

Ram Bapat's Solitude

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His solitude first of all consists in the fact that he seems *unclassifiable*, that he cannot be ranged in one camp alongside other thinkers in one tradition.

— Louis Althusser (1988: 469).

The passing of Ram Bapat (1931-2012) marks a watershed in the annals of the Marathi public sphere which has been in a state of terminal decline. The well-known writer and critic Vilas Sarang observed 20 years ago: “(M)odernism is generally on the wane in Marathi literature. A kind of literary-cultural fundamentalism has taken hold, and newer poets seem scarcely interested in experimentation or international literary developments” (Sarang 1992: 12). This diagnosis rings true even today and applies equally to other fields of cultural production including the social sciences (Gavaskar 2010). Bapat was one of the few Marathi intellectuals who ceaselessly strove to stem such narrowing of horizons.

A political scientist by training and profession (he studied and subsequently taught Political Science at the University of Pune), Bapat nevertheless moved nimbly across disciplinary boundaries and acquired a humongous, polymath erudition which he generously shared without staking a claim to any type of copyright. He served as a bridge connecting scholars belonging to different disciplines and generations within and beyond Maharashtra, spanned the domains of academia and activism, and sustained a dialogue between the Marathi and Anglophone spheres. Not surprisingly, he was always surrounded by a bevy of students, colleagues and other intellectually inclined persons from various fields such as politics, social movements, journalism, literature and the arts.

So wide was the range of Bapat's public engagement that one wondered if he had a private life worth the name. It is

tempting to answer this question in the negative; for he was a bachelor free of the preoccupation with leisure, consumption and status that Habermas (1973: 75) has described as “familial-vocational privatism”; the life of the mind and the pursuit of the common good were his only real passions. He kept open house for and placed his time and energy at the disposal of people seeking intellectual enlightenment. Private property or personal ambition mattered little to him. But this is only half the story. The fact remains that a strong streak of solitude was woven visibly into the fabric of his life.

Impersonal Subjectivity

The seminar room was Bapat's natural habitat and he wholeheartedly participated in a variety of discussions. Yet on several occasions he would seem aloof and introspective right in the midst of a lively debate. He was fond of trekking and lost no opportunity to indulge in this pastime. While he was happy to have companions during his forays into hills and dales, he could just as merrily go on an expedition all by himself. A stout champion of inclusive and eclectic

modes of thought, he nevertheless ended up taking an idiosyncratic position on certain crucial issues. These facets of his personality bespeak a solitude anchored in a sort of “impersonal subjectivity”, which lay at the heart of the private world that Bapat inhabited.

The legendary Marxist thinker Louis Althusser (1918-1990) has given an insightful account of Machiavelli’s solitude by exploring its existential and cognitive contours through a politically informed theoretical lens (Althusser 1988). Gregory Elliott (1988) has similarly subjected Althusser’s solitude to a searching scrutiny. Bapat’s solitude also deserves a closer look along these lines.

Bapat firmly believed in practising what he preached. Thus, as an outspoken advocate of democracy, he did not flinch from openly expressing his opposition to the authoritarianism let loose during the Emergency (1975-77). However, a curious inconsistency was evident in the differential treatment he accorded to speech and writing as media of expression. Bapat easily established a rapport with the audience through formal lectures or informal dialogue. He spoke fluently in many registers and gave full play to his extraordinary learning, wit and imagination. Writing, on the contrary, was a task which he approached with utmost reluctance.

The bulk of Bapat’s published work comprises prefaces he penned for books authored by like-minded scholars (Bapat 2011). These write-ups are not critical commentaries, but elaborate and adulatory synopses couched in a somewhat turgid, pedantic style that reveals a cautious mindset. It would be unfair to treat them as a touchstone of Bapat’s intellectual calibre. Perhaps the very act of writing ran against the grain of his sensibility with its penchant for a simultaneous exploration of multiple paths. It is possible to see the verbosity of the prefaces as an ostensibly paradoxical expression of a species of silence that signalled the author’s refusal to be dragged out of his solitude and permanently exposed to the public gaze in a fixed posture.

In his screenplay for Derek Jarman’s film on Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), the renowned literary critic Terry Eagleton

has pointed out an interesting anomaly in the philosophical aspirations of the great thinker. Wittgenstein, who continually grappled with silence and solitude, hoped to decipher a realm of “crystalline purity” via a systematic study of Logic and Mathematics, even as he sought to dissolve the supposedly perennial problems of Philosophy by locating them on “the rough ground” of linguistic and social practices (Scheman 1996: 383). An analogous dilemma can be detected in Bapat’s quest for a feasible utopia.

On the one hand, Bapat was keenly aware of the need to take into account the contradictions emanating from gender, caste and class asymmetry for adequately grasping and transforming socio-economic and political processes as well as relatively “autonomous” activities like literature and art. His candid critique of the social conservatism concealed beneath the much-vaunted radical stance of the famous Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) testifies to this. On the other hand, he had a lifelong fascination for S D Javadekar (1894-1955) who championed a woolly admixture of Vedanta, socialism and Gandhism (Lederle 1976: 372-78).

In the ultimate analysis, Bapat’s solitude stemmed from his impossible yearning to find a language capable of explaining and healing the intractable ruptures with which social life in contemporary India is riven – a language rooted at once in the country’s “great tradition” and in the emancipatory discourse of modernity.

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