ENS de Lyon
25 October 2017

Death and Contemporary Political Imaginaries

Udaya Kumar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Anand Patwardhan, *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011, 199 mins.)

Jai Bhim Comrade begins with a description of the Indian caste system and its oppression of the Dalit community. The film includes a song by Dalit poet and activist Vilas Ghogre, followed by a shot of a newspaper clipping describing his suicide in reaction to the Ramabai killings in 1997. The documentary then describes the killings; on 11 July 1997 a statue of B.R. Ambedkar in the Dalit colony of Ramabai had a garland of footwear placed over it, an act considered to be a desecration. An initially peaceful protest was fired upon by a team of Special Reserve Police Force members, killing ten protesters, and other protests later in the day saw further police violence. Commentators stated that the violence was motivated by caste-based prejudices, as the leader of the police team stood accused of several cases of mistreatment of Dalit people. The Dalit singer, poet, and activist Vilas Ghogre hanged himself in protest at the incident.

After narrating the incidents surrounding the killing, the documentary follows Patwardhan on his visits to the families of those killed in the firing, as well as to Ghogre's wife. The film tries to reconstruct the incident by interviewing witnesses on both sides. The footage shot by a civilian bystander is used to contradict the description of the incident given by the police.

The film then shows interviews with many of Ghogre's colleagues, who discuss the state of Dalit politics in India. In a voice-over, Patwardhan describes the life of Ambedkar, and his activism against the caste system. The interviews are interspersed with other Dalits describing difficulties and discrimination they face in their lives.

The second part of the film focuses on contemporary Dalit activism, chiefly the activities of the Kabir Kala Manch, a troupe of singers using their performances to raise awareness and support for their cause. Many clips of songs and protests are shown, together with interviews with the leaders of the troupe. The film describes the initial successes of the troupe during the protests that followed the Khairlanji massacre in 2006. The ideology of the group was a mixture of that of Ambedkar fused with left-wing ideology. However, the group was soon branded a Naxalite outfit, and led to it being targeted by the Anti-terrorist squad. Several members were forced to go on the run, while others were arrested. The film ends with interviews with the mothers of two of the members of Kabir Kala Manch that had been forced to go underground.

Jai Bhim Comrade was filmed over a period of 14 years, from 1997 to its release in 2011. Part of the reason it took that length of time was that Patwardhan wanted to wait for the outcome of the trials that followed the Ramabai incident before finishing the documentary.

(Wikipedia, edited)

Kherlanji Massacre

On 29 September 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to a Dalit caste were murdered in a small village called Kherlanji in Maharashtra. The women of the family, Surekha and Priyanka, were paraded naked in public before being murdered. Enraged by a police complaint lodged the previous day by Surekha over a land dispute, the accused dragged out Surekha Bhaiyyalal Bhotmange and two of her sons and daughter, paraded naked in the village, sexually abused them and then hacked them to death. The accused were members of the politically dominant Kunbi caste. The Indian media did not cover this incident until the Nagpur

riots by the Dalits. The criminal act was in fact carried out by assailants from the politically powerful Kunbi caste (classified as Other Backward Classes for "opposing" the requisition of their field to have a road built over it. Initial reports suggested that the women were gang-raped before being murdered. Though CBI investigations concluded that the women were not raped, there were allegations of bribery of doctors who performed the post-mortem, and of corruption.
There were allegations that the local police shielded the alleged perpetrators in the ongoing investigation. …

In September 2008, six people were given the death sentence for the crime. However, on 14 July 2010, the Nagpur bench of the High Court commuted the death penalty awarded to the six convicted to a 25-year rigorous imprisonment jail sentence. (From Wikepedia)

