

**REVOLUTION ECHOED FROM ALL HORIZONS - AN ANALYSIS OF
VARAVARA RAO'S POEMS AS A POLITICAL TOOL
OF PROTEST AND RESISTANCE**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS
in English Language and Literature*

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Revolution Echoed from all Horizons - An analysis of Varava Rao’s poems as a political tool of protest and resistance” is a record of bonafide work carried out by Meghna Murali Kalathungal under my supervision and guidance.

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An abstract of the project entitled *Revolution Echoed from all Horizons - An Analysis of Varavara Rao's Poems as a Political Tool of Protest and Resistance.*

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Victims of subjugation often adopt diverse methods to show their opposition to the regime of power structures. While a few arm swords and lethal weapons, others wield the pen as an aegis to show their resistance against dominant powers. Literature, in this manner, plays an inevitable role in indicating an individual's aversion to hegemony through their writings. The literature they propagate becomes a political tool of resistance and source of their liberation. Varavara Rao's poetry is undoubtedly one such effective tool of political protest against an authoritarian system. Varavara Rao is an Indian activist, poet, teacher, and writer from Telangana, India who has been accused in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence and has been arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Our study analyses Varavara Rao's works through the theories of resistance in the light of the American comparatist Barbara Harlow's 'Resistance Literature' and the Power Theory proposed by Gene Sharp. Using these theories, the study attempts to close read and understand Varavara Rao's works as a fluent, strong language of protest and resistance and an effective political tool against the power dynamics of a fascist regime.

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Introduction

In these times of strife and divide, the need to stand in favour of the ideals you trust and raise your voice against vices you wish to see undone, immaterial of the repercussions it entails, is borne out of an inclination to merely exist. Resistance is essentially a struggle for survival. Pain, fear, violence, death, repression and an ardent desire to live life on one's terms often lead even the most placid to resistance. Resistance is mostly the result of having to experience an elevated sense of anguish against the atrocious and demeaning dynamics unleashed by hegemonic powers. In order to free oneself from the hegemonic oppression, there is a strong and inevitable need for resistance that is embraced by the subjugated population.

Victims of subjugation often adopt diverse methods to show their opposition to the regime of power structures. While a few arm swords and lethal weapons, others wield the pen as an aegis to show their resistance against dominant powers. Literature, in this manner, plays an inevitable role in indicating an individual's aversion to the hegemony through their writings. The literature they propagate becomes the source of their liberation. Works of ethnic minorities and the subaltern mostly depict a remonstrance against fascist groups that have been attempting to rid these people from lands they rightfully own. Such pieces of literature have often professed openly the racial atrocities of authoritarian ethnic groups.

In fact, resistance in the literary world had emerged as early as the Restoration period. This era saw the outbreak of writers whose masterpieces were critical compositions. These writings exist as evidence for the invasion of resistance in literature. Thus, contrary to popular opinion, the concept of resistance literature is not primarily reserved for postcolonial or minority literature but finds mention in earlier literary periods as well. Such literature provides a sense of non-compliance to the

deadening forces of society that pressurizes its victims into silence and a state of numbness, whether it comes in the form of political ideologies, social norms, or rampant consumerism and excessive capitalist structures. Barbara Harlow, a leading critic in Middle Eastern and African writing, in her book *Resistance Literature* (1987) defines the concept as a politically inclined activity that is mainly concerned with freeing people's minds from colonial oppression. Literature acts as an arena for the subaltern to write against the hegemony and back to the empire. It accurately illuminates the plight of the oppressed and their horrific realities, instantly captivating the reader's absolute interest. Literature, as a universal mode of artistic expression, plays an important role in human lives as an entertainer and also as an illuminator. Literature has the power to play an influential role in making its readers aware of the atrocities unleashed on those living at the fringes.

