

## Khairlanji and Its Aftermath: Exploding Some Myths

*The importance of Khairlanji lies in providing a clear illustration of the genesis, development and culmination of a caste atrocity. Khairlanji brings to the fore the irrelevance of dalit politics and politicians and rejection of them by ordinary dalits. But above all, Khairlanji helps dispel a number of myths – the myth that economic development does away with casteism, the myth of Maharashtra being a progressive state, the myth that there exists a significant progressive section of non-dalits that is against the caste system, the myth that dalits placed in the bureaucracy can orient the administration to do justice to dalits, and finally the mythology of ‘bahujanwad’ developed by the late Kanshiram and followed by other dalit leaders.*

ANAND TELTUMBDE

It is time to comprehend the significance of Khairlanji, the forces behind it, the reactions it evoked, and the lessons it holds forth. Khairlanji has exposed the omissions and commissions, indeed, the very complicity of the state in crimes against dalits, as also the bankruptcy and irrelevance of mainstream dalit politics and politicians. It has dispelled a number of myths – that economic development weakens the hold of the caste system; that Maharashtra is a progressive state; that there is a significant section of non-dalits that is anti-caste; that a significant proportion of dalits in the bureaucracy can orient the state to fulfil its constitutional responsibility towards the dalits; and, that ‘bahujanwad’, which tries to unite the dalits and shudra castes on the basis of their caste identity, is a viable strategy of advance of the dalit cause.

### More Grotesque, More Extreme

The cases of recent atrocities reflect a qualitative change in the mode of perpetration as well as their intensity. Unlike in the past, when individuals mostly committed caste atrocities, in recent years they tend to be committed by collectives in a grotesque celebratory mode. Take the case of Jajjhar in Haryana where five dalits

were lynched to death on October 15, 2002 by a crowd of caste Hindus in broad daylight and within the police premises, with police officials standing by as mute spectators to the ghastly act. There is a sense of defiance and self-assurance on the part of the perpetrators associated with recent crimes. The Jajjhar incident was publicly justified as a well-deserved punishment to the victims.<sup>1</sup> So was the case in Bhutegaon in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra in May 2003,<sup>2</sup> in which a youth was burnt alive by a crowd of caste Hindus or of Sonnakhota in Beed district, around the same time, where again a crowd of caste Hindus chased a poor dalit and stoned him to death.<sup>3</sup> There is a discernible increase in the intensity of atrocities in recent years, which may be explained to some extent by their being committed by a collective. The cruelty displayed in certain recent caste atrocities defies human imagination. The details of the torture inflicted on the Bhotmanges in Khairlanji cannot be believed to be an act of human beings – a mother and daughter being paraded naked to the village centre, the genitals of the boys being crushed with stones, the two women being gang raped to death and the corpses being callously thrown into the canal.

The dispute over the passage through Bhotmange land provided a backdrop to the incident, no doubt, but this does not explain

the atrocity, particularly the ferocity of it. The land dispute goes back 17 years in time, when Bhaiyalal Bhotmange had moved with his family to Khairlanji to cultivate five acres of land that he bought near the village of his in-laws.<sup>4</sup> The land, which was used as a common passage by the villagers as long as it was uncultivated, became unavailable to villagers thereafter. The matter had gone to revenue court, but eventually Bhaiyalal Bhotmange emerged unscathed with the support of Siddharth Gajbhiye, a well-to-do cousin of Surekha, Bhaiyalal's wife, who was also a police patil<sup>5</sup> of his village. The injury to the caste pride of the caste Hindus simmered and grew with the increasing assertiveness of Bhotmanges, which was perceived to be partly due to their upward economic mobility and cultural progress, the latter in terms of the educational achievements of the Bhotmange children, and partly to the support of Gajbhiye. The villagers grudging Gajbhiye's visits to Khairlanji, alleging an illicit relation between him and Surekha Bhotmange, and thrashed him on September 3. In the case filed by him, where Surekha and her daughter stood witness, 12 local persons were arrested. On obtaining bail, on September 29 last year they carried out the attack on the Bhotmanges with the support of entire caste Hindu population. While the origin of dispute thus appears to be land, the caste prejudice of the caste Hindu villagers played a major role, right from the articulation of dispute through the development and eventual precipitation into a heinous crime.

