Caste and the Resistance of Theatre

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Body on the Barricades: Life, Art, and Resistance in Contemporary India by Brahma Prakash, *New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2023; pp 210, ₹325.*

Towards the end of Vivek Shanbagh's (2023: 160) novel *Sakina's Kiss*, its compulsively self-exposing narrator observes, "The intensity of a life can be measured in stupid decisions. I have always been envious of those who manage to be reckless." "Stupid" here does not mean thoughtless or banal; it means, instead, that which is uncalculated, spontaneous, without reck or care for one's own interest. While in Shanbagh's novel, the terrifying, yet, alluring image of such stupidity—of the ability to spontaneously risk one's well-being or even one's life—can be glimpsed only as a projection, a radiance foreclosed, it is at the very centre of Brahma Prakash's astonishing and passionate book, *Body on the Barricades: Life, Art, and Resistance in Contemporary India*.

As the title of the book indicates, it is about the possibility of resistance in a public space saturated by authoritarian hierarchies, moralistic pieties, panic, and dread. Perhaps that is putting it a little mildly—for, in fact, the book suggests that resistance is not only possible in the worst of times, but that it may emerge most vividly and forcefully in precisely such times. This is because acute crisis produces a clarity that may be missing in a state of generalised and routinised oppression. Right from the beginning, the book invokes the COVID-19 pandemic not only as a disaster, but also as a moment of revelation, one that made visible what might have been invisible before—namely a general condition of airlessness, of suffocation and asphyxiation, daily experienced by those who enter sewers, those who live in airless shanties, and those who are throttled by the police. Its reading of the pandemic as a paradigmatic moment is predicated on two strands, two themes, if you like, that are woven through the entire fabric of the text.

The first is a political argument about the centrality of caste to all aspects of Indian life: its centrality to speech, gesture, movement, imagination—even the imagination of otherwise "progressive" people. And the second is the idea of theatre, of theatricality and performativity. Theatre itself seems to be conceived of in at least two distinct ways. One is conscious performance—a choreographed spectacle produced for a particular audience, or sometimes even in the hope of engendering such an audience. This kind of performance may be enacted by either an authoritarian or an emancipatory movement (I will return to the difference between these two towards the end of this review, but for now, let us place them in one group). The other is what I would call the performance of the unconscious—the speech that unintentionally reveals what had hitherto been concealed and hence brings into view the monstrosity of the social body. While the former—conscious performance—is theatrical insofar as it consciously *stages scenes* that interrupt or break through the routinised landscape of the everyday, the latter is theatrical in a more elemental or fundamental way insofar as it *recreates the arena of visibility*, making possible the perception of something that had hitherto remained invisible or unspoken. It is this second kind of theatre that Prakash invokes when, in Chapter 1, he writes,

> the coronavirus created visibility. It produced a condition of estrangement [...] What others veiled in everydayness, COVID-19 showed in its full nakedness. Can we think of a more naked slogan than "Samajik Doori ka samman karen" in a caste society? What everydayness could not show, the pandemic showed in an epic way. It is like creating an epic model of theatre from the everyday street scenes in a Brechtian sense. In the everydayness of caste society, the pandemic offers us an estranged model to see things from the outside. (p 35)

Here, then, is one way to think about the relation between the two major strands I have noted—caste and theatre.

Conscious theatre may be performed either as the theatre of lynching, flogging, and rape, in short, as the theatre of oppression and brutality, *or* as the theatre of protest, strike, and defiance—that is to say, as the theatre of emancipation. But in both cases, it has a more or less clear objective: to either reinforce or break the rules of caste society. Its relation is primarily to such rules, to their strengthening or fracturing. The theatre of the unconscious, however, the kind of "epic" theatre that Prakash describes in the passage, reveals instead the foundational and symbolic structure of caste society. It makes it possible to glimpse the unspeakable ground of the rules governing caste sociality. On the one hand, then, the book suggests that caste *is* theatre—it assigns roles, gestures, forms of speech, and even ways of looking and walking—but on the other, it also seems to suggest that the only way to exit this theatre is by entering another theatre—entering a kind of "metatheatrical" space that denaturalises, unhinges, and hence discloses the pervasive theatricality of caste.

Later in my remarks, I will briefly return again to the typology of theatre that the book offers. Before doing that, however, let me comment on three questions that I found particularly significant in this book. Each demands a more careful and extended discussion than I can offer here, so what I say must be taken as very preliminary and tentative notes, meant more for those who have not yet read the book than for those already familiar with it.

