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### Anand Teltumbde, *Khairlanji. A Strange and Bitter Crop*

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**Anand Teltumbe, *Kairllangi. A Strange and Bitter Crop*, New Delhi:  
Navayana, 2008, 214 pages, ISBN 978-8-189-059156**

Nicolas Jaoul

[1] The importance of the Khairlanji events lies partly, but not mainly, in the exceptional degree of cruelty displayed by the village mob when it engaged, in broad daylight, in the murder and collective rape of four members of a Dalit family. After all, events of caste-based violence have occurred regularly in Indian villages since the 1970s, when the dynamics of Dalit emancipation threatened to upset the rural traditional order. Khairlanji's historical importance rather lies in the massive Dalit demonstrations of anger that followed, providing a sharp contrast with mere ritualised visits and moral condemnations by leaders of the opposition whose politically motivated interventions were little concerned by Dalit security. Such an unprecedented Dalit uprising and its ability to catch the media's attention explain that the very name 'Khairlanji' has now become a recognised symbol of extreme caste injustice and violence, a disturbing counter narrative of the 'shining India' myth<sup>1</sup>.

[2] The Dalit crowds that took to the streets to demand the hanging of the perpetrators did so because the local and state administration had simply sought to conceal and erase the atrocity. The judicial outcome too was unprecedented: among the 38 accused, eight were recognised guilty, amongst whom six have been sentenced to death and two to life imprisonment (however, due to appeal procedures, the final sentences could still change). A special anti-atrocity law exists to punish caste-based crimes against Dalits, but the conviction rates are exceptionally low, testifying to the ability of dominant castes to neutralize judicial procedures, not to mention the problem of underreporting of such crimes by the local authorities.<sup>2</sup> Their inability to

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<sup>1</sup> On the post-Khairlanji protests, see Jaoul (2008).

<sup>2</sup> On the failure of this law, see Galanter (1989); also a more recent press report by *Frontline*: <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2624/stories/20091204262400400.htm>

take advantage of such legal protection is in fact one aspect of the overall dispossession of Dalits when seeking the support of the local administration, as a means to protect their constitutional rights and dignity.

[3] This book, written by A. Teltumbde, a Dalit intellectual from Maharashtra, is an expression of the will to remember Khairlanji and turn it into a symbol, both of caste oppression and Dalit revolt against it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: 'We cannot allow Khairlanji to remain an unfortunate incident, an aberration, a forgotten case in some obscure court. The world needs to know the strange fruit that the tree of caste has borne' (p.10). Although not an academic, the author provides a challenging Dalit critique of the failure of both the Indian state and of its Dalit representatives to prevent caste atrocities. His book will be of special interest to readers interested in the latest developments in the politics of the unprivileged in India. It argues that Dalit politics has reached a critical stage, and questions the legalistic approach that it has adopted until now. Teltumbde in fact constructs Khairlanji as an historical turning point. His criticism of the Ambedkarite movement's inadequacies leads to a series of propositions for the post-Khairlanji Ambedkarite movement that are reminiscent of the Dalit Panther's tentative and short-lived Marxist redefinition of Ambedkarism in the early 1970s.

[4] Teltumbde's attempt to expose the reality of caste from below through the scrutiny of an atrocity and its aftermath not only provides first hand material on the massacre and the Dalit reaction that followed, it represents a valuable intellectual essay on 'understanding castes to annihilate them', as the introduction's title proposes. From the academic point of view, the book provides fruitful and pertinent insights into the understanding of caste in the contemporary Indian context. Dismissing Indologist theories on caste, the author expresses his disagreement with the (formerly) established scholarly perspective that took the ideological justification of caste uncritically, giving it the status of the consensual, autochthonic cultural point of view. As critiques of Dumont's theory of caste have also pointed out, such views provided academic authority to Brahminical hierarchy as the essence of Indian sociology. Pointing to the obsolescence of such a scholarly tradition and its uselessness for the anti-caste movement that requires a properly contextualised understanding of caste, Teltumbde seeks to elucidate the economic and political rationale of anti-Dalit violence ('caste atrocities') in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In taking such a critical stand against academic research, the author fails to acknowledge the important work that researchers conducted from the perspective of the lower castes, which clearly departs from the Dumontian theory. The profound renewal of academic research on Indian society, in which the

old Indology appears to have been definitively sidelined, has not been taken into account by the author. For instance, many recent studies have documented the lives and struggles of India's ordinary poor people and their relationship to the state<sup>3</sup>, bringing relevant knowledge to his own objective, i.e. 'to sharpen our understanding of caste dynamics as they exist' (p.20).