### Complicity of the State Machinery

Structurally speaking, in examining a caste atrocity one has to take cognisance of the existing social relational disequilibria between caste Hindus and dalits, as also the protective mechanism in favour of the dalits, which is mandated in the Constitution, should this disequilibria precipitate into injustice. The disequilibria in social relations is intrinsic to caste society, and can only be contained so long as dalits submit to the humiliating demands of the caste Hindus or the latter are so enlightened as to treat dalits as equals, which however is only an hypothetical possibility. The social relational dynamics,

in normal course, is basically mediated by the perceived strength of each group by both camps. The state can play an instrumental role in enhancing the perception of dalit strength by its protective measures. But the record of atrocities on dalits reflects the utter failure of the state in the discharge of its constitutional responsibility.<sup>6</sup> The state has only faithfully served the ruling classes, whose vested interests are in preserving the existing caste divide, even accentuating it. Partly following from this, and partly due to its dominant upper caste orientation, the state has never made a sincere effort to arrest impending caste atrocities. On the contrary, mostly it has been complicit with the perpetrators of such crimes.

The state's complicity has manifested even in its post-atrocity dealings in refusing to register the case, or, if registered, in not conducting proper investigation, and thereby weakening the case in the court of law. If the state had performed its role even reasonably well, it may be argued, the menace of caste atrocities would have abated substantially by now. Unfortunately, the incidence of caste atrocities has been growing with passage of time. The very process of dalits registering a crime with the police is fraught with hurdles, starting with a fear of reprisal from the powerful upper castes or of incurring social prejudice, as in the case of crimes involving women at the victim's end, and thereafter the reluctance of the police to register the case. The case gets counted in the statistics of crimes against SCs only after it gets past these hurdles. More often than not, the local police clearly take sides with the perpetrators of the crime against the dalit victims and do everything possible to suppress the crime at the first instance. Political pressure and money exert a significant role. Even if the crime is registered, it is the police who investigate the crime and collect evidence for prosecution. The shoddy investigation by the police in such cases is legion, as evidenced by the extremely paltry rate of conviction. There is a tacit assurance to the upper castes that the official protectors of the law would not come in their way in their dealings with dalits. This assurance has played a key role in sustaining the growth of atrocities year after year. The temerity of the Khairlanji criminals also indicates a similar assurance.

From the facts of the case, it is clear that the incident was sought to be suppressed by the police even as they reluctantly took it on record. Although it would send shivers

down the spine at the thought that such a ghastly incident could have been buried in the files of an obscure police station, this is precisely what was initially planned. On hindsight, it might appear foolish on the part of the schemers to have imagined that they would be able to cover up the incident, but the very fact that they tried suggests that this was not entirely out of the realm of possibility. The public uproar over the incident broke out a full month after the incident, during which it was as good as buried. If even Bhaiyalal Bhotmange's first information report (FIR) led to the arrests of some people (not the real culprits, he kept on shouting until end-November) in Khairlanji, as it actually happened, who would have followed the case, what would have happened in absence of any evidence or any witnesses? Khairlanji, with all its bestiality and gore would have been covered up and forgotten. Nobody would have known about it. Even now that it has got so much publicity, one cannot be sure that the real criminals would ever be punished. If the Ramabai Nagar case in the heart of Mumbai could frustrate dalits, who could be sure of conviction in remote Khairlanji?<sup>7</sup>

### Treacherous Role

The insidious role the police played in the making of Khairlanji and then suppressing it is quite representative of caste crimes anywhere. Khairlanji is a village of 800 people in which just three households are of neo-Buddhists (dalits) and seven households are of gonds (tribals), who in Vidarbha more or less identify with the caste Hindus, the balance population belonging to the kunabi, kalar, teli, lodhi, dhivar, vadhai and other jatis, which fall under the other backward classes (OBC) category, but serve as upper caste vis-a-vis dalits in a village setting. In such circumstances, dalits will never come out in open conflict with caste Hindus unless there is a grave enough reason. The land dispute that triggered a saga of the Bhotmanges getting ostracised was not unknown to the local police. While resisting the passage of caste Hindus across his fields, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange was once beaten, for which he had complained to the police.<sup>8</sup> In 2002, Surekha had complained against a neighbouring farmer, Shivshankar Atilkar for trespassing on her farmland and abusing her in "casteist" tones. In 2004, though the re-measurement of the farmland confirmed the case of the Bhotmanges in a revenue court, in order to buy

peace, Bhotmange, with the mediation of Siddharth Gajbhiye, conceded a small passage through the farm. But this conciliatory measure on his part did not stop harassment. Priyanka, Surekha's daughter, was teased and verbally harassed by passing lewd remarks while she cycled to school. Once she had reported such harassment to Siddharth Gajbhiye, who reprimanded the caste Hindus but advised the Bhotmanges not to formally complain to the police. One complaint on record with the police is of Surekha being attacked with a sickle by some caste Hindu women. Indeed, there appears to be a series of incidents that were reported to the police but there was absolutely no action taken.

