

Rage Against The Machine: A look at the life and cause of Lokshahir Sambhaji Bhagat

The life of lokshahirs, Maharashtra's fabled people's poets, is at the centre of the National Award winning film Court. On the trail of one such Dalit bard, Sambhaji Bhagat, you come face to face with a rebel and his cause.

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Indian Express



Sambhaji

Bhagat performs at a slum in Pune (Source: Express photo by Prashant Nadkar)

A quiet smile plays on his lips. Unusually mum, he clutches the duff close to his chest and makes way past the garbage dump that marks the beginning of the Gandhinagar slum in Pune's Pimpri-Chinchwad. It's 4 pm. The hot afternoon sun has barely begun to relent. Most residents are holed up inside their yellow brick-and-tin tenements.

Children are busy at their games. Four women sit in a corner, chatting.

The sight of kurta-clad strangers is enough to attract attention but Sambhaji Bhagat doesn't wait. He begins to beat his duff, its clanging insistent and urgent. Soon, curtains — the makeshift doors to the houses — part. Faces peep out. Bhagat begins, a powerhouse of anger and resistance, his words his ammunition:

Bhalan dada, dada re, bhalan dada

Arre raan raan raan chala uthvu saare raan re

(Oh brother, come on, come on, wake up!)

The words have the desired effect. Amused faces are on the street, surrounding Bhagat and his two vocalists, Shirish Pawar and Babasaheb Atkhile. Bhagat, 52, proceeds to belt out the powada (ballad) in his powerful baritone.

Jaan jaan jaan jeheri dusmanala jaan re(Get to know who your enemy is)

His words reverberate. The crowd thickens.

This could well have been a scene from Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court*. In the film, which won the National Award for Best Film this year, another lokshahir Narayan Kamble walks up to the makeshift stage in the middle of a slum. But it isn't the setting alone. Kamble's character is heavily inspired by Bhagat, who also composed, wrote and recorded the powada in the film.

A lokshahir is a people's poet, a master of the tamasha folk form. Bhagat's music borrows from this Maharashtrian folk tradition while his songs speak against oppression. "We're a dead people. We no more unite and raise our voice against oppression, be it by class, caste or government. This state was once the epicentre of so many great movements, the social reform movement in the 19th century, the communist and feminist movements in the 1970s and '80s. It feels sad that people today choose to remain silent," says Bhagat.



A scene from the film *Court*

Maharashtra boasts of a long tradition of lokshahirs. The three biggest names — Annabhau Sathe, Amar Sheikh and DN Gavankar—borrowed from the teachings of BR Ambedkar and Karl Marx to speak up against the inequalities of class, caste and state in the 1940s and '50s. They started an organisation called the Lal Bawta Kalapathak. Its members sang at mill gates, maidans and chawls, aided in organising support for the Samyukta Maharashtra movement. Bhagat belongs to this school of thought and action.

Born into the family of a landless Dalit labourer in Satara's Mahu village, Bhagat's initiation into the Left ideology was preceded by a stint with the RSS in his early days. It was only when he moved to Mumbai as a young man for his college education that he discovered the writings of Marx and Ambedkar. "I had a stable job with the Planning Commission. But I asked myself, what will my life amount to eventually? So I joined the communist movement in the early '80s as a lokshahir with the Avahan Natya Manch," he says.

Bhagat's style sets him apart from the current crop of lokshahirs. He speaks against caste, capitalism and the "cultural fascism" of the right-wing among other things. But on stage, he doesn't merely sing. He pulls in the largely Dalit audience into his show, transforming them into participants. He does this as much through his booming voice as with his humour, which draws from the life of his audience.

Here he is, complaining that they have forgotten the teachings of their saints Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Before their attention wavers, he slips in a barb. "Who's [Amitabh Bachchan](#)'s daughter-in-law?" he asks. Unable to spot the trap he has laid, they speak the name out in chorus. "Oh! So you all know!" he mocks, getting the audience to crack up in embarrassment.