Varavara Rao put pen to paper and subversive imagination to lyric when the egalitarian ethos we are familiar with today had not yet become part of the mainstream. He was an early bird in terms of, both, a new aesthetics and a dispositional eye for justice and freedom. Varavara Rao is an Indian activist, poet, teacher, and writer from Telangana, India. He is an accused in the 2018 Bhima Koregaon violence and has been arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) Varavara Rao has been imprisoned as an under-trial multiple times since 1973 and has faced more than 25 cases over the past 45 years. Varavara Rao is the author of nine collections of poetry, three volumes of literary criticism and one volume of essays, all in Telugu; he has also brought out a literary journal 'Sarjana' for several decades. His notable poetry collections include *Chali Negallu* (Camp Fires) in 1968, *Jeevanaadi* (The Pulse) in 1970 and *Bavishyattu Chitrapatam* (Portrait of the Future) in 1986. He is perhaps a poet who has suffered incarceration for the longest

stint in the history of independent India. During his early prison days he translated the works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o into his mother tongue. In 1985, he was charged with distribution of bombs in order to protest the custodial death of a Radical Students' Union activist. Rao's most famous poem 'Reflection' written as a response to these allegations is analysed in this study. "Words", "The Other Day", "The Bard", "Butcher", "Musafir", "Plain Talk", are the other poems focused in this study (Indradeep Bhattacharya, 2020).

Varavara Rao's poems have been translated into various languages other than English – Marathi, Italian, Irula (a tribal dialect), Urdu, Malayalam, Portuguese, Tamil, Bengali and French among others. A point about these translations is that though his poems embody a politically nuanced idiom, they continue to retain their 'sting' even in the texture of the target language. There is a rare confluence of various strands of literary *jouissance* (intellectual pleasure, delight or ecstasy) that introduces a new cache of imagery to the Indian English idiom. It is a whiff of fresh air in the otherwise politically pasteurised Indian English poetry scene which largely panders to a clientele of upper-caste, upper-class and urbanized readership. The recent trend of Dalit poets writing in English or Mia poetry debuting in English are rare exceptions to this.

That Rao's poetic and political oeuvre is anti-establishment is no secret. Through the years it has captured and ignited the public imagination, especially that of the dispossessed. The Revolutionary Writers' Association (Virasam), founded by him in 1970, was inspired by Bengal's Naxalbari uprising and was banned twice by the Andhra Pradesh government.

Virasam was also closely associated with Dalit politics and peasant rights. Its members came to be branded as "literary Naxalites". It is not plausible, therefore, to

expect that Rao's poetry will be divorced from his activism, or that his himself will not have all these tributaries flowing into each other. Perhaps no other literary pursuit lends itself to conjectures on the creator more than poetry does. As such, a distinct image of the poet emerges from Rao's poems ; that of a feeling, breathing ideologue and now, perhaps, a bleeding one (Shaoni Sarkar, 2020).

The chapters covered in this study is an attempt to understand Varavara Rao's poetry through the Resistance theory explained in the American comparatist Barbara Harlow's 'Resistance Literature' and the Power Theory proposed by Gene Sharp, an American professor of political science. The central assertion of Resistance Literature is that literature presents an integral medium for individuals who seek salvation from colonial oppression to recount their dismal reality and thus liberate themselves. Harlow's work goes on to throw light on the fact that though resistance movements mostly depend on acts of aggression and political elements to coerce administrative and civil alterations, it is only through writing that one will be successful in disentangling one's self from the realms of hegemonic projections and dominant institutions.

Gene Sharp, an American professor of political science, believes that power depends ultimately on its bases. Thus a political regime maintains power because people accept and obey its dictates, laws and policies. Sharp cites the insight of Étienne de La Boétie. Sharp's key theme is that power is not monolithic; that is, it does not derive from some intrinsic quality of those who are in power. For Sharp, political power, the power of any state, regardless of its particular structural organization, ultimately derives from the subjects of the state. His fundamental belief is that any power structure relies upon the subjects' obedience to the orders of the rulers. If subjects do not obey, leaders have no power. His work is thought to have

been influential in the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in the 2011 Arab Spring, and other nonviolent revolutions. In the light of these theories of resistance and power, the study attempts to close read and understand Varavara Rao's works as a fluent, strong language of protest and resistance and an effective political tool against the power dynamics of a fascist regime. The study perceives why they (the authoritarians) don't want us to read Varavara Rao's poems and how the political prisoners are made.

Chapter 1

Resistance Theory and Theory of Power

The concept of Resistance, literally meaning to 'stand against' entered the arena of the social sciences from the primary sources of politics and culture. Though the term has psychoanalytical definitions and technical connotations attached to it, it is essentially resistance as understood from a critical politico-cultural perspective that has had the greatest impact in the field. At its most basic level, resistance is comprehended as a form of armed struggle, organized by a covert movement, created with the intention of rebellion. It accurately denotes surreptitious alliances that seek to threaten authoritarian systems in nations of political turmoil, though not always by waging war. Indeed, in today's post-modern world, it is arguable that the strongest polemic appears as written content. Resistance was and still is an important theme within the quest for selfhood and liberty.