[5] Despite his criticism of the Ambedkarite movement and the Marxist overtones of his analysis, his intellectual effort is well inscribed in the legacy of the great historical leader of Dalit emancipation, whose writings are starting to be acknowledged in the academic world. In this respect, the author dissociates himself from the bulk of Ambedkarite activists, who have simply adopted the great man as the ideal combination of upward mobility and engagement on behalf of the Dalit community and seek to pursue his agenda in an orthodox and rather uncreative manner, notwithstanding Ambedkar's own iconoclasm. Although critical of Ambedkar's religious focus on conversion to Buddhism, that his followers now consider the unquestioned antidote against caste and the religious label of true Ambedkarites, Teltumbde seems more in tune with Ambedkar's insistence on the need to base anti-caste activism on a sharp sociological and historical account of caste, an organic theory of caste annihilation grounded in the Dalit experience of caste oppression.

[6] As a Dalit intellectual, the author builds his critique from the point of view of an insider, who is entitled to expose of his community's political flaws, thus avoiding the trap of pure victimization. Instead he maintains the militant self-definition of Dalits as emancipated and radical political subjects struggling to democratize Indian society from the margins. Far from the kind of Brahmin bashing with which Ambedkarites sometimes tend to content themselves, the author seeks to include the Ambedkarite movement's faults in his critique of what he calls India's 'political economy of caste'. Hence, much more than just a book on the Khairlanji massacre, Teltumbde's essay takes caste atrocity as a relevant feature for the understanding of contemporary Indian society, focusing especially on caste interferences in the functioning of the Indian state machinery and on the caste bias of the dominant media's public discourse.

[7] The biased way in which the local and the national mainstream media treated the issue of the massacre, as well as the negative image they gave of the subsequent protests are finely analysed. The figures regarding upper caste domination of the media (90% of the senior journalists and managers in Delhi's print media, according to a quoted survey by the CSDS) do

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Brass (1998); Mendelsohn & Vicziany (1998); Fuller & Bénéï (2000).

suggest quite a lot about an elitist and urban view on what matters or not, what deserves a headline or will remain unnoticed as just another shady crime story involving 'uneducated villagers' in 'backward India'. The massacre was initially reported in Nagpur's local press as being a popular punishment meted out to an allegedly adulterous mother. The caste angle was concealed and the criminal crowd who indulged in the collective raping, beating and mutilating to death, was portrayed as being driven by a sense of moral outrage, indulging in 'an act of public-spirited 'moral justice'' (p.13), a presentation of the events that is nothing short of a justification.

The caste and urban bias of the journalists appeared negatively through the absence of reports on the massacre in the national media (despite several attempts by local NGOs to catch their attention by sending reports of their fact finding missions). The bias became more manifest and textual in the reports on the Dalit protests, assimilated as they were to mere public nuisance. Damage to public property was sensationally highlighted and protestors were framed in contrast to 'citizens', victims of traffic perturbations, while the rationale behind the collective anger was reduced to 'political manipulation'.

[8] Such biased reports provide a clear justification for an alternative account from the Dalit side. Teltumbde's main argument is that far from being 'just the misdeed of some uncultured barbaric monsters', Khairlanji in fact 'illustrates the state of the entire country' (p.25). 'Every village in India is a potential Khairlanji. (...) Khairlanji represents the quintessence of caste in India – that people have to observe their ascriptive statuses; stay put in their place' (p.14). Based on the Dalit experience of caste as violence, the social reality described here is the exact negation of the irenic Gandhian cliché 'much celebrated in textbooks and tourist brochures' (p.13) on Indian village life; instead it is a world where caste violence is multifarious, permanent and inescapable, whether internalised with the acceptance of one's degraded status, or manifest when refusing to forsake one's dignity and rights.

[9] Reflecting the Dalit standpoint, the author thus argues that violence is an intrinsic aspect of caste, and that such irruptions of caste violence, far from being isolated events, have a more functional, systemic aspect of enforcing the social order, hence its tendency 'to be performed as a public spectacle by collectives in a celebratory mode' (p.185). This is made clear by the collective dimension of rape, where the woman's body becomes the privileged site of collective punishment. 'Rape is not a private affair- in Khairlanji, it becomes a celebratory spectacle. Atrocities involve intricate and devious planning so that they become a 'lesson' for the entire dalit community.' (pp.178-9).