Rohit Vemula's suicide note, 17 January 2016

> Good morning,
>
> I would not be around when you read this letter. Don't get angry on me. I know some of you truly cared for me, loved me and treated me very well. I have no complaints on anyone. It was always with myself I had problems. I feel a growing gap between my soul and my body. And I have become a monster. I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan. At last, this is the only letter I am getting to write.
>
> I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan.
>
> I loved Science, Stars, Nature, but then I loved people without knowing that people have long since divorced from nature. Our feelings are second handed. Our love is constructed. Our beliefs colored. Our originality valid through artificial art. It has become truly difficult to love without getting hurt.
>
> The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living.
>
> I am writing this kind of letter for the first time. My first time of a final letter. Forgive me if I fail to make sense.
>
> My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.
>
> May be I was wrong, all the while, in understanding world. In understanding love, pain, life, death. There was no urgency. But I always was rushing. Desperate to start a life. All the while, some people, for them, life itself is curse. My birth is my fatal accident. I can never recover from my childhood loneliness. The unappreciated child from my past.
>
> I am not hurt at this moment. I am not sad. I am just empty. Unconcerned about myself. That's pathetic. And that's why I am doing this.
>
> People may dub me as a coward. And selfish, or stupid once I am gone. I am not bothered about what I am called. I don't believe in after-death stories, ghosts, or spirits. If there is anything at all I believe, I believe that I can travel to the stars. And know about the other worlds.
>
> If you, who is reading this letter can do anything for me, I have to get 7 months of my fellowship, one lakh and seventy five thousand rupees. Please see to it that my family is paid that. I have to give some 40 thousand to Ramji. He never asked them back. But please pay that to him from that.
>
> Let my funeral be silent and smooth. Behave like I just appeared and gone. Do not shed tears for me. Know that I am happy dead than being alive.
>
> "From shadows to the stars."
>
> Uma anna, sorry for using your room for this thing.

To ASA family, sorry for disappointing all of you. You loved me very much. I wish all the very best for the future.

For one last time,

Jai Bheem

I forgot to write the formalities. No one is responsible for my this act of killing myself.

No one has instigated me, whether by their acts or by their words to this act.

This is my decision and I am the only one responsible for this.

Do not trouble my friends and enemies on this after I am gone.

From: Kalpana Ram, *Fertile Disorder* (2013), pp. 87-8.

- A mother has brought her son, who finds it impossible to enter their home. Once inside he smells fumes of poison and his body begins to ache. He is unable to eat because of this smell. He is unable to work. Saint Michael, speaking through Mary, the medium, tells them that *the son is troubled by the spirit of a man who killed himself by drinking poison.* Saint Michael requires the mother and son to return to him five days in a row. The son is asked to fast before his next visit, when a medicine will be given.
- Mātā, or the Virgin, speaks through Mary. She has diagnosed several spirits troubling a woman. They include Icakki, Vannāra Māṭaṉ, and the spirit of a relative. *The spirit signals its presence by the smell of arrack* [cheap country liquor]. *According to Mātā, this is the spirit of a relative of the woman's father who committed suicide with arrack and poison.* The woman is reprimanded for not being more careful about when she walks around the streets at night.[4]

This domain of popular culture, if we are open to it, has something to teach us of how injustice comes to be lived affectively. These ghosts are not purely internal; they are not experienced as manifestations of the subject's mental states. But neither do they have the "objective" status of other beings in the world that share with humans a material, tangible quality. Yet they serve to connect human beings to the past. These creatures continue to hunger for human beings who will bear witness. The reader will recall that the spirit that possessed Vijaya as a bride was once a married woman who suffered both in life and death from her husband's jealous rages. Vijaya knew this woman, knew of her suffering, and was clearly affected by her story.

One of the perennial questions that creates a difficulty for social science interpretations of possession is this: why do certain individuals become possessed and not others. The difficulty is partly addressed if we include the affective dimension of existence. For it is this *capacity to be affected* by the suffering and violent end of others that is the prerequisite for the particular kinds of possessions being discussed here. Such a capacity is also the prerequisite for bearing witness; and the bearing of witness is one way in which we might understand such possession. It is this capacity, unevenly distributed within any social group, that seems to allow ghosts to find particular individuals who can serve as their witnesses, often in pitiable and dramatic ways.

