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Cinema, Dissent, and Dalit Assertion: Reading *Jai Bhim Comrade*

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Abstract

This paper examines *Jai Bhim Comrade* as a work of political resistance that foregrounds Dalit assertion through the aesthetics of dissent. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible," the paper argues that the documentary makes marginalized voices visible by challenging dominant structures of representation and power. Through its engagement with caste, class, cultural performance, and political activism, the film reimagines the public sphere as a site of resistance and democratic participation. The study highlights documentary cinema as a powerful medium for articulating Dalit political consciousness and reshaping the aesthetics of social justice.

Keywords: Dalit Aesthetics; *Jai Bhim Comrade*; Documentary Cinema; Dalit Assertion; Politics of Aesthetics; Political Dissent; Public Sphere; Cultural Resistance.

Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* deals with the mass police shootings on the residents of Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar Colony in Mumbai in 1997 which killed several Dalits and injured many others. First released in 2011, the film (which took fourteen years to complete) is a recorded history of the attack, the trails and the changing socio-political paradigm in Maharashtra and India. Like all of Patwardhan's films *Jai Bhim Comrade* was also subjected to state censorship and the battle to show it publicly. The two-hundred-minute documentary that tries to understand various aspects of caste, class and identity is an attempt at making the invisible visible through politicized art work. I will argue that the conscious politicization of his art is an attempt at asserting itself in the public sphere that has been influenced by the twin entities of neo liberalism and militant Hindu nationalism.



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Jacques Ranciere in the *Politics of Aesthetics* defines politics in inherently aesthetic terms. He writes, “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”. Calling the political situations of the given society (the police regime) as fundamentally aesthetic in character since it deals with the ‘distribution of the sensible’, that is ways of speaking, thinking, writing that is accepted or rejected under tight scrutiny, Ranciere writes about the need for an aesthetic revolution as a pre-requisite to fulfill the political revolution.

Ranciere’s concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ differs with Althusser’s ideological state apparatus and Gramsci’s notion of common sense in the sense that it talks about the more physical and visual (and not mere abstract) presence of the political in the public spaces, of social inclusion and exclusion and about state approved ways of organization and even dissent. This notion of aesthetics is related to forms of social organization, the way people assert their role and voice in the political space and the ways in which politics itself is conceptualized in society. The emergence of politics for Ranciere happens as dissent against the police state bringing a redistribution of the sensible, that is, a shift in public consciousness concerning what is made visible and invisible and who can legitimately say it. The collective political subjectivization that happens disrupts the existing police state and demands a role in the reconfigured public sphere.

Ranciere’s notion of the aesthetics and the aesthetic regime is founded on the emancipatory potential of art. All aesthetic notions, he asserts, also has a political notion. For him the ideal art is that which can negotiate between reducing art for use of political meaning making and obscuring the political in art by the sublime or uncanny. That is, he talks about the need for art to become at once political in nature without compromising its aesthetic value by becoming artistically reductive by being mere political propaganda. Ranciere’s intermingling of arts, politics and aesthetics is suggestive of how an art work when it is presented in the public sphere has the potential of influencing it by being a political act in itself. I read the political documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* as an art work of resistance that not only dissents against the dominant social structure but also helps in breaking the forced upon silence of the dissenting voices within the subaltern castes and movements by giving them a visibility in the liberal public sphere.

In the beginning of the documentary, the audience is introduced to Vilas Ghore, a *Dalit* Marxist activist, who commits suicide after the Ramabai shootings asserting his *Dalit* identity by hanging himself with a blue scarf. The conflict of caste and class becomes a major thematic concern for Patwardhan who explores various radical social movements



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within the *Dalit* community in Maharashtra on the lines of identity. In the process Patwardhan brings to the screen the subaltern cultural traditions built around the musical that represents the social and political reality of *Dalit* lives. Their music, qawwalis, sung collectively by the community, by unprofessional singers and poets stands in direct contrast to the 'high culture' of caste Hindu art and musical forms. The musical evenings/gatherings organized by the various *sabhas* function as collective cathartic community events that combine social criticism and entertainment with survival in an unjust social system. These gatherings also function as educative initiatives to enlighten the masses of their history as a people against the social and cultural domination of the caste Hindus. The popular Hindu mythologies are subverted and challenged in the counter cultural ideology of subaltern resistance. To focus attention on this culture and its traditions, Pawardhan immediately cuts the screen to the *ramleelas* and political gatherings of the Bharatiya Janta Panty to distinguish between the two.