The Bhotmanges had the support of Siddharth Gajbhiye, and so the Khairlanji villagers decided to teach him a lesson. On September 3 last year, under the alibi of a dispute over wages to be paid to farm labourers, some of them caught and beat him unconscious. The following day his brother Rajendra went to the Andhalgaon police station to report the incident but was arrogantly turned away. Siddharth was admitted to a Kamptee hospital, where the police registered his complaint and transferred the case to the Andhalgaon police station on jurisdictional grounds. As the Andhalgaon police came to take the statements of Surekha and Priyanka, the witnesses named in the complaint, the sarpanch and upsarpanch of Khairlanji had threatened to kill them, and that too, in the very presence of the police. On September 21, Rajendra was similarly threatened at Kandri village. The next day he was involved in a skirmish, for which he had made a complaint to the police, but there was no action. The police arrested 12 people for beating Siddharth Gajbhiye but they were released on bail on September 29. It is said that as a witness Surekha took advantage of the opportunity and included some of her old enemies in the list of 12 accused. After the return of these accused, the caste Hindus called a meeting and decided to teach a lesson to Siddharth Gajbhiye and the Bhotmange family. When Surekha learnt of this,<sup>9</sup> she informed Siddharth Gajbhiye and her nephew Rashtrapal Narnaware in Warti village over her cell phone.

Each of the above complaints qualified to be registered under SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (PoA Act), but none was so registered. Even the case of beating of Siddharth Gajbhiye in Khairlanji that culminated in the gory carnage was deemed not fit enough to be registered under the

PoA Act. Had the police taken due cognisance of these preceding disputes, one could argue, that Khairlanji could have been averted. It is the complicity of police that has led to caste Hindus mustering courage to punish Bhotmanges for upholding their dignity and self-respect.

When the mob actually attacked, Surekha had called Rajendra Gajbhiye on her cell to seek police help. Rajendra immediately called the police but they did not pay any heed. Mysteriously, the sim card of Surekha's cellphone went missing. Rajendra then rushed to Khairlanji and after witnessing the attack again called the police on his cellphone. Bhaiyalal, who saw the attack ran to Siddharth to save himself. Siddharth immediately called the police and requested for help. The torture of Bhotmanges lasted for more than two hours thereafter. The police, located just eight km away, could have easily reached there in less than 20 minutes, but they chose not to. Bhaiyalal and Gajbhiye personally reached the Andhalgaon police station to report the incident but the police did not register it and instead sent a constable to Khairlanji when everything was over. The constable just met the sarpanch and returned reporting that everything was normal. It was only the next day, when Bhaiyalal went with Gajbhiye and his uncle to the police station that an FIR was registered. When in the morning of September 30 the body of Priyanka was recovered from the canal and her cousin Rashtrapal identified her, the police recorded it in their inquest as "unidentified and unclaimed" and sent it for post-mortem. The post-mortem was carried out shoddily and the body disposed off. The next day, the other three bodies were recovered, but they were also similarly disposed off. The evidence as such was effectively destroyed.

The information provided by the police to the press was obviously prompted by the schemers – that the Bhotmanges were killed over the issue of an illicit relationship. The strategy appeared to have worked to the extent that none among the large congregation of dalits gathered to commemorate the 50th year of conversion of Babasaheb Ambedkar on October 2 at Diksha Bhoomi at Nagpur noted the news. It was not even noted by the next congregation on October 14 that followed the English calendar in observing the anniversary. The incident could have easily passed off as a crime for which some arrests were made and police investigation was on. They would have managed bail for the arrested

people and thereafter for the others. This might seem implausible, but is actually what happens in most atrocity cases. Even after the publicity that the case gets, there is no guarantee of conviction of criminals. For instance, no one knows what happened in the case of Gohana<sup>10</sup> or Jajjhar?

Apart from the entire police machinery, the doctors who helped suppress this incident by their acts of commission and omission, the public prosecutor who inexplicably advised against the PoA Act being applied, in short, the entire state apparatus has actively contributed to the making of Khairlanji.

### The Aftermath

What followed Khairlanji was equally grave. As the information on the gruesome murders began leaking out of the fact-finding reports and spreading around, it created revulsion among certain sections of the dalit community. The first reaction was to come out in protest on to the streets; a women's organisation, the Rashtriya Sambuddha Mahila Sanghтана in Bhandara, took out a massive rally on November 1. This rally provided inspiration to others to organise protests in various towns and cities. Soon, the entire Vidarbha region reverberated with protests. It is notable that almost everywhere dalit women had taken a lead. The people, particularly youngsters supported these efforts and poured out on to the streets in large numbers. These were genuine protesters who did not have the usual support system that the established political parties have. Most people were educated individuals, employed or otherwise, who were impelled to express their moral outrage against the criminals of Khairlanji and police complicity in the crime. However, the police everywhere cracked down on them with a heavy hand, as though they were bigger criminals than the perpetrators of Khairlanji. At most places the protesters were brutally beaten. At least one person was killed and several injured when police opened fire in Amravati. As an all-India fact-finding committee that visited Nagpur, Kamptee, Amravati, Akola and Yavatmal, where significant police action had taken place, reported that the use of force by the police was unwarranted and reflected an anti-dalit bias.