These individuals lend their own bodies and voices to allow the ghosts to communicate with a wider public. They do so with varying degrees of practice, agency, and will. At one end of the spectrum are women such as Vijaya, whose possession is involuntary. At the other end are ritual practitioners, valued performers who give affective shape to the worship of the goddess and of minor male deities. One end of the spectrum is dominated by women, the other, accruing ritual value, is dominated by men. There is, nevertheless, a continuum from one end to the other of the spectrum that has often been missed in accounts of possession. That continuum is afforded by the capacity to be moved, to be affected by the bodily danger and death of others. This capacity to be affected is crystallized around the theme of violent death, which is pervasive in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in the south. In the *vil pāṭṭu,* or "bow-song," genre of performance in Kanyakumari District (Blackburn 1988; Schuler 2009), where Vijaya lived, as in the *terukkūttu* genre of other parts of Tamil Nadu (Frasca 1990; de Bruin 2006), the most intense performances are those that bear witness to violent death through the medium of retelling the story, or *katai,* of the life and violent death of a hero. So powerful is this preoccupation that in both *terukkūttu* and the Kerala genre of *kathakali,* the performance of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata has been reattuned to favor the depiction of death dealing and the killing of wrongdoers.

From: Gregoire Chamayou, *Manhunts*

To write a history of manhunts is to write one fragment of a long history of violence on the part of the dominant. It is also to write the history of the technologies of predation indispensable for the establishment and reproduction of relationships of domination.

The manhunt must not be understood here as a metaphor. It refers to concrete historical phenomena in which human beings were tracked down, captured, or killed in accord with the forms of the hunt; these were regular and sometimes large-scale practices whose forms were first theorized in ancient Greece, long before their enormous expansion in the modern period in conjunction with the development of transatlantic capitalism.

Christian pastoralism was opposed, as we have seen, to cynegetic power: fishing for souls rather than hunting for men, persuasion rather than coercion. Pastoral power was defined as an antihunting. However—and this is the paradox—it developed its own cynegetic practices, its own forms of manhunts, *pastoral hunts*.

What fundamentally distinguished the pastoral model from the cynegetic model, and what radically forbade the former to entertain any predatory relationship, was the imperative of caring and protecting. A protective power versus a predatory power: that was the line of opposition. But pastoral hunting took place precisely in the name of protecting the flock. To protect the flock sometimes one has to hunt down certain sheep, to sacrifice a few to save all the others. Here we are no longer in a logic of predatory appropriation but rather in a rationality of salutary ablation and beneficent exclusion.

The history of a power is also that of struggles. How can people free themselves from a relationship of hunting and predation? How, from the position of a prey, can a political subjectivity be formed?

The first difficulty has to do with the identification of prey as being essentially *victims*. I have tried to show how this kind of political identification bore within itself a dilemma, the dilemma of the victim, in which the subjects find themselves confronted by a false choice between the recognition of their status as victims at the price of negating their power to act and the recognition of their power to act at the price of negating the guilt of their tormentors. This antinomy, which constitutes a powerful political trap, is based on the false idea that the historical responsibility for their enslavement has to be attributed to the oppressed in order for the task of their emancipation to become their own. Moving out of this rut involves reactivating nonjudicial categories of political identification and the recognition of a subjectivity that is active because it is already engaged in a process of self-emancipation.

Manhunting involves a specific relationship between consciousnesses whose peculiar dialectic I have sought to trace: a dialectic of the hunter and the hunted whose elements differ from those of the classical schema of Hegelian phenomenology. Caught from the outset in a dissymmetrical power relationship, the prey can move beyond its initial state of radical concern and constitute an active subjectivity through the paradoxical internalization of the position of objectivity that is assigned him by the hunter's perspective. A reversal then occurs in which the former prey becomes a hunter in turn. But at the same time an aporia appears, that of the simple reversion or nondialectical reversal of the relationship of predation, in which the positions are simply inverted, whereas the fundamental relationship remains intact. That is the tragic irony of the prey who escapes only by becoming what it sought to escape from. Moving out of this rut presupposes the formulation of a critical theory of political violence.