While the teachings of Ambedkar and Buddha dominate the cultural gatherings, a constructive economic and political criticism of the system seems to largely escape from being critiqued. Social critique becomes limited to the evils of Hindu religion while the rhetoric of 'I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu' takes center stage. It is here than Patwardhan focuses attention to the varying kinds of *Dalit* political radicalism. Featuring the *Kabir Kala Manch*, a group of theatre activists, the documentary focuses on their activism that is not limited to the caste question alone. Through music, the KKM speaks against caste, gender inequalities, farmer suicides, corruption and the neo liberal economic policies of the government which they yoke under one umbrella that feeds and grows from each other. Throughout the documentary, Patwardhan shows the KKM members including Sheetal Sathe and her husband Sachin Male engaged in activism built around their theatre.

Wait and watch, I come!

I shall come because there's justice...

Sans justice can this world exist?

I am coming, my time has to come ...

The song of the downtrodden has to be sung!

My coming has a meaning...

It's the selfishness of sharing a morsel with those who starve...

I shall come... But not alone...

My intention is not small...

Wait and watch!



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In another poem penned by her while in Jail, Sheethal Sathe, member of the KKM writes,
Nausea served in the plate , the untouchable nausea
The disgust grows in the belly, the untouchable disgust
It's there in the flower buds, it's there in sweet songs
That a man should drink another man's blood ,
This is the land where this happens
This is the land of hellish nausea.

The radical nature of the Kabir Kala Manch, of combining socio-cultural criticism with political economy welcomed the ire of the class in power. The Maharashtra government declared the KKM a Naxalite organization and its many members including Sheetal Sathe and Sachin Male were arrested on charges of inciting violence through their work. The silencing of political radicalism by dissenting voices is an instance of how fearful the regime is of the 'invisible' asserting itself in the public domain they are otherwise systematically excluded from. At a time of neo liberalism and free market economy when the cultural spaces have been influenced by the commercial logic of the 'culture industries', the significance of theatre groups like the Kabir Kala Manch is highly significant. The growth of radical Hindu nationalism since the late 1980s coincided with the liberalization of Indian markets for global consumption of cultural products. It contributed amongst other things to the depoliticization of the public sphere. In the absence of a strong left, the vacant spaces were appropriated by the right-wing Hindu groups. Patwardhan's documentary is witness to these socio-political shifts in Indian history. From the events in 1997, Patwardhan documents with critical clarity the growth of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the emergence of Narendra Modi and the deepening communalism of Indian politics. The documentary records what can be described as the defeatist moment in the *Dalit* movement of the alliance between the Shiv Sena-BJP and a section of the Dalit population.

The significance of the Kabir Kala Manch and Patwardhan's documentary lies in the realm of what Ranciere calls the "aesthetic", functioning as "distribution of the sensible". As modes of cultural and political expression or as forms of art, both try to transform not only the social consciousness of a society but also the way public spheres exist as political spaces for freedom of expression and modes of thought. They aim to transform the existing modes of the political space and modes of organizing and dissent (which is allowed by the power regime) to cultivate a truly radical cultural and political public sphere. It is an anticipation of the aesthetic revolution of in society, which as the prerequisite for the new political revolution engages in the "aesthetic education of man" (Ranciere, 26). It is the transformation in social consciousness and the public sphere.



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The documentary's title *Jai Bhim Comrade* combines the notion of both caste and class for the possible assertion and liberation of *Dalit* and subaltern classes in society. The documentary, by making the invisible visible, dissents against the police regime and commits a political act aimed at a revolution of the aesthetic.

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