During one of his songs, he laughs at "high art" and its self-proclaimed keepers. He asks of what use are songs where the lover promises the sun and the moon to his lady love. "Those who write such songs, can they climb atop the drumstick tree in the village to fetch a few stalks?" he quips.

"Our ideology and beliefs are modern but it needs to be made accessible to lay people who often comprise my audience, many of whom have had the privilege of education. The music is the easy part, it brings them in. But my verse needs to borrow from the world they inhabit," he says.

The audience loves him, even when he is mocking them. At the Nashik leg of Bhagat's four-city tour organised to help promote Court, a large part of the audience comprises his fans.

Anil Kotkar runs a transport business. Usually, he ends his day around 7.30pm but today, he left office, 14 km from the venue, and drove down for the show. "While tackling social issues through his songs, Sambhaji doesn't pander to the audience. He cocks a snook at everyone, the system, the bourgeois and even us," he says.



Sambhaji Bhagat and his troupe at a show in Nashik (Source: Express photo by Prashant Nadkar)

In court, Nagpur-based Vira Sathidar plays Kamble, a lokshahir thrown into prison on a rather unexpected charge: his songs, say the police, drove a sanitation worker into committing suicide. As the judicial system closes in on Kamble, through a long-drawn Kafkaesque process, the film looks at the prejudices that leach into the process of law and how the state and its machinery work against the marginalised. It does this through the story of Kamble's predicament as well as that of a man we never see on screen: the sanitation worker, who drinks himself senseless every time he needs to plunge into a putrid sewer without any protective equipment.

Sathidar's Kamble isn't a screen version of Shambhaji Bhagat. He is a reticent, almost self-effacing man, unlike the flamboyant Bhagat with his neck-long locks and animated body language. Tamhane, who was introduced to the culture of lokshahiri with a performance by the famous Telugu balladeer and Naxalite activist Gaddar nine years ago, wanted his protagonist to have his own personality. The inspirations, thus, have been many, including Dalit Marathi poet and activist Namdeo Dhasal.

Initially, the 28-year-old director was looking for a lokshahir who would both act and sing in order to lend the character authenticity. “But the search turned out to be futile. Not all are as radical as Sambhaji in using this medium as a form of protest. Many use crowd-appeasing tactics, such as singing the Ganesh vandana before the show, and belt out the same old five folk songs without any improvisation,” says Tamhane.

Eventually, Tamhane cast Sathidar, a 55-year-old activist-turned-actor. “I understood and shared the character’s ideology,” says Sathidar, who, as a trade union leader, would mobilise workers through street plays.

The court case, Tamhane admits, was the last of the pieces to fall into place. The initial impulse of the film was the complex relationship between the state and dissent. “During my research, I came across the Jiten Marandi case, which sparked the idea,” he says. The Jharkhand-based poet was falsely arrested as a co-accused in the Chilkari massacre in 2008 and sentenced to death. He was released in 2013 after it emerged that he had been “mistaken” for a Maoist of the same name.

Marandi was not the last artist to have faced such harassment. Several popular poets and artistes have faced arrest under acts as severe as MCOCA and POTA, including Dhasal, Telangana-based Varavara Rao and Gaddar. Bhagat too spent a large part of the 1980s behind bars. Then a member of the Avahan Natya Manch, he was inspired by Ambedkar’s call to “educate, organise, agitate”. With his troupe, he performed protest songs in slums across Maharashtra, speaking against the caste system. “The organisation was diluted in early 1990s and I have since performed independently, training Dalit youth from the slums,” says Bhagat. Cultural resistance by artists has often been met with state hostility. The most recent instance is that of Kabir Kala Manch, a group from Maharashtra trained by Bhagat, which uses protest poetry and plays to talk about farmer issues, social inequalities and corruption. In 2011, it was accused of being Maoist sympathisers and some of its members were imprisoned.