At the rally in Nagpur, one of the first in a series of protest actions, people expressed their anger by blocking traffic and shouting anti-government slogans, nothing

abnormal, given the context of Khairlanji. However, the home minister of Maharashtra issued a statement on camera that the government suspected Naxalites were behind these protests. Later he publicly retracted the statement, as it led to an uproar among dalits. However, the Nagpur police fully capitalised on it to unleash severe repression on the dalit masses. The brutal lathi charges on protesting dalits, the arrests that followed these protests, the showering of filthy casteist abuses, the humiliations heaped on people in police custody as though they were hardened criminals, and police vehemence in opposing their bail applications, were reflective of a deep anti-dalit bias and intolerance of dalit assertion of their democratic rights.

In Amravati, the protest rally on November 14 by the Khairlanji Nished Kruti Samiti evoked a massive response; more than 25,000 people in attendance, which was in sharp contrast to just a couple of thousand persons at a rally organised by the senior Republican Party of India (RPI) leader, R S Gavai. After reaching the collector's office and handing over a memorandum, the rally formally concluded. But as the people dispersed and were returning home, the police suddenly began a lathi charge on the pretext of stone throwing from somewhere, which according to organisers was rather in response to police action. Police did not spare even women and children, one of whom lay in hospital paralysed for life. Irked by the police highhandedness, people set fire to a water tanker and a few motorbikes parked nearby. The police burst teargas shells and opened fire on the retreating people. One youth, Dinesh Wankhede was hit in the head and killed and three others were wounded with bullet injuries on various parts of their bodies. The fact that all the wounded persons fell down in the by-lanes clearly showed (this was even captured on camera) that police had indeed fired upon the people while they were in retreat. The police commissioner justified the firing to the all-India fact-finding committee members, saying that there was an imminent danger of a communal conflagration, with the Shiv Sena being prepared for that.

The police action however did not end there. The police began rounding up people and slapping all kinds of cases on them – cases such as sedition, attempt to murder, rioting, etc, for which it is not easy to get bail. They arrested a mathematics teacher of the local Navodaya Vidyalaya for having a booklet and a poster on Khairlanji.

Incidentally, the booklet was a duly published fact-finding report by the Samata Sainik Dal, Nagpur and the poster was freely available on the Internet and was displayed in many cities in the form of hoardings. The harsh treatment meted out to persons like the arrested teacher was intended to break the morale of intellectuals backing the protests. As Dilip Edatkar, the editor of *Matadar*, a local daily, said: the police created such an atmosphere of terror that nobody dared to speak out in support of those who have been arrested or being harassed.

At Yavatmal, a small rally called by Pramodini Ramteke, a noted activist in the dalit women's movement, provoked severe police repression. The alleged stone throwing could well have been executed by some miscreants at the behest of vested interests, according to Ramteke. One Subhash Rai, a businessman with a questionable reputation got his goons to pelt stones and chappals at Ambedkar's statue near Patipura, a famous dalit colony. The police simply stood by. In the night, prompted by

some political bigwigs, a posse of over 100 policemen raided the houses of dalits in Teli Fail, picked up youth, beat them in the presence of their parents and hounded them into police vans. Later in the night they raided Patipura. Everywhere the police broke open the doors of the houses and forcibly picked up the youth from their beds and hounded them into vans. Most of the people who were arrested swore that they did not know of the morcha and wondered why they were beaten and abused in filthy casteist language. Pramodini Ramteke herself was arrested and subjected to physical and sexual torture in police custody. She literally wept while describing her plight in the police custody. Like the teacher in Amravati, she too was suspended from her job.

There was an unprecedented attempt to counter the dalit protests by encouraging others to come into the streets in opposition. Right from the Bhandara rally, this pattern was evident. Supporters of the Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into the

streets raising the issue of Ankit Lanjewar, who was raped and killed by a dalit in Lakhandur. The police wanted to justify its repression by giving it a communal colour. The firing at Amravati was actually justified under this alibi by none other than the police commissioner. At Sholapur, supporters of the combine clashed with dalits, with the police taking a completely partisan stand, unleashing repression on the dalits. The police entered dalit colonies and battered people, including women and girl children. They smashed the framed pictures of Ambedkar and Buddha, and abused the people in the most filthy casteist language. In contrast, no action was taken against the Bajrang Dal/Shiv Sena attackers.