Freedom and Curtailment

The theme of the limits of freedom runs throughout the book, as when Prakash writes, "Body on the barricades becomes an allegory for thinking about the limits on freedom, the shrinking spaces, the dying democracy, and the barricades full of iron nails" (p 43). Or, when focusing on the potential of language, he says that demagogues curtail words (p 54) and reduce their capacities to perform criticality (p 66). Thus, the book powerfully brings to our attention the shrinking space of freedom and dissent in our times. However, what I found more significant were passages that also show us how, at the same time, spaces of freedom have also been *enlarged* for many sections of the population. By outsourcing, as it were, its putative monopoly on violence to selected actors, the state has also created vast arenas of freedom or impunity, arenas where those who live under the protection of the authorities can have, as Prakash writes, "fun" with the lives and bodies of others. The regime is not only repressive, it is also perversely liberatory, and that is crucial to what keeps it functioning. If the left today dreams of one idea of freedom, the right dreams of another, as it peddles the utopia of an "anti-state state," in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022).

Though Prakash does not refer to Gilmore's work, it seemed to me that some aspects of his work gesture in this direction. In doing so, they complicate the relatively simple opposition between the love of freedom and the love of authority that appears in other parts of the book. They push us not to think of fascism and totalitarianism as ideologies that *necessarily* oppose or restrict freedom for everyone. On the contrary, as Alberto Toscano (2021: 5–6) has powerfully argued, it might be instructive for us to dwell on "that apparent oxymoron—*fascist freedom,*" and to consider the ways in which a certain discourse of freedom has been central, not only to neo-liberalism, but also to fascism.

The Muslim

The figure of the Muslim is at the centre of Chapter 3, subtitled "Muslim Hating in the Bone of the Nation"—one of the most painful and insightful chapters of the book. It is here that Prakash speaks most openly about his own family, his experience of growing up in a village in Bihar where, on the one hand, there are no Hindus or Muslims, only "castes and castes" (p 74), and on the other, despite this apparent disregard of religious identity, the word used for violence against Muslims is not the evasive and deceitful word "riot" or *danga* but, instead, the frank and unpretentious *Miyamaari*—massacre of Muslims. "We don't try to hide it," Prakash writes, "we keep it simple" (p 76).

Presenting a diagnosis of the current valuation of *sacred contagion*—a contagion that purifies even rapists if they subscribe to the right kind of piety, and the corresponding fear of *dangerous contagion*, Prakash writes one of the most thought-provoking passages in the book:

> While the sacred contagion with the notion of security has every right to spread, we must curtail and contain the "dangerous contagion." Since caste remains the model of sanctity in Hinduism, the acts can be seen as an attempt to impose Hindu social order on Muslim communities in which they become "terrorist" by birth, as one becomes "Brahmins" and "Untouchables," or as nomads become born "criminals" and performing communities become "prostitutes." (p 81)

I remember reading an essay by Alain Badiou (2002), where he wrote that in the phrase "Islamic Terrorism," the predicate "Islamic" should not be read as a changeable or replaceable adjective. Instead, the word "Islamic" provides, in this phrase, the very content of the word "terrorism" which is otherwise devoid of any meaningful political content today. What Prakash writes, in a different idiom and context, is not very far from this observation of Badiou. The Muslim has been assigned a caste in the Hindu order. It is his burden alone to carry the caste mark of terrorism.

Art

While questions about the possibility or the power of art appear in various discussions in the book, for example, in discussions of protest poetry, protest art, and discussions regarding the very function of art, the most powerful passage about art appears in the chapter on the Una protests—protests organised by Dalit youth in 2016 after the public flogging of four young Dalit men accused of cow slaughter by vigilantes. The flogging was widely shared on social media. It led to strikes by Dalits in many parts of Gujarat, the cessation of sanitary work, and what Prakash calls an "art strike:"

> The Una strike was full of innovations. It was challenging not only the politics but the very sense of religion and aesthetics. They used cow carcasses and garbage as art materials. […] Instead of collecting the garbage and carcasses, they started scattering them in the open spaces. The repulsive art

> was creating ripples in society. […] The art strike was an act of defiance and defilement together. (p 178)

Upon reading this, I thought of Om Prakash Valmiki's (2001) path-breaking book *Dalit Sahitya ka Saundaryashastra* (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) where he argued, in effect, that Dalit literature becomes what it is by breaking with conventional Savarna ideas about literary language and aesthetics. Prakash perhaps complicates that even further by conjoining the idea of an improper and impure art with the idea of the strike. In his writing, the act of the Una protestors becomes like the rock hurled at the screen in the final scene of Nagraj Manjule's film *Fandry*.

