

Bhima-Koregaon

Myth, Metaphor and Meta-mission

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Soon after the “Elgar Conference” at Pune on 31 December 2017, organised jointly by Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Muslims, and Maratha organisations, presided over by Justice P B Sawant to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Bhima-Koregaon battle, I wrote a piece for the *Wire* (Teltumbde 2018). The conference, of which I was one of the conveners, was directed against the reactionary anti-people policies of the present Hindutva dispensation in power. Despite vigorous canvassing over a month, I was told only 30–35 people participated in the long marches taken out from Nagpur, Shirur, and Mumbai to Shaniwar Wada, the venue of the conference. Why such few numbers in the long march whereas lakhs would be turning up on 1 January at Bhima-Koregaon? It was depressing to see that the conference meant to prepare people to fight against “new Peshwai” would only end up adding a few lakhs to the already swelling crowds around the obelisk at Bhima-Koregaon. It is only due to its association with B R Ambedkar that Bhima-Koregaon and other such places had been attracting even greater crowds of Dalits with each passing year.

The article generated extreme reactions, both positive and negative; positive from the progressive who’s who across the country, and negative (mostly angry and abusive) from Dalits and Hindutva bigots. The Dalits typically picked up the “myth” part of it,¹ distorting it to their hearts’ content and insinuating that it was against Ambedkar. Even scholars like Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2018) jumped on this bandwagon in distorting what I wrote: “Anand Teltumbde ... who believed that the Mahar soldiers did not die for the nationalist cause ... ” whereas I had elaborately written the

exact opposite in the above-mentioned article: “To see historical facts through the spectacles of a non-existent nation is equally condemnable.” In terms of the facts cited, there was nothing disputable but when passion runs high reason does not count.

Truth behind Myths

There is no dispute that the obelisk standing at Bhima-Koregaon marks the valour of Mahar soldiers or even further, that it was largely the Dalit soldiers who won the British their empire.² In each of the numerous battles that the British East India Company fought, symbolically bracketed by the first one at Plassey in 1757 to the last at Bhima-Koregaon in 1818, Dalit soldiers played an overwhelmingly large role in winning them. When the ungrateful British stopped recruitment of Dalits in 1892 on the pretext that they were not a martial race, it provoked agitation among them to demand its restoration. It was led by the pioneers of the Dalit movement—Gopal Baba Walangkar, Shivram Janba Kamble, and among them Ramji Maloji Sakpal, father of B R Ambedkar—who rightly used the testimony of the Koregaon obelisk for their claim of being a martial race.

But to insinuate that the Koregaon battle was won by the Mahars to avenge their humiliation by the Peshwas is a myth. Ambedkar visited the obelisk for the first time on 1 January 1927, 119 years after the war was fought and won, and reportedly many times thereafter. He used it to inspire the Mahars to fight against Brahminism, as their ancestors did while fighting against Peshwai.³ In the Mahad Conference, 1927, he urged Dalits to educate their children by telling them how their ancestors were learned people. Thereafter, he realised the limitations

of caste identity and widened his appeal to workers and peasants that subsumed Dalits under the Independent Labour Party. The fact that before and even after that, Bhima-Koregaon was forgotten until the 1990s when Dalits began congregating there, speaks volumes about the Dalits’ reading of it and the apologetic theorisations of Dalit scholars.

Ambedkar, for whom there was not even a small structure built at the place he was cremated until his son erected the existing stupa in 1967 or for whom Dalits had to perform a massive *jail bharo* (court arrest) in 1965 to demand inter alia his picture to be put up in Parliament hall, became an important icon in the late 1960s. The causal linkage for it is not difficult to seek. Electoral politics became increasingly competitive with the rise of regional parties of the rural rich, created from among the most populous Shudra castes by the postcolonial political economy. Ambedkar was skillfully iconised by the ruling classes to woo Dalits, who nostalgically idolised him in the wake of the debacles in their movements. Chaitya Bhoomi, his cremation place, where until the late 1960s only a few hundred people, including his family members, paid homage on 6 December, the congregation today goes beyond 2 million. The growing congregations to commemorate Ambedkar at an increasing number of memorials (estimated at over 5 million every year consuming ₹500 crore, which over the years could have provided several universities for Dalits!) are just the manifestation of identity obsession whipped up by the contemporary political dynamics.