Taking advantage of the dalit protests, the police prevented scores of dalits from paying homage to their messiah on the special occasion of the 50th death anniversary at Chaitya Bhoomi last year. A million odd people congregate at Chaitya Bhoomi every year to observe the anniversary on December 6 in a solemn manner. The fact that over 50 years there



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**Theme**

Entrepreneurship and innovation have been recognized as major determinants of economic growth in most developed countries. Increased entrepreneurial activity and innovation have resulted in an environment of sustained economic growth and controlled unemployment in North America over the last twenty years. Academic researchers and policy makers in Europe as well as Asia are realizing the potential of entrepreneurship to improve growth rates and reverse the increasing levels of unemployment. This joint conference aims to bring together work on sources of entrepreneurship, the challenges in enabling and sustaining entrepreneurship and innovation and issues in entrepreneurship culture. There shall also be special sessions on entrepreneurial situation in Europe and Asia.

In particular, the conference will address the following topics:

- Knowledge sources of entrepreneurship (e.g. from science, employees or users)
- Human capital challenges for enabling and sustaining entrepreneurial activity and innovation
- Issues in entrepreneurship culture
- Assessment of the spatial distribution and local clustering of innovative entrepreneurship in different industries and analysis of its impact on economic performance
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- Assessment of entrepreneurship and innovation policies in Europe and Asia

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**M. H. Bala Subrahmanya**  
Phone: +91-80-2293 3266  
[bala@mgmt.iisc.ernet.in](mailto:bala@mgmt.iisc.ernet.in)

**Max Keilbach**  
Phone: +49-3641- 686 770  
[indo-german@econ.mpg.de](mailto:indo-german@econ.mpg.de)

**Jagannadha Tamvada**  
Phone: +49-3641- 686 730  
[tamvada@econ.mpg.de](mailto:tamvada@econ.mpg.de)

has not been any incident that has blemished this solemnity, and this, without much police presence (the entire arrangement is overseen by the Samata Sainik Dal), should have been good enough to dispel any misgiving. But the state intentionally created a fear psychosis, duly whipped up by the media, that lakhs of people decided not to grace the occasion. The entire Chaitya Bhoomi and Shivaji maidan had the overbearing presence of police, which effectively took away the solemnity of the occasion. The administration and the police in effect disrupted one of the most glorious occasions of dalit solidarity. Henceforth, the Diksha Bhoomis and Chaitya Bhoomis will no longer be the same; they will be closely monitored and controlled by the might of the state.

Before the fire over Khairlanji could be doused, the news of desecration of a statue in Kanpur came in, giving rise to a new wave of violent protests in Maharashtra. In Nashik, one person was killed; so too in Nanded. In Usmanabad, during a 'rasta roko' two persons were killed in police firing. At Ulhasnagar, the Deccan Queen and a local train were set on fire. The arrests that followed thereafter had the same pattern of harassment, beating and humiliation in police custody, and so on. The fact-finding team that investigated the Ulhasnagar incidents reported that, according to local people, it was not the people protesting there who set the rear bogies of the train on fire, but persons patronised by a particular politician who caused all the damage.

### Question of Conscience

The spate of spontaneous protests over the desecration of the statue of Ambedkar stunned many people because these took place in distant Maharashtra and not in the state where the desecration happened. While this could be easily explained by the immediate context of Khairlanji or the difference in degree of devotion among dalits vis-à-vis Ambedkar in Maharashtra and elsewhere, these protests exposed the nature of dalit consciousness, which could be an eye-opener for dalit movement. While in the case of Khairlanji, where four hapless persons were brutally killed in what could be called a pure caste atrocity, it took over a month for the protests to erupt, in contrast, the news of the desecration of Ambedkar's statue evoked an instantaneous response. News of the desecration of a statue evokes an immediate public outrage but not that of the brutal killing of human

beings. The gruesome killings in Jhajjar or burning down of 70 dalit houses in Gohana, both in Haryana, surprisingly did not evoke any reaction in Maharashtra. Why, even in the wake of Khairlanji, there were a spate of atrocities in Maharashtra itself, which significantly included the brutal cutting into pieces of a dalit farm labourer in Jahangir Moha village of Beed district of Marathwada in November or the killing of a youth belonging to the matang caste in Umarga Narangwadi in October. But both these atrocities did not create even a ripple among dalits. Outrage over Ambedkar statues however is legion; recall, for instance, the Ramabai Nagar incident that took toll of 10 lives in police firing and self-killing in protest of a revolutionary dalit poet, Vilas Ghogre.

