being, relating and practising – and calling for its recognition and dismantling as a precondition for solidarity.

Sharmila Rege takes it further in the Indian context. She reminds us (elsewhere) that it is not simply an issue of say, dalit women “naming their difference” but rather of calling for “a revolutionary epistemological shift to a dalit feminist standpoint” (2005: 61). Since this point is so critical to the issue of solidarity and so often misconstrued in order to be dismissed, it is best to quote Rege at some length here to comprehend the depth of such a standpoint as hers (ibid: 61-62).

A dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of Dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing, structural power relations of caste, class, ethnicity that construct such groups. It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women’s standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous, even contradictory, that is, the category ‘dalit woman’ is not homogenous. Such a recognition underlies the fact that *the subject of dalit feminists’ liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality construct each other*. Thus we agree that the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions (my emphasis).

Rege’s pioneering corpus of work is a useful reminder that caste (like gender, class, race and sexuality) cannot be approached directly or simply as a “pure” category, an autonomous empirically identifiable one that exists apart from other categories. To approach caste as a lived reality instead, requires an understanding (that many sections of the Left are reluctant to admit) of the overdetermined character of all categories (each category represents a process

and each goes into the making of the others) and of the intersectional character of reality. For example, attending to the gender question necessarily calls for an engagement with the caste question, especially through the question of social reproduction of caste group boundaries, caste relations, caste inequalities, and caste identities. Caste in such an understanding is not operating outside gender (and vice versa), but both operate in ways that can only be analytically – not empirically or experientially – separable. By insisting upon the liberatory possibilities of their embodied and socially located knowledge, dalit feminists directly challenge all other claims to universality, especially, particular kinds of feminist or Left or dalit claims that are not vigilant about standpoints and overdetermination.

It is here that Gopal Guru’s is a major voice in critically advancing the debates. His epigraph above is in the context of seeking interventions in contemporary dalit politics and the “search for new and more accommodative categories and alliance” (2005: 30). My reading of Guru’s specific critiques of the trend among dalit leadership and movement to form political alliances is that such alliances, if rushed into through electoral logic alone, deeply compromise the historically evolved category “dalit” which potentially locates dalits as a unique historical subject (casted, classed, gendered) capable of universalist visions and aspirations of emancipation. In the same spirit, Guru’s invitation to non-dalits to take seriously the categories such as “dignity and self-respect” – that appear alien or disappear into the “natural” for those with caste privilege – demands an understanding and approach to dalit identities that properly historicises the formation of casted subjects (both dalits and non-dalits). Guru’s call cannot be accepted without accepting Rege’s challenge to view dalit feminist standpoint outlined above. In this sense, Guru’s call sets the standards for building a solidarity that moves towards what Attri and Rege agree upon as their ultimate goal: “If our goal is to be the same we’ll definitely meet the end result: end of caste” (Attri, op cit). I will return to

this important point – the end of caste, not simply casteism.

Returning to the film, *Jai Bhim Comrade* shows clearly how even physical death, which carries the ultimate message of our common mortality as human beings, does not bring together any communion of comrades across caste divides. To extend Sartre via Nancy in this context, “communism remains”, even in *Jai Bhim Comrade*, “the unsurpassed horizon of our times”. The road to that horizon necessarily entails a journeying together through recognising the need to punctuate our solidarity-making, at least from time to time. Here the problem for solidarity from the Left on the caste question is compounded by a historically produced and mostly reasonable “trust deficit” that is poignantly articulated by the next epigraph of the comrade who speaks about the realities of Left attempts to be in solidarity.

Caste as a Neurosis

The willingness and ability to suffer (injury, humiliation or death) for others has been written about from different traditions of thought. My intention in introducing this epigraph is only to note that caste, as the next epigraph by Murzban Jal correctly identifies, is a “neurosis” – characterised precisely by anxiety and distress (which I submit) is a result of deep-seated mistrust outside caste borders. Indeed, reminding ourselves of caste as a neurosis and a cretinism (a stunting of mental and social development) is a much required antidote to any attempt to delude ourselves that we can live with caste in our midst. It also reminds us that such anxieties will characterise anti-caste solidarities too and about the need to address that “trust deficit” – less with hand-wringing and more by articulating transitional goals and punctuated solidarity moments to social mobilisations.

Finally, Anand Teltumbde’s epigraph, from a heterodox Left perspective, allows us to think of solidarity on the caste question in ways from the other end of the spectrum (from Rege and Attri). In the larger project of which this epigraph is part, Teltumbde identifies three realms of “atrocious, discrimination and

deprivation” as the particular points in society where an anti-caste movement needs to be focused. It is useful to note that “caste” emerges here as a lived category that is intimately tied to violence since each of these points exists and occurs, according to Teltumbde, due to the peculiarly “vulnerable” position of dalits in Indian society. In other words, the descriptive term “vulnerable” also turns out to be an analytical term since dalits, by the very fact of being dalit, are already at greater risk to violence due to structural inequalities of caste, class and gender. Consequently, Teltumbde’s call to view the dalit movement (as currently characterised by what is sometimes derisively termed as “identity politics”) as a stage towards the annihilation of caste need not be read as a reduction of caste to class, nor as a dismissal of the need to work through identity-based mobilisations since caste vulnerability is built upon identities, perceptions of “difference” and class and gender locations.