Why do such artists end up unnerving the state? “Lokshahirs connect with people at the grassroot level, people whose votes matter,” says Tamhane. “They are radically different from the smoke-and-mirror machinery operating in mainstream. The fact that they have the power to mobilise people to raise their voice against the system, especially certain communities like the Dalits — a very strong vote bank — makes them ‘dangerous’. It’s the farmer, the common man who is directly affected by the oppression of such artists, not so much the urban Indian who will protest against the beef ban or the cancellation of a Seinfeld show.”

Yet, when Bhagat performs, his audience includes members from a cross-section of society even though a large part comprises Dalits and Ambedkarites. In Nashik, the first few rows up front are occupied by a mix of upper castes, supporters of the Left movement, a few members of the Republican Party of India and Dalits. Most of them are regulars at Bhagat's shows. But the lack of new blood is also the biggest challenge Bhagat faces in a state where the Left is in free fall.

At his shows, however, the thunderous applause is reserved for Bhagat's most popular and favourite ballad, Inko dhyaan se dekho re bhai, Inki soorat to pehchano bhai (Watch them closely brother/Recognise who they are brother) where he asks people to look beyond the facade of people in power. Bhagat's performance, in which he tears into the government and religious leaders, can last anywhere between 15 and 25 minutes. When he lowers his pitch and delivers the cheeky lines, the audience erupts in laughter.

Inse note toh lena re bhai

Par inko vote naa dena re bhai!

(Do accept the notes from them/But don't give them your vote)

It's also a song that tests the audience's open-mindedness. "Very often, the invitation to perform is extended by political party workers or even the municipal corporation," he says, "But the audience is mostly kind, it laughs when I make a mockery of the system they are a part of."

That isn't the case every time. During the Mumbai show, his face flushed with heat and exhaustion from performing non-stop for two hours, Bhagat pauses after the following lines, allowing the reference to sink in.

Koi satsang mein baithe hain bhai,

Koi Asaram ke bhakt hain bhai...

Then, quickly breaking into a grin even as he shakes his head to the continuing beat, he says: "Earlier, when I would take Asaram's name, his followers would land up on stage. Par agar woh Asaram ke bhagat hain toh main bhi Bhagat hoon. (If they are Asaram's followers, I too am Bhagat!)."

From [Narendra Modi](#) to godmen, his wit spares no one. His performances are not preachy, which is why young people are drawn to him. A group of four men, in their early 20s, has travelled an hour to watch Bhagat's performance in Mumbai because "you don't get to hear what he talks about in films or on TV". "I am a hardcore [Salman Khan](#) fan, but Sambhaji is unique because he acquaints us with the realities of life, of how caste plays out," says Rupesh

Kamble, who works as a welder. His friend, Mahesh Dhekle, an insurance agent and a self-confessed [Shah Rukh Khan](#) fan, believes that lok kala is key to uniting people in resistance. “The youth is hooked onto social media, everyone wants change, freedom from corruption and oppression. But it’s unity that we lack. Performances like Sambhaji’s can give us direction,” he says.

What resonates with his audience is his call for the annihilation of caste. For many of them, caste discrimination is a grim reality. Shilpa Salve, 32, a housewife in Nashik, was turned away thrice when she applied for the sewing course under a scheme for Dalit women. “I couldn’t bribe my way,” she says. Two years ago, she says, her brother was rejected during the oral exam for Maharashtra Public Service Commission when he informed the examiner that he was a Dalit.

While Bhagat knows the pulse of his audience, it’s been years since he delivered an impromptu performance in a slum. He marched into the Pune slum today when volunteers told him that few have turned up from Gandhinagar.

By the time Bhagat is halfway through the powada, the amused smiles have been replaced by nods of agreement. But just as the people begin to warm up to the presence of this lokshahir in their midst, he chooses to walk away. The curious ones are informed that Bhagat’s performance at the nearby ground will soon begin.

On his way out of the slum, Bhagat is grinning. He knows they will follow him there. At the Ambedkar Jayanti Mahotsav where he has been invited to perform, the 800-odd seats are already taken. His long locks sticking to his forehead with sweat, the shahir pauses to catch his breath. Then he walks up the few steps to take the stage, taps the mic to check if it’s working, and roars a salute to his leader: “Jai Bhim”.