It seems that dalits are more concerned with symbolic identity issues than with what happens to the living members of their community. On the positive side, the Ambedkar statue symbolises the loftiest legacy of dalit struggle, which should inspire generations of dalits to take this struggle further, but on the negative side, Ambedkar could become just a god head, like that of erstwhile *vithoba* or *mhasoba*, that could enslave their spirits. Considering the state of dalit masses, the latter is more likely to happen. None other than the ruling classes understood this and decided to promote it; the more the creed of the Ambedkar statue takes root, the more would Ambedkar's ideals be rooted out. Khairlanji serves as one more reminder for dalits to rethink these matters. Looked at from a strategic angle, the resource scarce people as they are, dalits should have an acute sense of priorities. The sensitivity towards dignity, symbolised by the Ambedkar statue, is only justified if it is associated with a similar concern for the plight of living people. While the inversion may be explained to a large extent by the historical alienation of the dalit movement from social movements inspired by the philosophy of historical materialism, it is time for dalits to realise that this reactionary disorientation has already done a great damage to their collective well-being.

### Irrelevance of Dalit Politicians

The identity orientation of dalits serves well a politics that does not have anything to offer dalits other than empty slogans and hollow symbols. Intrinsically incapable of comprehending and confronting the real life problems of dalits, the politicians

embracing the politics of identity abide by the practices of the ruling class political parties to maintain the vacuous character of dalit politics. The Poona Pact of 1932 had deprived them of the possibility of independent representation on the basis of a communitarian identity. And, the possibility of an alternative politics, involving alliances with the working class as a whole and the communist parties, and embracing the politics of class was not as easy as identity politics and did not attract dalit politicians aiming at a quick buck. The result was that dalit politics and politicians got subsumed as adjuncts of the ruling class parties for which symbols and identities mattered more than the material interests of the people.

Khairlanji conclusively exposes the bankruptcy of dalit politics and politicians in its comprehensiveness. The absence of these politicians in Khairlanji was as conspicuous as in all the earlier incidents of atrocities on dalits. It is significant that dalit politics, whose *raison d'être* it is to safeguard dalit interests fundamentally from caste discrimination, is not concerned with atrocities on dalits, which indeed are the concentrated expression of casteism. The reason behind this is that the dalit politicians cannot afford to embarrass their ruling class political patrons. In the case of Khairlanji, it is said that one senior dalit politician had deliberately ensured that the news of Khairlanji was suppressed in the city edition so that the celebrations of 50th anniversary of the 'Dharmachakra Pravartan Din', which has been reduced over the years to an event for self promotion passes on without any disturbance. Some politicians pursuing the ephemeral caste-based bahujanism could not figure out what stand to take when they found that kunbis and kalars were pitted against the dalits. Reared on anti-brahmin symbolism, they are intellectually so bereft as not to see that atrocities on dalits are mostly committed by the backward castes who have assumed the baton of brahminism during the post-independence period.

The protesters over Khairlanji therefore zealously kept away the entire set of mainstream politicians from their midst. Abhorrence of these politicians was so intense that the participants in protest rallies even did not let the organisers speak into the mike at many places lest they should seem like the mainstream dalit politicians. The anger of dalit protesters was as much against the perpetrators of crime as was against the complicity of the state and the

dalit politicians, whom they held primarily responsible for such an occurrence. Khairlanji, and for that matter all caste atrocities, are a reflection of the impairment of the political strength of dalits for which dalit politicians have to take blame. When after the mass upsurge these politicians awkwardly tried to rush in to take the credit, they were utterly ignored. The pitiable show of R S Gavai in his own citadel at a rally on November 14, despite all the support from the administration, revealed it all. The violent protests that followed against the desecration of Ambedkar's statue were also largely sans leaders and against them. The residual utility of dalit politics could have shown up in extending help and support to people who were arrested by the police, but unfortunately this was nowhere visible. People utterly without any support system were prepared to suffer but not look at these politicians for help. Indeed, Khairlanji has taken this divide between the dalit politicians and the dalit masses to a new high.

### Myths and Mythologies

Khairlanji exploded many myths and mythologies that continue to shroud the reality of the caste question and thereby obfuscate its objective solution. Some of the obvious myths that get exploded are the myth that economic development does away with caste, the myth of Maharashtra as a progressive state, the myth that there exists a significant progressive section of non-dalits that is against the caste system, the myth that dalits placed in the bureaucracy can orient the administration to do justice to dalits, and finally the mythology of bahujanwad developed by the late Kanshiram and followed by others.

Many intellectuals hold the notion that economic development will eradicate castes. Some people correlate economic development with educational and cultural development and therefore imagine that the irrationality of castes would be eradicated through it. Khairlanji certainly refutes all these notions. In economic terms, the village of Khairlanji is far better than the average village in Maharashtra. Even the economic position of the Bhotmanges, who owned five acres of irrigated land, can be similarly taken as better than that of the average dalit household. Even educationally, the village may not be inferior to an average village in the state. In such a situation it is not the absolute development but the manner in which the unequal and uneven

nature of the development process buttresses casteism that needs to be examined.

