

# The project of cultural resistance

INFOCHANGE INDIA

By Aritra Bhattacharya

The Kabir Kala Manch and Deshbhakti Yuva Manch trace their ideological lineage to the radical left and radical Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra. What are the issues these cultural activists engage with, and why do they make the state so uncomfortable?



*A Kabir Kala Manch performance*

[Read Part 2 of this series](#)

[Read Part 3 of this series](#)

[Read Part 4 of this series](#)

Does Einstein's theory of relativity lend itself to music? To cultural activism, to be more precise? Perhaps not, you might think, but for a group of youngsters in 2005, it did.

"It was unusual," says Arun Ferreira. "After all, not often do you come across a group that works among the grassroots putting up an act around the theory of relativity." Ferreira was referring to Chandrapur-based Deshbhakti Yuva Manch, which had, on the occasion of 100 years of Einstein's relativity theory, made it the focus of one of their campaigns.

The group emerged out of a big Marathi daily's attempts to expand its base by supporting college bands around 2002. Once various members of the group stayed together for a while, they figured they wanted to do more than just sing and dance for the sake of it. They gradually charted out a radical course, initiating and sustaining various campaigns, mainly street theatre.

By 2005, Deshbhakti Yuva Manch had grown in stature, and had run campaigns on the birth centenary of Bhagat Singh, among other things. Their plays were political, stringing together Ambedkarite and leftist strands.

"They became quite popular. In fact, in 2007, they organised a 5,000-strong rally in Chandrapur," says Arun.

Viplav Teltumbde, who was studying law in Chandrapur when Deshbhakti Yuva Manch was functional, remembers it as a 'big students' group', which organised campaigns around the birth anniversaries of Ambedkar,

Phule and Marx. “By 2007, they were a force to reckon with in Chandrapur district...they had over 15,000 members,” says Viplav.

This was when the state swung into action. In January 2008, nine members of Deshbhakti Yuva Manch were arrested for their alleged involvement in offences punishable under Sections 10, 13, 18 and 39(1) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, which deal with membership of an unlawful association, membership of a terrorist organisation/ gang and sympathies for a terrorist organisation/ gang. They were also charged with sedition (Section 124A), criminal conspiracy (Section 120B), cheating (Section 420), forgery (Section 465), and possessing unlicensed arms.

In February 2010, another person named Bandu Meshram was picked up by the Nagpur police—he was presented as ‘Bhanu’, an absconding accused in the Deshbhakti Yuva Manch. Following his arrest Bandu was tortured for over two weeks—he was stripped and beaten up and given electric shocks in his genitals. This apart, such was the mental torture he was put through that it took him six months to recover. “Throughout, while torturing, cops wanted to know what I was up to as Bhanu—they said that Deshbhakti Yuva Manch, which I, ie Bhanu, was supposedly associated with, was a front organisation of the Maoists. They kept torturing me in order to make me accept that I was Bhanu and that the Deshbhakti Yuva Manch was a Maoist front,” says Bandu. In fact, Bandu was associated with another radical Mumbai-based group called Republican Panther Jati Antachi Chalwal (RP) founded by Sudhir Dhawale, who is in jail now on charges of being a Maoist.

Bandu, then an accused in the Deshbhakti Yuva Manch case, was handed over to the police in Chandrapur. In order to firm up the group’s Maoist credentials further, Arun Ferreira was made a co-accused in the case. Arun, a political activist who was jailed in 2007 for his alleged Maoist links, was in prison then. The state had lodged multiple cases against him to ensure he stayed behind bars; he was infamously arrested immediately after being released from Nagpur jail, from outside the jail, in 2011. Though cops said that he was arrested in connection with another case, Arun was acquitted of all charges and released from prison in January 2012. He says he came to know about Deshbhakti Yuva Manch only after he was made an accused in the case. He adds that the state action against the group forced some members to go underground.

\*\*\*

The broad trajectory of the Deshbhakti Yuva Manch appears strikingly similar to that of Kabir Kala Manch (KKM).

KKM was founded by Amarnath Chandaliya in 2002, when some members of the group came together against the communal carnage in Gujarat. During the ensuing years, the group took up various causes including slum-dwellers’ and workers’ rights and the annihilation of caste, through various modes of performance. They joined ranks with and performed for movements led by Medha Patkar and Bhai Vaidya.

Noted playwright Ramu Ramanathan recalls KKM appearing on Pune’s theatre scene in 2002. In an article, he wrote, “The group had young dalit boys and girls – who sang songs and staged angry plays...A typical KKM show in the *bastis* ensured the first scene had to have more noise onstage than the noise in the audience.”

Along the way, Amarnath, who founded the group, distanced himself from it, as did some others. In came young singers and poets like Sheetal Sathe, Sagar Gorkhe and Deepak Dingle. The group grew in stature and popularity, much like Deshbhakti Yuva Manch. Its songs and acts were imbued with strands of feminism, equality, and the perils of rampant casteism and unbridled capitalism.