The term resistance, originally derived from the Latin word, 'Resiste're', has become an ineludible, vital weapon for the subaltern to react against people in positions of power. It is especially suggestive of the instinctive social movements initiated in the third world countries as political turbulence to stand against the hegemony of imperialists and those re- entering from the West. The anger of having been made alien to one's land, of having a way of life completely diminished, only to impose on them a system that will never truly be theirs instilled in the subjugated an unquenchable sense of vengeance. It is this anger that dwelled in their hearts and soon erupted in the form of resistance. Such movements always aim to alter the nation's social, political, and cultural scenario to rid it of its authoritarian atmosphere. This sort of opposition is upheld as legitimate for reasons concerning the progression of humanity.

Leading Indian writer and critic Usha Bande in her *Writing Resistance* (2006) presents the argument that “resistance involves re-interpretation so as to bring the marginalized to the centre. It also recognizes the need to hear ‘voices’ and give consideration to the dispossessed”(Bande,1). The real desire of wanting to resist is mainly experienced when forced to exist in a world polluted by propaganda. When your identity undergoes erasure and your entire being is vaporized; when you are conflicted about where to place your trust, on the dismal reality that you see and endure every day or on the web of lies spun around by propagators of evil and orthodoxy, it changes all parties involved, bringing the actors of the deed into greater alignment or graver disparities. Resistance is indeed a complex form of human communication.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of resistance entered the literary world during the Restoration period through works that criticized earlier works or the then-contemporary way of living and flawed societal systems. Resistance literature explores how literature subverts and challenges conventional or orthodox discourses and opens opportunities for dialogue and negotiation, weaving nets of contact and communication in arenas where multiple barriers earlier threatened to hinder an open, liberal exchange of ideas. Without a doubt, writing represents an act of resistance as it uncovers cultural assumptions and binary thoughts that present the premise of colonial narrative and provides an alternative reading of the colonial or dominant authority. Such writings seek to undermine the legitimacy of the oppressor’s narrative and resistance literature is construed as the Other to the dominators’ discourse. Resistance thus transforms itself to become an integral part of social dynamics that is revealed either through silent dissent and non-cooperation or vociferous

demonstrations and strong content. It is easy to assess the strength of writing as being equal to the material forces exerted to combat hegemony.

It is believed that the development of the theory of resistance can be traced back to the early modern period and its growth is marked with complexity, besides being largely based on the political, philosophical, and legal arguments propounded by French authors during the religious wars of the sixteenth century. The theory mainly takes an accurate form and perspective only when we take into consideration the specific history of the subject under scrutiny and the implications this criterion presents upon systems of knowledge, power, and ideology. Resistance theory indulges in a politicized reading of the actions undertaken by the oppressed and subjugated to oppose power structures that reinforce inequality relating to class, gender, race, and sexuality. Grounded in Marxian, Postmodern, Feminist, post-structural, and Neo Gramscian examinations of power struggles, resistance theorists focus on providing deeper insight into the multiple ways in which the marginalized mobilize agency to revolt against political and social orders of society that are discriminatory in nature. Such groups mainly project their dissent intending to transform the policies and institutions that create and maintain privilege for some while belittling others. Theorists make attempts to justify the actions of a group that strives to negate and oppose mainstream ideologies that seek to dominate and forcefully extract subservience from participants while working against their perceived interest. Theories of resistance contribute to and inform the body of knowledge in social theory that concerns itself with the issues and meanings of opposition and conflict present when marginalized individuals or groups raise their voices about the status, treatment or relative position inscribed to them on account of being inducted into an institution or social system.

American comparatist Barbara Harlow's seminal study, *Resistance Literature*, published in 1987, was one of the first works in English to examine resistance literature and the fiction produced during liberation struggles in third world countries from a novel perspective and reveals the author's commitment to a subversive, counter-hegemonic politics. The study broke new ground in western literary circles by calling for a comprehensive and more serious engagement of the formerly neglected genre of Third World literature. The work advocates critics to forgo their New Critical facade of detachment and objectivity and to accommodate a methodology that apprehends the social, political, and historical conditions of the piece under scrutiny. Harlow defines resistance literature as a global phenomenon created by the political conflict between Western imperialism and non-Western indigenous resistance movements. As a contemporary genre, it is perceived by geopolitical examinations, and, as a body of literature, it is categorized by links of association with liberation struggles across the globe.