There is an associated myth about Maharashtra that it is a progressive state. This myth is built upon and related to its economic development, particularly around the Mumbai-Pune region, which significantly elevates the economic position of the state relative to the other states. Another factor that contributes to this myth is the origin of the non-brahmin and dalit movements in the state by Jotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar respectively. The empirical reality however is quite contrary. Maharashtra is as casteist as any other state. Maharashtra has an inglorious track record of heinous atrocities perpetrated on dalits. According to the crime statistics for 2005, Maharashtra ranks at number 10 among 35 states for the crimes committed against SCs and STs,<sup>11</sup> which clearly indicates that it does not have much reason to be complacent. What this myth does is to make Maharashtra complacent. It dampens the need to put in special efforts by the state as well as the civil society to fight caste consciousness and disorients one not to see the reality. As one of the most barbaric caste atrocities that best expose the factors that go into their making, Khairlanji conclusively explodes this

myth. Although subdued, there were certain casteist disapprovals even during the heat of protests that Khairlanji generated. Some Hindutva outfits had openly opposed these protests at many places. Some media people poured out their venom to dismiss the mass protests as "fuss" created over a non-event.<sup>12</sup> Thus Maharashtra does not have a moral right to claim the legacy of Phule and Ambedkar.

It is a popular myth that there exists a significant progressive section of non-dalits that is against castes. There indeed is a large section of people who hold progressive ideas on many other social issues, such as communalism, gender discrimination, general exploitation of labour and the peasantry, and so on. However, when it comes to caste, they conveniently leave it for dalits to deal with. When Khairlanji protests broke out, they should have come forward to express their support to dalits. After all, it was apolitical and organised by people who in some way shared their progressivism. Why then were they not there? Why do the people who take up the cause of the communal oppression of Muslims so enthusiastically not moved on the issue of caste oppression? Why the people who are genuinely concerned to save Afzal Guru do not show any sensitivity to

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### Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

CG-45, First Floor, Sector-III, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-700 106, West Bengal, India

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the pervasive injustice being done to dalits? Why is the opposition to caste bracketed with casteism? It appears, progressivism does not necessarily mean anti-casteism in India. Even the communist parties, who claim to have changed their stand on caste issues, do not think that they ought to go beyond tokenism. Why did they not mobilise their cadres to protest against Khairlanji? Progressivism in this country does seem to include the dispelling of caste consciousness. That is why the media people, feigning progressivism, do not forget to prefix "dalit" to writers, doctors, engineers and managers belonging to the dalit community even when the appellation is irrelevant. In such a situation, one tends to salute stray exceptions of Varsha Kale and others of her ilk who sided with dalit activists to demonstrate in Mantralaya.<sup>13</sup>

Importantly, Khairlanji also blasts the myth that if dalit individuals are placed in the bureaucratic structure, the latter becomes more congenial to dalits. This myth informs a large part of the argument for reservations. As discussed, Khairlanji best exemplifies the complicity of the state machinery in the perpetration of caste atrocities, and interestingly, even when this machinery is largely manned by the people of the dalit community. The superintendent of police, Bhandara, the deputy superintendent of police, the PSI of Andhalgaon police station, a constable under him, the doctor who performed the post-mortems, the district civil surgeon who permitted the doctor to go ahead with the post-mortems without a lady doctor, the public prosecutor who advised against the application of the PoA Act to the earlier cases which were essentially caste-based, the nodal officer at the apex level who is entrusted with the responsibility of reviewing the state of crimes against SCs and STs in accordance with the PoA Act, were all dalits and belonging to the same sub-castes as that of the Bhotmanges.<sup>14</sup> Nobody will fault this combination and accuse the upper caste people of exercising caste prejudice in relation to dalits but the fact is that the entire network failed at every possible step. It is easy to blame these individuals but not the system of which they are essentially a part. It is naïve to believe that a dalit individual rising up the bureaucratic or governmental structure could influence it to be pro-dalit. On the contrary, the rise of such an individual is basically a reward for the proven service rendered by him/her to the system and the latter expects much more of the same from

him/her in the future. It is a singular naivety of dalits that has reduced them to political inactivity. They have forgotten that it is their own political participation, their struggle that can influence the behaviour of the existing structures, indeed, change these very structures for the better, not the individuals howsoever highly placed they may be.