More to the point at hand, if, as Teltumbde rightly argues, caste is indeed the preserve of “upper castes” (in both the senses of that term – upper castes are far more invested in preserving or conserving caste as an organising principle of society, and caste observances are far more characteristic of upper caste lives than dalits), then it is arguably true that caste simply cannot be annihilated by dalits alone, since anti-caste cultural-ideological battles need to be fought very much within upper caste communities. What Teltumbde however does not explore is the grounds upon which non-dalit comrades can contribute towards a convergence of dalit and Left movements. In other words, although he brings much-needed theoretical and political clarity about caste itself, he stops short of clarifying the need for and possibility of solidarity (the latter part of his epigraph), perhaps gauging it to be outside the scope of his book.

Need for Solidarity

We are thus back to the questions we began with. I hope to have shown thus far that if the goal is to annihilate caste, then some form of solidarity between

dalits and upper castes is needed and sought after by both dalits and non-dalits. This, however, cannot come at the expense of denying the rights and need of dalits and the need of non-dalits to work at times in different social spaces and for the latter to be attentive to these needs. Further, the grounds for coming together cannot be wished into existence without seriously struggling with the “difference” that is historically structuring social relations across castes. Then again, such attention to “difference” cannot stop short of moving consciously towards an annihilation of caste itself which includes caste identity. In such a project, rife with dangers but rich with possibilities, non-dalits ultimately need to reflect upon and build their actions on a ground very different from what is normally the case. It is in addressing this last point that I conclude by invoking the insights of Iris Young drawing upon the example of the more than a decade-old us-based student-led campaign against sweatshops.

Central to Young’s argument was that the anti-sweatshop movement was novel and successful because it made a moral claim that one need not only be directly responsible or liable (the legal term) in order to bear responsibility for a crime. Instead, the movement argued that people “are responsible for injustice by virtue of their structural connection to it [the crime], even though they are not to *blame* for it” (2003: 40, emphasis in original). In other words, and for our purposes, those “progressive non-Dalits” seeking to be in solidarity with dalits would benefit by making the grounds of their solidarity a clear acknowledgement of what Young calls “political responsibility” for caste (as a crime) and not guilt as a reason for action. Only the former allows for an engagement that will be able to view the need for what I have called “punctuated solidarity” that arises from recognising how “difference” arises from the lack of privilege (along the axes of caste, class and/or gender) and is hidden from view of those with privilege due to the DuBoisian “veil”. Such a position will be grounded in the recognisable fact that non-dalits are connected to the

crime of caste in structural ways by our own actions of simply being caste subjects of privilege. Political responsibility-based solidarity, viewed thus, will enable the emergence of a multi-caste caste-conscious anti-caste mobilisation that avoids some of the pitfalls of a rush to solidarity.

NOTES

- 1 For a recent attempt to simply catalogue some major instances of such comrades, see Gatade (2012).
- 2 See reviews at <http://www.patwardhan.com/films/Jai%20Bhim%20Comrade.htm>, accessed on 18 January 2013.
- 3 Comrade derives its meaning from the French and Spanish contexts of “One Who Shares the Same Room” or “Chamber Mate”, and is derived from the Latin (and Italian) *camera* which referred to a “Vaulted Room or Chamber”.
- 4 Van den Abeele makes the distinction in the two different etymologies of the term “Community” thus: *com* + *unis* meaning “What Is Together as One” versus *com* + *munis* meaning “With the Sense of being Bound, Obligated or Indebted Together” (1991: xi). Only the former sense eliminates difference.
- 5 I am indebted to Ram Mahalingam for long conversations on this question.

REFERENCES

- Attri, Pradeep (2012): “What Can a ‘Sincere’ Upper Caste Person Do?”, *Round Table India*, http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5459:what-can-a-sincere-upper-caste-person-do&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132, accessed on 18 January 2013.
- DuBois, W E B (1903): *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A C McClurg & Co); (Cambridge, US: Cambridge: University Press John Wilson and Son).
- Gatade, Subhash (2012): “Cast Away Caste...Breaking New Ground”, <http://kafile.org/2012/09/03/cast-away-caste-breaking-new-grounds/>, accessed on 18 January.
- Guru, Gopal (2005): “Understanding the Category Dalit” in Gopal Guru (ed.), *Atrophy of Dalit Politics*, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra.
- Jal, Murzban (2012): “Asking Questions of Caste, Class and History to the Indian Left”, *Radical Socialist*, <http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/marxist-theory/482-asking-questions-of-caste-class-and-history-to-the-indian-left>, accessed on 18 January.
- Nancy, J L (1991): *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Rege, Sharmila (2005): “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’” in Gopal Guru (ed.), *Atrophy of Dalit Politics*, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra.
- Teltumbde, Anand (2005): *Anti-Imperialism and Annihilation of Caste*, Ramai Prakashan.
- Van den Abeele, G (1991): “Introduction” in the Miami Theory Collective (eds.), *Community at Loose Ends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Young, Iris (2003): “From Guilt to Solidarity: Sweatshops and Political Responsibility”, *Dissent* (Spring 2003): 39-44.