Mourning

The conclusion of the book returns us to theatricality. There is nothing surprising about this since Prakash is a scholar of theatre and performance studies, whose earlier work focused on folk performance in India.

Towards the end of the book, Prakash juxtaposes the theatre of violence and cruelty, the lynchings performed for the video camera, circulated, applauded, and emulated, against the theatre of mourning, the performative aspect of mourning, of gathering, collecting, standing in solidarity with those who are bereft. "Mourning," writes Prakash, "is not just about grieving, it is also about a collective *demonstration* of grief" (p 196, emphasis added). We live in times when public mourning often becomes an act of defiance, when the state fears the power of mourning like Creon feared Antigone's mourning. While the theatre of lynching, of rape, of massacre, is in a simple causal way inextricably related to the theatre of mourning, the book, of course, wishes to draw our attention to their absolute *difference*. Perhaps one can think of this difference in the following way—if the theatre of lynching exhibits and puts on stage a desperate attempt to claim and valorise an identity that one, at some level, *knows* to be utterly empty and meaningless, the theatre of mourning, on the contrary, stages nothing but a traumatic non-experience of mortality and finitude. This is precisely what it discloses to those it addresses. It may be that it is not its defiance, but rather its decomposing exposure to mortality that renders it so terrifying.

In Chapter 8, "A Show for the Dead," one reads the following enigmatic description of mourning: "The body becomes so porous that it becomes all breath" (p 183). We are very far here from the suffocation and airlessness that had been the focus of Chapter 1, "When We Can't Breathe." The inexhaustibility, the endlessness that Prakash associates with mourning seems to become here a sign of the inexhaustible reserve of solidarity, love and care.

Resistance and the Barricade

One cannot read this book without being struck by the singular quality of Prakash's voice—at once lyrical and polemical, performative, hyperbolic—charged, indeed, with all the risk and the excess that it celebrates. Most astounding for me was the *hope* that the book managed to convey despite its recounting of a most grim and bleak phase of our history. I will confess that I do not usually share this hope. The book attempts to persuade us that hope is possible, that it is shared by many who speak and act today, and that without such hope there would be, in effect, no body on the barricades. And if there were no body on the barricades—none of those bodies whose pressure against the barricades has inspired the book—then indeed we might as well be consigned to hell.

However, while the book valiantly attempts to convey such hope to us, it also brings into view a more troubling and dark idea by suggesting that the very possibility of art, poetry, or even solidarity remains, in a sense, *dependent* on authoritarianism and cruelty. This becomes very clear when Prakash cites Habib Tanvir in the epilogue: "Yes, I want a dictator, so I can continue with my theatre" (p 203). Though Prakash reads Tanvir's words as evidence of a refusal to "succumb to the malevolence of power," they in fact echo a theme that structures the entire book. In attempting to persuade us that resistance (not only explicit protest, but creativity, spontaneity, invention, poetry, and art) is possible *even* at the worst of times, it sometimes seems to be saying that it might *only* be possible at such times. It is as if art secretly desires the darkness of oppression in order to come into its own, to glow and shine.

The double-sided, ambivalent figure of the barricades is analogously paradoxical—now appearing as a site of curtailment of movement and police authoritarianism, and at other times, as a site of resistance, of the protection of protest. "Freedom and barricades," writes Prakash, "look for each other as a hunter looks for its prey" (p 39). It seems to me that we should not think of these dualities—art and oppression, or freedom and barricades—in the way we think of mythic interconnected dualities (like life and death, earth and sky, and so on); as transhistorical oppositions, each giving meaning to the other. Instead, their relation, as it emerges in Prakash's book, seems to pose a more challenging provocation concerning the very being of art in an age of modern biopolitics. What, if not consciousness of oppression, could inspire forms of art that, at the same time, resist commodification today? I feel quite certain that Prakash has an original and thoughtful response to this implicit provocation raised by his own book, and I hope he will write about it before too long.

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