The critic's conception of resistance literature challenges the conventions of literary criticism as she locates writers in a historicized context of political revolution and struggle. Alliances of resistance strictly supplant national and ethnic identities. She boldly asserts that it is imperative to challenge presuppositions and premises of enterprises that seem to force their victims to internalize and blindly accept western models and patterns of development. Resistance literature, akin to the liberation movements organized at the national level not only reflects and participates in such initiatives for freedom but demands for its independent status to receive recognition and autonomy as a separate literary production.

Harlow's discourse on resistance narratives details the narrative form as being more expansive and analytical in its study of power relations that maintain the

systems of exploitation and domination. By developing their conclusions, novelists enjoy the freedom to oppose conjecture imposed by the dominating forces of the West; to study how the past plays out in the present and to use the results of this examination to find novel methods to resist in the present and the future. The prison memoirs of resistance writers imprisoned for their writings of a political nature and their involvement in resistance movements are advantageous in positioning individual experiences with the collective communal struggle. Such works also help to record the barbarity both within the walls of the prison and within revolutions. Their very existence is proof enough of the hegemony's desire to censor and silence resistance writings. The closing chapter focuses on post-independence texts and talks of the tensions that arise between visions of the future that have been imagined and versions of the factual past. She points out that the contradictions between utopian goals and ideologies from before independence and dystopian neo-colonialism of the present have manifested in nations experiencing cultural bankruptcy and social discontent.

Harlow advocates that resistance literature must not only show what an independent nation would look like but must detail the steps revolutionaries must adopt to create the utopia they envision for their state. Critics like Harlow draw attention to the intrinsic connections between the institutions of literature and social authoritarianism. Through her work, she strives to achieve a deconstruction and significant revision of the conventional codes and margins of Western literary criticism. Harlow intends her *Resistance Literature* to be perceived merely as a prefatory study in this new, flourishing stream. The author demands that the field of resistance literature must work towards acquiring civil and human rights for the oppressed, overthrowing fascist systems, and the accurate representation of a punctuated past. Barbara Harlow endorses a politicized reading of third world and

other resistance literature to ensure a complete and responsible apprehension of the tales of liberation and struggle.

The essence of Sharp's theory of power is quite simple: people in society may be divided into rulers and subjects; the power of rulers derives from consent by the subjects; non-violent action is a process of withdrawing consent and thus is a way to challenge the key modern problems of dictatorship, genocide, war and systems of oppression. The two key concepts in Sharp's theory of power are, first, the ruler-subject classification and, second, consent. The ruler-subject classification is one that Sharp uses without detailed justification. The 'ruler' includes 'not only chief executives but also ruling groups and all bodies in command of the State structure' (Gene Sharp, 1980). Sharp focuses on the state in his analysis. He spells out the various structures involved in the state, especially the state bureaucracy, police and military, all of which are under the command of the person or group which occupies the position of "ruler" at the head of the State' (Sharp, 1980). All others besides the rulers are the subjects.

Sharp defines political power, which is one type of social power, as 'the totality of means, influences, and pressures - including authority, rewards, and sanctions - available for use to achieve the objectives of the power-holder, especially the institutions of government, the State, and groups opposing either of them' (Sharp, 1980). Sharp counterposes his analysis to the common idea that power is a monolithic entity residing in the person or position of a ruler or ruling body. Sharp argues instead that power is pluralistic, residing with a variety of groups and in a diversity of locations, which he calls 'loci of power'. The loci of power provide a countervailing force against the power of the ruler, especially when the loci are numerous and widely distributed throughout society.

Accepting the argument that power is not intrinsic to rulers, then it must come from somewhere else. Sharp gives the following key sources of power: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources and sanctions (Sharp,1973). What is the basis for these sources of power? This is where the second key concept of Sharp's enters in. He says that these sources of the ruler's power 'depend intimately upon the obedience and cooperation of the subjects' (Sharp, 1973). This can be called the consent theory of power. Without the consent of the subjects - either their active support or their passive acquiescence the ruler would have little power and little basis for rule.

