

The Living Theatre of Identity Politics



- Deepa Punjani.

At first glance the makeshift platform and the concomitant atmosphere in the heart of the workers' living quarters (BIT *chawl*) in Mazgaon, Mumbai appears just like the venue of an organized rally than a stage that is in waiting to rock the audience. Taken at face value, the first view of things as they were on 10th January 2007 would amount to a political protest leveraged by the scheduled castes of India who proudly and verily call themselves the *Dalits*. Their history is as old as the history of India and their pernicious conditions need no retelling.

Despite the mire of controversies and complexities that engulfs their status as the rightful citizens of India, there is no doubt that their voice and stance is more often than not taken as political tokenism, a dull headache that is best ignored or temporarily attended to. More grievous is the utter lack of empathy by large sections of the Indian polity towards their situation. Atrocities continue to be inflicted upon them in varying degrees and yet the popular opinion is



largely restricted to issues such as the percentage of reservations that these underprivileged people have lobbied for or to their close association with *Naxalities*.

Victims of the Hindu caste system, which continues to blight the social fabric of the country, the *Dalits* are not wrong in voicing their misgivings with the dominant culture and politics of the privileged, most of whom belong to the upper castes. The caste system is one of the greatest impediments in the functioning of India's democracy and in many a way it is this ingrained social inequality that has given currency to sectarian and identity politics in the country.

In view of the recently committed heinous crime at Kairlanji in Nagpur, Maharashtra, it was only natural for *Dalits* across the country to come together and mobilize themselves. The events that unfolded at the BIT *chawl* in Mazgaon and on the following day at the Ambedkar Bhavan in Dadar (E) could best be described as the living theatre of these marginalized people. And the actor in lead was none other than the famed balladeer, social activist and branded *Naxalite*, Gaddar. The ignorance of his theatre by the mainstream *theatrewallahs* and media is only testimony to the cultural hegemony of what is a legitimate expression of art and what is not.

Telugu by origin, Gaddar was born into a family of poor *Dalit* labourers in Andhra Pradesh. His actual name is Gummadi Vittal Rao while the pseudonym Gaddar is a reference to the eponymous Indian pre-independence, revolutionary party of Punjab. Gaddar's detailed background and trajectory can be easily accessed on the Internet but suffice it to say for the purpose of this article is that he is a brilliant performer whose self-styled acts and songs have made him an icon in *Dalit* politics.

No sooner had he taken the stage than whistles and cheers cut through the audience. The adulation was mesmerizing. Playwright and theatre person, Ramu Ramanathan is apt in describing him as a complete rock star; this short, podgy man in a knee length *dhoti*, with a rough wool blanket across his chest. At 56, he appears older than he is but his vitality has not been diminished by the hard circumstances of his life or by a bullet that remains lodged in his back, owing to an assassination attempt on his life.



'You can kill everything but not the voice' says Gaddar as he extols the virtues of the songs and music that are capable of bringing on a revolution. Improvisation, narration, lyrics, music, dance and movement are characteristic of his performances. His movement bears the stamp of a man lost in the private revels of salvation, a *vairagi* on the quest for the ultimate truth. At other times he is engaged with making his point be that about revering the great *Dalit* leaders such as Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar or about addressing the socio-economic conditions of their lot.

His ability to use simple verse that has a smattering of English works fabulously as does his colloquial Hindi. Not knowing Hindi well is hardly an obstacle for him. In his characteristic or rather signature style he overcame the barriers of language to get the larger message across to the majority of his Marathi listeners in Mumbai and Pune. And when he breaks into brief spells of dance, the audience is clearly held in raptures. His mission of doing away with inequality and injustice of all kinds, be it homegrown or arising out of the excesses of the West imbues his performance. There is no line that divides Gaddar, the man and Gaddar, the actor and it is this undivided personality in action that recognizes the pulse of the audience and gives them the catharsis that they have come for.

The performer in him is adept at making himself home in different surroundings and this is clearly evident in his handling of huge crowds. The musicians improvise with him and even his ticking them off for a wrong beat does not appear to be as out of performance. The chorus that stands behind him in support is actor, singer and prompter in turn. There is an earthiness to Gaddar's performance that is warming to the heart and to the very spirit of the downtrodden.

In his performance at Mazgaon, he made use of hardly any props. A big, blood-red kerchief symbolized the *Dalit* martyrs who have sacrificed their lives to the *Dalit* cause. The colour red is also vividly symbolic of the Communist ideology that Gaddar shares with his fellow intellectuals, activists and artists. Chorus members of his group tie a red head bend around their foreheads. The red kerchief was enough to send the right ripples through the audience but from an artistic point of view, Gaddar also breathed life into the prop. Audience involvement remained at an all time high and children too were sucked into the vortex of his simple but highly effective rhythmic meters. Professional actors and theatre workshop conductors can indeed learn a thing or two from him.



Stylistically speaking his performance is greatly influenced by the art of narration and singing. In his struggle for the separate state of Telangana, Gaddar formed a *burrakatha* (a folk theatrical form of Andhra Pradesh that relies on storytelling) in the early seventies. His singing is marked by a high pitch that has the ability to travel the length and breadth of an auditorium and is further aided by his inexhaustible energy that makes him even jump in the throes of the moment. The influence of the *shahirs* (people's poets) and of the art form of *Tamasha* (a popular folk theatrical form of Maharashtra)

is also remarkably clear. In one of the interludes which satirizes the attitude of the upper castes and of the government towards the Khairlanji issue, he adopts the role of a *songadya* (jester). In both performances in Mumbai, he was in fact accompanied by the noted Maharashtra *shahir*, Sambhaji Bhagat.

There is no doubt that Gaddar's theatre like his compatriots is overtly political. It is almost impossible to separate the intellectual artist from his social and political

convictions and therein lays the danger of issues being projected in a lopsided manner. The cause of people like Gaddar is noble but their issues need more probing and debate. It was a pity that in the two days in which Gaddar sang his heart out, there was no real discussion that took place between the audience and the invited speakers at Ambedkar Bhavan. The speeches made by the speakers were inspirational and fiery in turn but often they were reduced to a sweeping criticism of America and of globalization and privatization.

Again communism which has found a natural ally in the *Dalits'* cause is preached and propagated widely without any kind of an inquiry into its vastly proven failings. Caste and class are inextricably tied up with each other in India, which explains the *Dalits'* adoption of Communism as the political arm of their movement. There is no doubt that grave inequalities persist in the democratic system that India has embraced but despite its shortcomings, it remains India's core strength. The problem at its heart is about orthodoxy and governance. And it is important that this debate be a national one in which all sections of society must participate. Extremism and simplistic approaches are just not the answer.

In the meanwhile we cannot help but surrender ourselves to Gaddar's magic. His poetry may sound crude in Hindi but it also very compelling and hummable. And the truth is that we can only ignore voices like his to our own peril. The sooner we understand that, the better.

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