Above all, Khairlanji explodes a mythology, that of bahunjanwad, developed and practised by the late Kanshiram with a reasonable level of success. Dalit politicians such as Prakash Ambedkar, Udit Raj, and many others, but without acknowledging his debt, are following bahunjanwad. Bahunjanwad is basically an expedient strategy of the lower castes to succeed in electoral politics, not very dissimilar to creating a maratha like middle caste identity as successfully done by Sharad Pawar or Mulayam Singh. It assumes that all the lower shudra castes and dalits can come together and create a formidable constituency to bid for power. Indeed, purely from the standpoint of their material status, all these castes are placed similarly and there is no doubt that they should come together. But when bahunjanwad aspires to unite them on the basis of caste identities, it misses one point, namely, the fundamental break that divides them into caste and non-castes, varna and savarnas, unlike the maratha or any other caste identities, which fall on one side of the continuum. This divide can only be crossed if one transcends it with an entirely different approach, the class approach that emphasises their similarities. Khairlanji, and for that matter every caste atrocity, confused the bahunjanwad because these atrocities are invariably committed by the so-called OBCs. **EPW**

Email: tanand@vsnl.com

## Notes

- 1 On the Dussera day, October 15, 2002, five persons hailing from the dalit community were lynched to death in open daylight by the VHP/Bajrang Dal activists at Jhajhar district of Haryana in active connivance with the police. See Anand Teltumbde's 'Onslaught of Fascist Hindutva on Dalits: Impact and Resistance', available at [http://www.ambedkar.org/vivek/ailc\\_speech.pdf](http://www.ambedkar.org/vivek/ailc_speech.pdf). Last accessed on December 23, 2006.
- 2 On May 14, 2003, in Bhutegaon, district Jalana of Marathwada region, a youth, Dilip Shendge was burnt alive by the caste Hindu mob of the village. See 'Violence against Dalits in Marathwada: The Caste Cauldron of Maharashtra, a Fact-Finding Report', CPDR, 2003, available at <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/caste-cauldron.pdf>. Last accessed on December 23, 2006.

- 3 In Sonna Khota village, district Beed of Marathwada region, a dalit family was attacked by a caste Hindu mob. The mob chased Bhauro Dongre when he ran to save himself from the attack and stoned him to death. See 'Violence against Dalits in Marathwada: The Caste Cauldron of Maharashtra, a Fact-Finding Report', CPDR, 2003, available at <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2003/caste-cauldron.pdf>. Last accessed on December 23, 2006.
- 4 Rashtriya Sambuddha Mahila Sanghatana, a memorandum circulated for organising the protest rally in Bhandara, Vidrohi. Some fact-finding reports say that Bhaiyalal Bhotmange got it from his maternal uncle. 'Organised Killings of Dalits in Khairlanji Village: A Report under SC-ST (PoA) Act, 1989', Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute, Department of Social Justice, government of Maharashtra and Centre for Equity and Social Justice, Yashada. Available at <http://www.mail-archive.com/zestcaste@yahoogroups.com/msg05124.html>
- 5 Police patil is just an honorary post in the village.
- 6 The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in its report on 'Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Castes', authored by retired civil servant K P Saxena had indicted successive governments for their lukewarm response to atrocities against dalits.
- 7 On July 11, 1997, one police sub-inspector, M Y Kadam fired upon the protesters against the desecration of Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar, a predominantly dalit-populated urban colony in Mumbai, without much reason or provocation. Ten persons died and 24 persons were injured in the firing. Despite a struggle by the activists for the last 10 years, the conviction of the criminal PSI is not in sight.
- 8 Manuski Advocacy Centre, 'Caste Atrocity in Khairlanji - A Fact-Finding Report', Pune, 2006. Available at <http://atrocitiesnews.wordpress.com/files/2006/10/khairlanji.pdf>. Last Accessed: December 24, 2006.
- 9 It appears, many people knew of the decision. At least one woman deposed to one fact-finding team that she did.
- 10 Gohana is in Haryana, where 70 houses of dalits were burnt down by a mob of 1,500-2,000 jats in August 2005. No convictions are in sight.
- 11 National Crime Research Bureau, Annual Report 2005, Table 7.1, p 299, available at <http://ncrb.nic.in/crime2005/cii-2005/CHAP1.pdf>. Last accessed on December 23, 2006.
- 12 Many newspapers took a tangential view of the matter. An example is of a write-up by Sarita Kaushik, published in *Hindustan Times* on November 27, 2006.
- 13 On November 8, 2006 a group of 20 odd ladies managed to pass the security cordon and entered Mantralaya. They regrouped there to demonstrate and stunned the entire establishment. Some non-dalit women participated in this glorious initiative. Even in subsequent rallies, a few people of non-dalit castes did participate but their number was insignificant. Varsha Kale, who ran the struggle of bar girls in Mumbai was one of non-dalit women in support of the dalit women like Urmila Pawar and others.
- 14 'Hame Padhe Likhe Logone Dhoka Diya', Mahanayak, Mumbai, October 11, 2006.