Power for Sharp is always contingent and precarious, requiring cultivation of cooperation and manipulation of potentially antagonistic loci. His consideration of the sources of power thus leads him to obedience as the key: 'the most important single quality of any government, without which it would not exist, must be the obedience and submission of its subjects. Obedience is at the heart of political power' (Sharp, 1973). The focus on obedience then leads Sharp to ask 'Why do men obey?' He suggests that there is no single answer, but that important are habit, fear of sanctions, moral obligation, self-interest, psychological identification with the ruler, zones of indifference and absence of self-confidence among subjects (Sharp, 1973). Non-violent action constitutes a refusal by subjects to obey. The power of the ruler will collapse if consent is withdrawn in an active way. The 'active' here is vital. The ruler will not be threatened by grumbling, alienation or critical analyses alone. Passivity and submissiveness are of no concern to Sharp; he is interested in activity, challenge and struggle (Sharp,1973), in particular with nonviolent methods of action.

Chapter 2

Understanding Rao's Poetry

Literature, ever throughout its sprouting and flourishing, has been recognised through the lens of political, socio-structural and ideological questions. Having a revolutionary stance of its own, Varavara Rao's works raise these fundamental questions at the face of an authoritarian regime and mobilise the minds of people to protest and seek answers. His works position themselves along the lines of people's fight against power hierarchies, oppression, marginalization and other social injustices. Rao's words being moulded by the politics of the Dalit Panther movement and Naxalbari, expose a fabric of distress and curses encountered by the minorities of the nation. Here we examine how in these testing times Rao's poetry becomes a language of resistance, dissent and a political tool of protest.

Resistance can be as esoteric as silence and silence can be as impenetrable as hegemonic power; conversely, both resistance and silence have the potential to challenge power. By its very nature, resistance is non-confrontational. It works subtly through seemingly small, innocuous everyday acts of non-compliance and achieves the desired results imperceptibly and slowly. In liberation aesthetics or combat literature the first phase is marked by a celebration of native history, culture and glorification of its heroes. This is the phase of reclamation and recreation. The second phase is marked by protest literature, the many forms of resistance against neo-colonial policies of exploitation. Modern man has no way out but to choose protest for existential as well as social reasons. In absurd situations and a debased environment, protest seems to be the only legitimate alternative. The stark fact is that to live is to protest. Protest of an individual is not confined to him alone, it is reflected in society as well. It cannot be separated from social, cultural and political circumstances. The

awareness of protest arises when man confronts an unjust and inhuman situation. It takes birth when a man decides to get rid of the slave mentality. The foundation of protest is laid when man becomes conscious of his rights and for their attainment puts his body and soul into the struggle; consciousness towards fundamental rights, tendency to struggle and a sense of independence and liberty are the basic ingredients of protest which are liable to come into conflict with the dread power of the establishment. All these ingredients and elements are abundantly present in Varavara Rao's poetry.

The poetry which evolved over six decades, reflects and critiques modern social history, balancing it with a consistent and hopeful quest for freedom. This yearning for freedom comes as a resistance towards the systemic oppression and this made Rao compose a beautiful protest language through his poetic rebellion.

The poems that have blossomed down the ages through the cracks of prison walls have always been very many. Rao himself is no stranger to incarceration. He was first jailed in 1973 by the Andhra Pradesh government, under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, on charges of inciting violence through his writing.

Since then, he has seen little respite - either from being jailed or from his own dogged commitment to revolutionary politics. He was jailed and released time and again for charges that all sound similarly glib in 1975 during Emergency, in 1985 during the Labour Movement, in 2005 under the Andhra Pradesh Public Security Act, in 2010 for speaking on Kashmir, in 2011, in 2014 and then, finally, in 2018 until 2021 (Indradeep Bhattacharya, 2020).

Each time that he has been imprisoned for how he chose to employ his words, his poetry became recharged with even more vehemence. Yet, there is that fragility in his words that one always expects to find in poetry. You see it in Rao's memoir

"Captive Imagination: Letters from Prison: "... waves dissolving into waves, the silence of the prison becomes a disturbed lake. But these strokes are relentless on the waiting mind that knows no sleep — like the nails hammering Jesus to the cross. Then I began to feel sure that Ngugi wrote his Prison Diary for my sake."

(Varavara Rao, *Captive Imagination: Letters from Prison*)

Rao's poetry springs from his lifelong political activism and his politics and poetics complement each other in a poignant, authentic way. In the mid-1980s, Rao was charged with hatching a conspiracy with the Naxals to kill a police officer and supplying explosives for the act. Sitting in Warangal prison, he wrote

"I did not supply the explosives

Nor ideas for that matter

It was you who trod with iron heels

Upon the anthill

And from the trampled earth

Sprouted the ideas of vengeance

It was you who struck the beehive

With your lathi

The sound of the scattering bees

Exploded in your shaken facade

Blotched red with fear

When the victory drum started beating

In the heart of the masses

You mistook it for a person and trained your guns

Revolution echoed from all horizons."