Metaphor of Peshwai

Annual mass congregations at Bhima-Koregaon have been taking place since the 1990s, without any untoward incident. So what changed this year? The answer lies in the call given against “new Peshwai” by the forces that reflected the coming together of Dalits, Muslims, OBCs and Marathas. In Maharashtra, it could be quite a threatening development to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), particularly in the wake of elections

looming. The Maratha agitation that gripped the state last year was politically confused because although it was seeded by a particular party, it could not prevent its benefits from drifting to rival parties and so also the alienation of the Dalits and the OBCs. Marathas decided to befriend Dalits to target the Brahminical BJP in power. It is to break this incipient unity that the Hindutva forces unleashed their agent provocateurs in Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote to instigate the Marathas against the Dalits using the issue of the Sambhaji Memorial in a nearby village of Vadu Budruk. They fabricated history that it was not Govind Mahar but a Maratha family, who performed the last rites over the body of Sambhaji. On 28 December 2017, they damaged the memorial of Govind Mahar, gave a call of a bandh in surrounding villages, planned for the attack on Dalits and executed it on 1 January 2018. The complicity of the state apparatus was naked. Despite the first information report against the culprits under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and worldwide outrage against state inaction, the state refused to arrest the architects of the violence and instead rounded up thousands of Dalit youth all over the state for participating in the peaceful bandh observed on 3 January 2018 in protest against the attack.

Peshwai, a metaphor for reactionary, Brahminical rule, whose oppressiveness is infamously described by an earthen pot round the neck of a Mahar to hold his spittle, and a thorny branch tied to his behind to brush out his footsteps (Russell 1916). The new Peshwai serves as a metaphor for the current Hindutva dispensation. It is not to be seen only through the specs of castes and equated to its old version. It is far more insidious than that because of its expanse and fascist potentialities. The quibbling of left intellectuals over its *fascistness* notwithstanding, it will prove worse than the infamous fascist regimes of 1920s–1930s Europe. Its hydra-headed organisation, ideology of Brahminism (world's oldest anti-egalitarian ideology), backing of global capital, and congenial political conditions, make it potentially far more

harmful than Mussolini's Italy or Hitler's Germany. Needless to say, it is going to be dangerous to Dalits, as they are the real "other" for Hindutva forces.

Meta-mission of Dalits

Unfortunately for Dalits, fascism and imperialism are alien terms—communist jargons. Their meta-mission is fighting caste oppression. But what is the nature of this fight: reverse the scale or annihilate caste altogether? The identity mongering appears to indicate the former, that the Dalits seek to gain a dominant position à la ruling community, as Ambedkar once said, within the caste structure. The problem with this proposition, however, is that it betrays ignorance of the very character of caste identity, that is hierarchy. It drives caste to split like amoeba. The proof of it is that the aspirational category of "Dalits" constructed by Ambedkar could not hold Dalit castes together and prevent their splintering. Nothing that is based on caste identity could forge a larger unity of people. The dream of becoming a ruling community may inspire a section of upwardly mobile Dalits, but it will stay a chimera.

The real goal for the Dalits, nay, for the country must be the annihilation of caste, articulated by Ambedkar himself. He went along his diagnosis that caste was sourced from the *dharmashastra* stream of Hindu religion and since Hindus would never be prepared to destroy these dharmashastras, decided to renounce Hindu religion and embrace Buddhism. The efficacy of this solution apart, it must be realised that Dalits alone can never annihilate caste. Also, castes today are not the classical castes, as reflected in Ambedkar's consideration but are thoroughly mixed with class, which is a dominant category in the contemporary world. Moreover, there are

formidable structural barriers created by the postcolonial ruling classes in the constitution that they hold sacrosanct. This complex cobweb of caste and class can only be destroyed by the united struggle of people on the basis of class identity.

To those who smell blasphemy in this proposition, may I just cite Ambedkar's own words:

No great man really does his work by crippling his disciple, by forcing on them his maxims or his conclusions. What a great man does is not to impose his maxims on his disciples ... There is no ingratitude in the disciple not accepting the maxims or the conclusions of his master. For even when he rejects them, he is bound to acknowledge to his master in deep reverence "You awakened me to be myself: for that I thank you." The master is not entitled to less. The disciple is not bound to give more.⁴

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NOTES

- 1 Their contention arising from the following sentence in the article, "But when Babasaheb Ambedkar painted the Battle of Bhima Koregaon as the battle of Mahar soldiers against their caste oppression in Peshwa rule, he was creating a pure myth."
- 2 *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, Vol 12, p 88.
- 3 *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, Vol 17, Part 1, p 307.
- 4 *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai, Vol 1, p 240.

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- Teltumbde, Anand (2018): "The Myth of Bhima Koregaon Reinforces the Identities It Seeks to Transcend," *Wire*, 2 January, <https://thewire.in/209824/myth-bhima-koregaon-reinforces-identities-seeks-transcend/>.

Obituaries

The *EPW* has started a section, "Obituaries", which will note the passing of teachers and researchers in the social sciences and humanities, and social activists who have contributed to a just society.

The announcements will be in the nature of short notices about the work and careers of those who have passed away.

Readers could send brief obituaries to edit@epw.in.