

India: destroying the left intellectual

Loneliness of Varavara Rao, Anand Teltumbde, Sudha Bharadwaj tells a disquieting tale about state and us

Monday 20 July 2020, by [MEHTA Pratap Bhanu](#) (Date first published: 18 July 2020).

Teltumbde was insightful in thinking that once you had been labelled Left in India, it was easy to secure a diminution in your legal and cultural standing. Even the Courts will turn off their thinking cap. It is in this that the genuine intellectual enterprise is a lonely one, whose disastrous political consequences Teltumbde is facing.

Anand Teltumbde, one of India's important and courageous thinkers, just turned 70 in prison. He, along with Sudha Bharadwaj and others, is being held in the Bhima [Koregaon](#) case. They are being repeatedly denied bail. [Varavara Rao](#), poet and Maoist intellectual, contracted COVID and has been subject to degrading and humiliating conditions at the age of 80. The overwhelming power that the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act gives to the state, the sheer impunity with which government can treat this group of accused, the Kafkaesque role of the judiciary in denying bail and making procedural safeguards ineffective, and the deafening political silence on their detention, all warrant deeper reflection. The accused in the Bhima Koregaon case are not the first to be victimised in this way; and they will not be the last. The UAPA is being used to target protest from Assam to Delhi.

Anand Teltumbde's work, particularly "Republic of Caste", presciently forecast his own condition. He, like the others, has drawn support from the usual petition-writing crowd of intellectuals. But his case provides a disturbing window on the political loneliness of a genuine intellectual in Indian conditions.

Here is a well-known Dalit intellectual being put in prison and yet no serious political protest, even from Dalit politicians. Teltumbde had, in another context written, "When Sudhir Dhawale, a Dalit activist, was arrested in 2011 on the trumped up charge of being a Naxalite and incarcerated for nearly four years, there was hardly any protest from the community." This phenomenon of figures like Teltumbde not drawing broader political support requires some reflection. Teltumbde himself, in part, attributed this to divisions amongst Dalits, and their greater faith in the state. But his work points towards a subtler reason.

For all of India's handwringing, that we need to escape identity politics, there is a great antipathy to anyone who tries to escape it. Teltumbde is one of those rare figures who argued that the Left and liberals failed to take caste seriously, and caste mobilisation failed to take class and economics seriously. But the result is a kind of suspension in between two constructions: Most of society does not get outraged because he is often reduced to being a Dalit intellectual; Dalits don't get outraged because he becomes a "Left" intellectual. The blunt truth is that, if we leave the rarefied world of petitions, the only modality of protest that is politically effective is the one that has the imprimatur of community mobilisation behind it. If you can show a community identity is affected, all hell will break loose; without it, there is no political protest.

Teltumbde was also prescient about the way the term "Left" is used in India. Teltumbde himself is

closer to the Left in his economic imagination. But the rhetorical function of the “Left” in India is not to describe the contest over the free market versus the state. The rhetorical function of the “Left” is to describe any ideological or political current that, while recognising the importance of identity, wants to escape its compulsory or simplistic character; so any broadly liberal position or a position that distances itself from “my community right or wrong” also becomes Left. For Hindutva, anyone who resists or transcends the narcissisms of collective identity becomes “Left.” But the same is increasingly true of other identities — Maratha, Jat, Dalit, Rajput. “Left” is anyone who complicates identity claims. That, rather than secular versus communal, is the big chasm in Indian politics. But the result is that if you are labelled “Left” in this way, you will have no political protection.

The charge of Maoism is the hyper version of this “Left” in the context of Adivasi mobilisation. Which is why the entire political class, and so much of India’s discursive space, keeps invoking the “Left” spectre. And Teltumbde was insightful in thinking that once you had been labelled Left in India, it was easy to secure a diminution in your legal and cultural standing. Even the Courts will turn off their thinking cap. It is in this that the genuine intellectual enterprise is a lonely one, whose disastrous political consequences Teltumbde is facing.

The Bhima Koregaon cases also throw a spotlight on so many state institutions. The UAPA, and its ubiquitous use is a travesty in a liberal democracy. The lawyer, Abhinav Sekhri, has, in a recent article (“How the UAPA is perverting the Idea of Justice”, Article14.com) pointed out two basic issues with the law. The law is designed in a way that it makes the question of innocence or guilt almost irrelevant. It can, in effect, inflict punishment without guilt. The idea that people like Teltumbde or the exemplary Bharadwaj cannot even get bail underscores this point. And second, the safeguards of our criminal justice process work unevenly at the best of times. But in the case of the UAPA, the courts have often, practically, suspended serious scrutiny of the state. What legitimises this conduct of the court is two things: The broader ideological construction of the “Left” as an existential threat. And the impatience of society with procedural safeguards. The UAPA has in some senses become the judicial version of the encounter — where the suspension of the normal meaning of the rule of law is itself seen as a kind of justice.

The state has been going after Varavara Rao for his entire life. He is a complicated figure. He is an extraordinarily powerful poet who made visible the exploitative skeins of Indian society; his poetry, even in translation, cannot fail to move you out of a complacent slumber. He was formidable in consciousness raising. Of this group, his ideological excusing of horrendous Maoist excesses, has been indefensible and disturbing. His moral stance once promoted a deeply meditative critique on the morality of revolutionary violence by Apoorvanand (“‘Our’ Violence Versus ‘Their’ Violence”, Kafila.online).

But the farce that the Indian state is enacting in pursuing Varavara Rao in the Bhima Koregaon prosecutions is proving him correct in two ways. First, in his insistence that what is known as bourgeois law is a sham in its own terms; the rule of law indeed is rule by law. And second, that repression and degradation is indeed the argument of a despotic state. Where does one turn when law, political parties and the state turn their back on justice?

Pratap Bhanu Mehta

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Indian Express

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/varavara-rao-covid-19-anand-teltumbde-uapa-act-bhima-koregaon-6511031/>