[10] Displacing our understanding of caste from the mythical Varnashradharma reference to the role that it performs in the Indian market economy and bureaucratic polity (termed the 'political economy' of caste), the author thus makes the polemic statement that 'in recent times, atrocities also owe to the structural imperatives of the neoliberal state that needs to curb public dissent against its intrinsically anti-people policies' (p.115). Such a reassessment of the contemporary functionalities of caste thus invites the readers to depart from the 'classical fourfold *varna* system', as 'any discussion of caste typically begins with or bases itself' (p.19), so as to consider caste an integral part of Indian reality, especially as far as its interference in the functioning of the state machinery is concerned. Apart from his critique of Brahminical theories of caste, Teltumbde also directly challenges the anti-caste movement's narrow and self-deceiving focus on anti-Brahminism: 'Anticaste activism too has reflected and reinforced the worse stereotypes, identifying foes and friends in obsolete *varna* terms' (p.15). The author moreover notes that the anti-caste movement's pragmatic reliance on caste categories showed its limitations when, not knowing to which caste the Bhotmange belonged (since it is not a typical Dalit name), the Ambedkarite community initially failed to react to the massacre, thus illustrating 'the bitter truth that caste identity becomes more important than human identity in India, even for Ambedkarite dalits' (p.48).

[11] The Anti-Brahmin, '*Bahujan*' discourse emphasizing the cultural unity of Dalits and *Shudras* stands particularly discredited in view of the increasingly *Shudra* origin of caste violence, especially by dominant castes, like in the Khairlanji massacre. However, the author's contention that 'in all these infamous atrocities and mass murders over the last four decades, there was no direct involvement of the Brahminical castes' is questionable, especially if we consider the unprecedented wave of massacres in Bihar by the *Bhumihars* in the late 1990s. In fact the author's project of studying the 'political economy' of caste violence without reducing it to class violence would require more attention to the uses of Brahminical ideology by rural dominant castes in their attempts to assert their local hegemony and crush any attempt from the Dalits to improve their degraded position in local society.

[12] Another questionable aspect of Teltumbde's demonstration of a 'political economy of caste violence' is his inclusion of the Chhattisgarh state's response to Maoism, i.e., the creation of the *Salwa Judum* Tribal militia, which has led to a civil conflict in which Tribals have ended up attacking Tribals, leading to massive population displacement. The author accuses the Chhattisgarh state of voluntarily orchestrating the population displacement to meet the

requirement of setting up special economic zones, thus linking the *Salwa Judum* state-sponsored repression to the fulfilment of the demands of multinational corporations. He however fails to justify the assimilation of the Tribal issue to a caste issue. On what basis does the author justify his 'Dalit-Tribal' category, apart from their conflictual relationship to the state (which is also qualitatively different)? Dalits and Tribals have never mobilised jointly, or produced any common ideology. Dalits, while criticizing the caste system, and claiming non-Brahmin Dravidian origins, have paradoxically avoided any identification with Tribals. Even if it makes sense to study comparatively and simultaneously different kinds of ethnic discrimination, and if discrimination against non-Hindu minorities often have underlying caste dimensions (like in the case of Dalit converts), one should not lose sight of the specificity of caste discrimination, that Ambedkar himself theorised as the problem of graded inequality. Although agreeing that 'discarding caste as an analytical category altogether would be like throwing the baby with the bathwater' (p. 20), the author seems to head in that direction.

[13] Although he still situates himself in the Ambedkarite tradition of the politically engaged Dalit intelligentsia, his politics moves away from the anti-Brahmin alliance of Dalit and *Shudra* castes that was the ideological base of Ambedkarite political revival of the 1990s following the Bahujan Samaj Party's (BSP) success, but that events like Khairlanji and the growing class tensions between intermediary agricultural castes and the Dalits have discredited. Teltumbde instead advocates that the alternative to such caste based politics of alliance with other unprivileged groups lies in class unity, which is conceived as the only possible horizon of the anti-caste movement: 'it must be realised that caste cannot be the basis of such unity; only a class approach can achieve it. Indeed the caste situation today has become so complex that the caste idiom is proving increasingly futile, and the earlier one thinks of substituting it the better' (p. 20).