Gradually, as their sphere of influence extended beyond their base in Pune and their songs became popular among sections of the population, the state swung into action again. [The Maharashtra ATS arrested four members](#) of KKM in April-May 2011, along with three others from Pune and Thane, and booked them under various sections of UAPA; other members of KKM, who were declared absconding, were also booked for similar charges. They were accused of ‘spreading Naxal ideology of armed struggle against the government’. [Newsreports](#) reproducing the police narrative painted the members of KKM as undercover Maoists; it was alleged

that KKM was, in fact, a front-organisation of CPI (Maoist). Its members were accused of attending 'Naxal' training camps in Pune's Khed taluka and lecturing in support of 'dreaded Maoist' Angela Sontakke and others.

\*\*\*

Why would anybody want to sing and perform resistance, rather than engaging in direct political action? Theatre critic, theoretician and political activist Antonio Gramsci provides a possible answer, when he says that political power rests upon cultural hegemony; thus part of any revolutionary project is creating a counter hegemonic culture. (1)

Though Gramsci had observed this with regards to the workings of the Catholic church and the fascist state, his conception holds as true today, when all inequity and injustice is sought to be wished away by promoting more consumerism and more access to 'free' markets.

Part of the mandate of the project of cultural resistance that Deshbhakti Yuva Manch or KKM was engaged in was to point out the partisan nature of the discourse of the free market, and its cosy, compatible, often interchangeable, relationship with earlier oppressive structures like caste and gender.

For instance, the song [Zhopad Patti Re, Zhopad Patti](#) by KKM talks about the urban slum that builds the factory and the nation, and powers the economy; the same urban slum is also the place where most of the people from the oppressed castes reside. The song says:

*Angrez Aaya, machine laya, mil banaya, zhopad patti  
Chamar, bunker lohar mehnat, sab samaya zhopad patti*

And goes on to end with the lines:

*Gora jake aaya kala, toota woh sapno ka manzar  
Sath saalon mein chuna laga hai  
Sath saalon mein chuna lagake bikti reh gayi zhopad patti*

*(The English came, mills and machines in tow*

*The slums that came up accommodated the tanner, the weaver, the blacksmith*

*The white made way for the brown, the kingdom of dreams came crashing down*

*For sixty long years, cheats are running the show, the slums up for sale—where do we go?)*

As with the above song, the project of cultural resistance, in a sense, seeks to puncture the hot air balloon of progress, and raise questions about how it cultivates varied deprivations to rise higher and higher.

Kabir Kala Manch is perhaps the most well-known of the cultural resistance groups in Maharashtra today. This is thanks to Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade*; members of KKM feature prominently in the film, which was released after 14 years in the making, shortly after KKM members were arrested and charged by the Maharashtra ATS.

The film gave visibility to KKM as a group; sections of the media were quick to pick up the gross violation of 'freedom of expression' in the arrest of KKM members. At the same time, a strident and aggressive state used sections of the mainstream press as its handmaiden to publicise KKM's Maoist connections; stories [appeared](#) in papers suggesting that KKM members had, in fact, attended Maoist camps, and were in charge of spreading their network in Pune and other urban areas.

\*\*\*

Did KKM really have Maoist connections? Were they, as the cops allege, serving as a front organisation for the Maoists?

Whatever be the answer to that question, there isn't any incontrovertible evidence to suggest that they were involved in armed conflict against the state. In fact, four of the arrested members have already been granted bail

by the High Court of Bombay; the judge, while granting the bail application stated that mere belief in an ideology does not make one a member of the banned Maoist party.

What then did the state seek to achieve by charging the KKM members and putting them behind bars? The answer may be gleaned from the fate of Deshbhakti Yuva Manch after its members were arrested on similar charges.

Even though all those arrested in the Deshbhakti Yuva Manch case were eventually acquitted and granted bail, the incarceration smashed the group completely. "Some members went underground fearing police action," says Ferreira, adding that post the acquittal, the group never reconvened.

Some activists who closely watch the cultural resistance landscape think that the state's attempt in the case of KKM is also something similar—to smash the group.

Yet, neither was Deshbhakti Yuva Manch the first group of its kind, nor will KKM be the last. There were/ are several groups engaged in cultural resistance that trace their ideological lineages from the radical left in conjunction with the radical Ambedkarite flanks.

Activists, though, say that whenever any such group becomes too 'active' and begins wearing its radicalness on its sleeve, the state clamps down on them. Like it did in case of Deshbhakti Yuva Manch and KKM.

*(Aritra Bhattacharya is a researcher presently based in Maharashtra. This is the first in his series on cultural activists in Maharashtra, researched as part of the Infochange Media Fellowships 2012.)*

#### **Endnotes**

1) Stephen Duncombe, 'Antonio Gramsci: From the Prison Notebooks', *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Stephen Duncombe (ed), New Delhi: Adarsh Books, 2012, p 58

**Infochange News & Features, March 2013**