



By AMITA KANEKAR

Why Bhima-Koregaon Challenges the Nation

The Oxford University Press edition of 'Just One Word', a collection of stories by Bama (this year's speaker at the Dr B R Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series in Goa), describes her at the back of the book as a 'Dalit writer'. There is however no mention of caste in the bio-data of her translator. One might argue that a translator is not as important as an author, of course. But why don't we see Amitav Ghosh mentioned as a Brahmin, and Arundhati Roy as a half-Syrian Christian-half-Brahmin, at the back of their books? Because caste of the savarna is invisibilised in Indian discourse. Savarnas are casteless, so we are led to believe, as is their nation and its history.

But, as anybody who lives in South Asia knows well, this is not true. And the violence that began at Bhima-Koregaon on January 1st, along with the reactions to it, are a poignant illustration of the deep, even insurmountable, caste divides in this nation of India. The protests that took place in various parts of Maharashtra were greeted with anger by many upper castes, and demands for the return of peace and normalcy. But do the two go together? Normalcy in India is not peaceful. If one asks for normalcy, one is actually asking for the continuation of systemic violence, even barbarism.

Bhima-Koregaon was a historic moment of revolt against this barbaric violence. It is the place where, on 1st January 200 years ago, a small troop of the English East India Company (EIC) held off a 20,000-strong Peshwa army, in one of the battles of the Third Anglo-Maratha War which ended the Peshwa empire. The British troop comprised just 834 soldiers, many of whom were Mahars.

The EIC celebrated this remarkable achievement by putting up a great victory pillar at the site, which still stands today, with the names of the fallen soldiers, including many Mahars, inscribed on it. The Mahar soldiers were lauded by British historians in the 19th century as intrepid, tenacious, dedicated, disciplined, and honourable (Ratnesh Katulkar, Round Table India, 9/1/2018). It is another matter that, after the 1857 rebellion, when the British policies generally became more socially conservative, this debt was forgotten and Mahar recruitment stopped, so that a struggle had to be launched at the end of the 19th century to restart it.



The victory has also been celebrated by the Dalit movement, not just for the enormous success against the odds, but also because it was a victory against the social tyranny of the Peshwa empire. The Mahars were an ‘untouchable’ and persecuted community under this Brahmanical regime (Shraddha Kumbhojkar, *Contesting Power, Contesting Memories: The History of the Koregaon Memorial*, EPW, 2012). According to Mukta Salve, the 15-year-old student in one of the first schools for girls in British-ruled Pune who wrote a famous essay published in 1855, ‘Under Bajirao’s rule, if any *mang* or *mahar* happened to pass in front of a gymnasium, they would cut off his head and play ‘bat and ball’ with their swords as bats and his head as a ball, on the grounds. When we were punished for even passing through their doors, where was the question of getting education, getting freedom to learn? When any *mang* or *mahar* would learn somehow to read or write, and if Bajirao came to know about this, he would say: education of a *mang* or *mahar* amounts to taking away a brahman’s job. He used to say, “How dare they get educated? Do these untouchables expect the brahman to hand over their official duties to them and move around with their shaving kits, shaving the heads of widows?” ‘ (*Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi* — About the grief of the Mangs and the Mahars — Dalitweb.org, November 2015).

It was this barbaric Peshwai that Bhima-Koregaon buried. But the tragedy is that the Peshwa’s ideas are not dead. Even if the victory ensured that many kinds of casteist violence are no longer sanctioned by law, they still continue. There is the continuing practice of untouchability in Indian society; the savarna monopoly over power in every sector; the general acceptance of vast differences in education, health care, housing, etc. for savarnas and bahunas; the lack of implementation of caste-based reservations (rampantly in Goa), and so on, all proof of our acceptance of systemic casteist violence. Along with this is direct violence, like the murderous attacks at Khairlanji and Dadri; the ‘communal violence’ targeting bahunas; the ‘honour’ killings against intercaste love; the lynchings, rapes, and other random violence against even children, all such a norm in this land that they hardly merit a mention in the media, the same media which will spend hours of prime-time and reams of paper, even books and films, over the murder of a savarna person.

And then there is the intellectual violence which justifies everything else. So savarna privilege is called merit. The caste basis of most oppression is rarely discussed, nor that of most success. And in the celebration of the nation’s history, it is savarna history that is celebrated, like the Peshwas and their doings. While Dalit-Bahunas and their achievements,

are invisibilised, and colonial rule is demonised. Both Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar spoke of the social liberation made possible by the rule of the British, but how many Indian historians are willing to recognise this? And in Goa, we know that Portuguese rule, while not deliberately anti-caste, created new opportunities for oppressed communities even outside Goa, so that Dalits migrated into the Old Conquests in order to become 'subjects of a European king who did not recognise caste distinctions as valid legal distinctions , and also since it gave them a chance, through migration between the two conquest areas, to reinvent themselves.' (Peter Ronald de Souza, *Humiliation in a Crematorium*, 2009).

But all this history does not count. For those who rule India now, and who have ruled Goa from 1961, the Peshwa's casteist empire is a nationalist ideal, to be celebrated, even venerated, in popular culture. No surprises then, that the Bhima-Koregaon anniversary causes discomfort for many Indians. Because it was a victory against casteism. And this is a nation that still celebrates casteism.

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