From Khairlanji to Kopardi, a Poem by Neeraja

Translated by Shashi Deshpande

From Khairlanji to Kopardi
via Dilli, Mumbai, and any other
desolate spot in a town or village.
Only the names of places keep changing.

Flags of power are thrust
into my moist, protected yoni.
And
making candles of these, morchas are taken out,
discs of news played, blaring out proofs of cruelty.

Which is a woman's caste, what is her religion?
Does her caste make a difference to her suffering?
What is it that gives these torturers of bodies pleasure?
The enjoyment of a woman, or the enjoyment of her caste?

Woman has been denuded for all time in your struggle for power.
You have pushed your political ambitions into her body,
fought battles and defeated your enemies
by playing the game between her thighs.

Those men who assess the soil by its colour:
the earth has endured their plough for ages,
a mangalsutra strung round the neck, bearing witness.
But this has never become news.

You collect large crowds to shout defiance
at those who shredded my yoni.
Can you see, anywhere, in that crowd,
the agony tearing my insides apart?

Can you hear the scream bursting out of my tiny womb?
Can you understand the throbbing insult that lacerates my mind?
In what class will you demand reservation
For girls with mangled yonis?

In a niche in the inner rooms,
or at the bottom of a deep well at the backdoor?

The places of death will constantly change,
village and city will come together in this global village.
And a primal product called woman will be seen in the culture of use and discard,
providing daily news:
Of dishevelled hair
Of terrified eyes
Of hands on her yoni trying to stop its destruction.

From the Translator's Note (Edited):

This poem was brought to my notice by two Marathi-reading members of my family. They were overcome, it seemed, by its power; and after reading it, so was I. I knew I had to translate this poem into English. …

But first the title, which comes from two incidents that happened in rural Maharashtra. In Khairlanji in 2006, a Dalit family was massacred; the mother and teenage daughter were paraded naked in the village and then raped before they were killed. The assailants were Marathas. In Kopardi in 2016, a fourteen-year-old girl was raped with incredible savagery and then killed. The victim this time was a Maratha girl; the killers, Dalits. In both cases, the two caste groups protested with large morchas, asking for justice for the victim and also making political demands; the Marathas asking for reservation, and the Dalits for the application of the Prevention of Atrocities against Dalits Act for Khairlanji killings. The protests were more a show of strength by the two caste groups than an exhibition of sympathy for the victims.

Reading and admiring this powerful poem was one thing, translating it was quite another. At first we, and then I alone, tried to negotiate a way through words, each one of which was used purposefully and deliberately, so that I had to be very careful not to abandon that particular sense. And I thought: this could not have been written in English. Just one example: vagina does not seem to be the right substitute for the word yoni, used in the poem repeatedly. Yoni carries a mystical sense of both femaleness and the origin of life, which the word vagina lacks. I decided to retain yoni.

There's also the caste factor, so boldly and clearly proclaimed in the poem. For various reasons, English writers have rarely grappled with caste. Perhaps it has something to do with the class most English writers belong to, where caste is not very important; perhaps it is being mainly urban, where again caste matters less than in rural areas. There's also the fact that a particular caste brings in its own language. How do we render that in English? And, for some reason I cannot describe or explain, there is immediacy when such a subject is written of in the language it belongs to. English creates a distance, an objectivity, not a subjectivity. …

Despite all this, I knew I had to translate this poem. And for me, the distance was bridged by an instant sense of kinship with the poet, a feeling that what she was writing about was my reality as well, that these were the things I had been writing about for four decades. That I wrote in English did not distance me from what this poet was saying. For, I have not landed here from some exotic place merely because I write in English. …

Further Reading:

Rao, Anupama. 2009. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Chamayou, Gregoire. 2012. *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*. Tr. Steven Rendall. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ram, Kalpana. 2013. *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and Its Provocation of the Modern.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Henry, Nikhila. 2016. *#Caste is not a Rumour: The Online Diary of Rohit Vemula.* New Delhi: Jaggernaut Books. Electronic Edition.