[14] The denunciation of the Indian state's biased attitude towards Dalits by the Khairlanji protestors offers a valuable account of the contemporary Dalit condition as citizens whose access to state resources and constitutional rights is hampered by caste factors. The problematic relationship of Dalits to the state thus appears as a major dimension of the caste problem that they face, making the state part of the problem rather than the solution. The difficulty for Dalits to register complaints in a police station, that the Khairlanji events dramatically illustrated, highlights the insecurity and alienation of Dalits at the hands of the local state apparatus, as well as the complications created by caste complicities and corruption in gaining access to representatives of

the state: 'Bhayyalal remembered that when he had not met the demand for money from PSI (police station in-charge) Bharane on a previous occasion, Bharane had threatened him and said he would not entertain any of his complaints' (p. 42). Indeed, the Khairlanji narrative is woven around shocking examples of a biased attitude of the administration at different levels, like the absence of a forensic expert during the post-mortem examination of the bodies, due to pressure from local political notables, as well as in the second post-mortem conducted by a medical team from New Delhi.

[15] The Dalit state bourgeoisie, whom Ambedkar conceived as sympathetic representatives of Dalits inside the state institutions, is not spared in this critique. The Khairlanji revolt was not only a response to being let down by the administration and abandoned to the dominant castes' hostility, but also to the failure of Ambedkarite politicians to provide any protection to their constituency. What Khairlanji revealed was precisely the state of powerlessness of the Dalits and the terrible events to which it could lead. The fact-finding committees set up by Dalit organisations in order to enquire on the attitude of the administration discovered moreover that many of the state employees who were involved in the concealment of the crime were themselves Dalits. The fear of total abandonment by the official authorities (as an extreme form of disenfranchisement) that motivated the protests can thus be linked to the failure of the Dalit elite to provide protection to its deprived community from inside the administration. Teltumbde theorizes this popular resentment as the failure of the Ambedkarite project of Dalit representation.

[16] Ambedkar's own expectations from administrative representation in the shape of public job quotas, which he had himself dismissed at the end of his life as naive when he denounced the lack of moral commitment of Dalit administrators, is thus criticized as the theoretical failure to understand the nature the state, whose character, like all institutions, 'is not the same as the sum total of the characters of individuals manning it' (p. 112). Moreover, there are sociological obstacles to assuming the role of committed representatives, like social mobility that alienates and isolates the representatives from their social background ('From a class point of view, dalit officials no longer remains a allies (sic) of dalits', p. 195). The author argues that the dominated and insecure position in an upper caste dominated professional milieu generates internalised self restrictions to this role model that can even lead to contrary attitudes towards the community: 'sometimes even the dalit incumbents, perhaps on account of their relative lack of security, appear overzealous in trying to show that they are above caste and identity

considerations, which actually means toeing the caste-Hindu viewpoint and thereby acting against the interests of their fellow oppressed' (p.112). Even if bold and militant Dalit administrators exist, the author argues that they are nothing more than exemplary, individual exceptions, whose impact on Dalit lives is therefore marginal: 'This is not to say that individuals are totally inconsequential. Individuals— if they are intrinsically capable, courageously people-oriented and in positions of power- can catalyse some change. But such a combination in the case of dalits is a rare occurrence, given the huge systemic inertia and formidable class pressure on them' (p.113).

[17] Teltumbde, while reflecting on the Khairlanji protestors' feeling of being let down by their own, fails to elaborate an original analysis of the state based on the Dalit experience, instead contenting himself with the Marxist characterization of the Indian state as the product of the post colonial 'compromise between the feudal landlords and the emerging bourgeoisie' (p. 19). He gives an excessively monolithic account of the state, which is not exempt of essentialist overtones, as if the Indian state's nature was fixed once and for all. His critical account of the Dalit officers' failure to act from their administrative positions in Maharashtra could have been contrasted with the Dalit experience in Uttar Pradesh, where Mayawati's regimes not only posted Dalit officers in positions of local authority, but compelled them to work for their community's welfare. Her policy of administrative reshuffle, which was denigrated by the media as non-meritocratic and casteist, actually contributed to improving Dalits' relationship to the state and empowered them by providing them official support in their local struggles. However limited, this change is one of the most important results that the BSP governments have yielded for the Dalits (probably more important than its symbolic politics and Dalit oriented development schemes), which has generated hopes of replicating the formula in other parts of India, even if the BSP has for the moment failed to make any impact outside Uttar Pradesh.

