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## **Democracy needs their song**

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*They use poetry and song to fight for a just society but the state brands them Naxalites. ANAND PATWARDHAN on the ongoing saga of the Kabir Kala Manch.*

On the morning of July 11, 1997, Ramabai Colony in Ghatkopar had woken to find a garland of footwear on its statue of Dr. Ambedkar. As angry residents broke the windows of parked cars on an adjacent highway, the Special Reserve Police arrived and without warning, opened fire on the protestors. Then they took aim at the colony itself. Men, women and children — many of them bystanders watching from the “safety” of their own homes — were killed. Ten died that day, one a few years later.

I became something more than a horrified citizen when, four days later, poet and singer Vilas Ghogre, unable to bear the pain, hung himself in nearby Mulund. I had loved and recorded Vilas’s music over the years and I set about trying to understand why a Marxist Vilas reasserted his Dalit identity in death, tying a blue scarf on his forehead and writing “Long live Ambedkarite Unity” on a blackboard in his hut.

The journey took 14 years. I explored class and caste, followed court cases against the police and those they foisted against the victims of the firing, and followed other poet-musicians like Vilas who used their art for emancipation.

The 10th year brought me back to Ramabai Colony to a commemoration for the martyrs of Ramabai and Khairlanji. At Khairlanji village in 2006, four Dalits had been stripped, raped and murdered. The killer mob comprised non-Dalit co-villagers. Scores of accused with allegiance to influential political parties were acquitted. Six got the death penalty, later commuted to life. The court ruled that this was not a caste atrocity covered under the Prevention of Atrocities Act and no one had been raped. Although the bodies were found naked, rape was not investigated. When Dalits across Maharashtra took to the streets, the government described them as “Maoist

inspired”. Three years later, it gave Khairlanji an award for being a model of peace. (“Tantamukti Gaon”).

In 2007, on the 10th anniversary of the firing, the sense of outrage and injustice was palpable at Ramabai Colony. Many musicians performed that day. But the most electric of all was the Kabir Kala Manch(KKM), a young group from Pune. As Sheetal Sathe’s strong, clear voice rang out, the words piercing hearts and minds, I knew right away that the legacy of Vilas Ghogre would never die.

I began to follow the KKM, filming performances in the city and countryside and in the slum where they lived. We spoke with Sheetal’s mother, an amazing woman in her own right, who despite her faith in the “goddess” tolerated the growing rational consciousness of the children she had educated through much personal sacrifice.

We filmed them lending musical support to a diverse range of activists who had taken on the venality of the system — from Medha Patkar’s non-violent confrontations to their own Mahatma Phule-inspired movement for inter-caste marriage.

But, as atrocities like Khairlanji continued, I began to sense a change. Ambedkar was now interwoven with Marx and I marvelled at how potent the combination was in the hands of young believers who challenged an older generation that had settled for crumbs from the high table. Despite this, nothing about the KKM was dogmatic. They tolerated my hodge-podge Gandhian, Left, Ambedkarite ideas. The film was taking a long time to complete and they saw bits of it on the edit table. They knew that Vilas Ghogre had been expelled from his Marxist group because upper class/caste leaders had failed to grasp the conditions of his life. Young and impressionable as the KKM was, they were internally democratic. Even in performance, while Sachin was the published poet and Sheetal and Sagar the accomplished musicians, the group saw to it that everyone got a chance to sing, write and perform.

In 2011, I lost contact with them and soon understood why. Deepak Dengle of the KKM had been arrested by the Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS), accused of being a Naxalite. As the police began a witch-hunt, KKM went underground. Sheetal’s mother insisted that her children had promised to fight only with “the song and the drum”.

Police-planted news articles began to appear drawing on a statement by Deepak Dengle that KKM was present at a meeting with Maoists. Deepak subsequently withdrew his statement, as it had been obtained under torture. Last month he was released on bail when Justice Thipsay of the Bombay High Court held that, even under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, mere membership of a banned outfit could not constitute grounds for detention, that an actual crime or intention to commit one had to be proved. Deepak, after his release, described how acid was used on his back and how his family was threatened.

Back in 2012, we had formed a Kabir Kala Manch Defence Committee fearing for the lives of those branded as Naxalites. After our film *Jai Bhim Comrade* won a National award, the Maharashtra government added another cash award. This became the initial corpus for our defence work. Finally last month we were overjoyed when Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Mali made contact with our lawyers, to come over-ground. To prevent the police from claiming they had “caught” them, we ensured that they surfaced in the full glare of the media — at the State Assembly.

Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, leaders of the CPI and Defence Committee members and lawyers were present as Sheetal and Sachin sang outside the Assembly and declared that their action was not a “surrender” but a “satyagraha” for the freedom of expression.

Finally the ATS arrived to collect their quarry. That evening we met the Chief Minister who promised to prevent torture. In court the next day Sheetal, who is pregnant, was sent directly into judicial custody (where torture is rare but nutritious food even more so). Sachin was remanded to ATS questioning for two weeks. We learnt that he was not allowed to sleep for three days, but no bodily torture was done. This is certainly thanks to public pressure. It was reported that the ATS switched off its fax machine because of the volume of support for KKM. The police countered through the media that Sachin and Sheetal are indeed Naxalites.

Are they? I see them as fiery idealists who are fighting to make our society just and equitable. Does that distinguish them from Naxalites? The ATS seems confused. To me, the distinction lies in the fact that the only weapon Sachin and Sheetal fight with, is their poetry and song. Even if the worst were concluded — that KKM made contact with a banned organisation — what bewilders me is what the State actually wants from them now. They gave themselves up. They expressed the desire to sing freely again within the bounds of democracy. Other members from their group are still underground, waiting to see what develops. What is the message the State is sending? That it prefers to brand them forever as Naxalites and push them into the forest rather than allow them safe passage? Neither Sheetal nor Sachin is accused of any violence. Yet Sheetal’s bail application was refused. Are people who give themselves up going to run away?

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