[18] The emerging possibility of an eventual break away from the Indian state because of a feeling of disappointment and disgust, which seems to be the principal lesson of Khairlanji for Maharashtrian Dalits, is well illustrated in the vibrant account of the state repression of the protests, that the author characterizes as 'not any less grave atrocity than Khairlanji' (p. 111). Although the protestors expressed their anger through peaceful means of collective action, the Maharashtrian state's brutal response in which 'People were badly beaten, their bones broken, ligaments torn' (p. 74) not only targeted protestors but took the shape of a pogrom-like collective vengeance of the police against Dalit localities: 'Most of the victims had actually not participated

in the protests; they were targeted simply because they were dalits living in dalit localities...' (p. 74-5). Those arrested randomly were 'charged with all kinds of crimes, and would be spending many anxious years and their frugal earnings on courts to prove their innocence.' (p.77). Adding to the atrocity itself, the brutal repression of the Dalit protests shocked Dalit communities all over India.

[19] The possible convergence between such a hypothetic rupture with the state and the Maoist strategy of 'people's war', is evoked at several points and seems to sketch the book's political horizon. The supposed Maoist (or Naxalite) involvement in the protests was evoked by the Nagpur police, as well as the home state minister, 'as a licence for the police to unleash terror' (p. 111). However, the officials failed to provide any evidence to this claim, and were contradicted by the fact that the organisers of the local protest committees were well known Ambedkarite activists from local organisations. Although it could be politically difficult for the authorities to target the Ambedkarite movement, fully committed to acting in a legal framework, the Naxalite thesis could be put forward due to the fact that the Ambedkarite political leadership lost control over the protests. Generally, intense factionalism has led to individualized deals between local Ambedkarite politicians and mainstream political parties (whose electoral support is rewarded by official positions), political patronage that exerts an indirect form of political control on their Dalit constituency. But in the Khairlanji protests, the Ambedkarite masses came out in unity, responding to the call of newly formed committees that bypassed the political leaders, thus creating an impression of uncontrolled insurgency. The Naxalite angle used by the police was therefore not just an opportunistic and utilitarian claim, as the author suggests, but perhaps also an authentic feeling of an emerging Dalit uprising that could be abusively labelled as 'Naxalite' because of the threat it represented to the local power arrangements. 'Naxalite' is not just 'a demonic label produced by the Indian state to assume full authority to do whatever it pleases with ordinary people daring to dissent in this democratic republic' (p.68), as the author claims, even if it is also that. Not far from Khairlanji, the Gadchiroli Tribal district is one of the Maoist strongholds of central India. In April 2008, at the time of the death of the Maoist leader Arunadha Gandhi, it was revealed that she was staying in Nagpur's main Dalit locality (Indora, the epicentre of the Ambedkarite movement in Nagpur, and the main stronghold in Maharashtra), which is a pointer to the fact that the Naxalites had actually started building links with Dalits. Although this by no means signifies any substantial infiltrations of the Ambedkarite movement by Maoists, it could point to some degree of ideological influence, as is suggested in the 'Khairlanji' documentary film, which circulates in Nagpur on copied CDs, (especially in the last scene when a street singer sings

the war cry *halla bol*).<sup>4</sup> Teltumbde's book, which reflects the growing popular distrust of the state, itself testifies to this potential convergence as an outcome of a growing feeling of injustice among Dalits. This becomes more obvious when he makes the provocative statement that if state justice fails to punish severely the Khairlanji accused, then the Naxalite's 'summary justice' could provide the alternative.

[20] On the whole, the book is a major statement on the contemporary Dalit condition, at a moment when their relationship to Indian democracy has reached a critical point. Breaking away from some major postulates of the Ambedkarite movement, the author's attempt to relocate Ambedkarism in a Marxist framework can be seen as an attempt to salvage the movement in light of its electoral failure, despite having remained a powerful instrument of Dalit assertion and pride, as well as to prepare it for dealing with growing class tensions. Even in Uttar Pradesh, where Dalit electoral politics have achieved the most, the BSP's shift from Dalit identity for the sake of expanding its constituency has shown the limitations of such minority politics for Dalits. Many local Ambedkarite activists are now resentful of Mayawati's attempt to curb their grassroots social movement. This book in fact demonstrates that Ambedkarism's fate among Dalits provides an excellent indicator of their perceived stakes in the Indian state and therefore of its credibility among the largest sections of India's unprivileged citizens.

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<sup>4</sup> Patil, Pratap. 'Khairlanji', documentary movie. Vivid Vision Production, 43 minutes.