(Varavara Rao, *Reflection*, 1985)

There's a certain kind of anger, rebellion and a yearning for freedom in these lines. The 'You' addressed in this poem is the State and the 'lathi' symbolically represents the State sponsored violence and the power mishandled by the regime.

In 2010, Penguin India published a collection of Varavara Rao's letters ironically entitled 'Captive Imagination: Letters from Prison'. In the foreword, the author says the pieces in the book are "notes scribbled in the loneliness of jail". Explorations of solitude and confinement is the central theme of the letters culled in the volume, with Rao showing that no jail in the world, big or small, can hold a poet's imagination captive.

The other controversial work, 'Words' talks about Varavara Rao's own poetic vision; how he stirs awake words from his soul, and then they soar into the sky: 'Once again I must learn to utter/In communing with and listening to/Our people;/I must be tethered to the word and abide by it/What's man's legacy after betraying the word?'

Rao's poems are voices which represent and speak for a wider section of society, the underprivileged exploited class whose voices have been muted, history erased and identities challenged. The fact that someone is finally being able to use their platform of literature to speak loud and clear against the fascist, itself is a mode of resistance and in fact the most effective form of protest. Rao's words reach an audience whose consciousnesses are moulded into amplifying the voices and hence carrying on the protest for justice.

All the above mentioned works are considered as applications of the theory of resistance explained in Barbara Harlow's 'Resistance Literature'.

Harlow's discourse on resistance narratives details the narrative form as being more expansive and analytical in its study of power relations that maintain the systems of exploitation and domination. "By developing their conclusions, novelists

enjoy the freedom to oppose conjecture imposed by the dominating forces of the West; to study how the past plays out in the present and to use the results of this examination to find novel methods to resist in the present and the future. The prison memoirs of resistance writers imprisoned for their writings of a political nature and their involvement in resistance movements are advantageous in positioning individual experiences with the collective/ communal struggle. Such works also help to record the barbarity both within the walls of the prison and within revolutions. Their very existence is proof enough of the hegemony's desire to censor and silence resistance writings" (Barbara Harlow, 1987).

Bhavishyathu Chithrapadam ('Portrait of the Future', 1986), and Muktakantam ('Free Voice', 1990), the two most celebrated volumes in Varavara Rao's poetic corpus serve as testimony to Harlow's theory. Police atrocities during the NTR regime, anti-people policies of the government, extra-judicial killings and the issues of the marginalised people of Andhra Pradesh are recurring themes in these volumes. 'Butcher', in the 1986 volume is point-blank in its condemnation of torture of civilians in police custody. A Muslim butcher had witnessed the killing of a college student by police in full public view on May 15, 1985, because he was asking shopkeepers to down their shutters in protest against police encounters. The butcher in the poem said,

"I too take lives

but never with hatred

I do sell flesh but

I have never sold myself"

(Varavara Rao, Butcher, 1986)

Marvellously poignant and hard-hitting is the poem 'Dance of Liberty' in the same volume, where Varavara Rao plays with the metaphor of Spring after home minister Vasanta Nageswara Rao announced that the state championed liberty and peace. No wonder the collection was banned.

In this light it is very well understood why the Elgar Parishad meeting on December 31, 2017 was branded as 'Maoist provoked' and funded, and said to have caused the Bhima Koregaon violence on January 1, 2018. Amitav Ghosh, the renowned writer, in his letter to Varavara Rao in prison wrote that he lived in Calcutta as a young student during the thick of the Naxalite movement and he differs with them. But, he observes, the Bhima Koregaon violence does not look like 'Naxalite violence, all said and done' (Shaoni Sarkar,2020).

The fact is, everybody, including the state, knows that it was a violent Brahmanical Hindutva conspiracy against the broad unity of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, OBCs and even a section of Marathas, beside democrats.

Consider the lines from the poem 'The Bard' taken from the 'Portrait of Future,1986 and 'Poetry is an Open Secret'.

"When the tongue pulsates,

Tone manumits the air, and

Song turns missile in battle

The foe fears the poet;

Incarcerates him, and

Tightens the noose around the neck

But, already, the poet in his notes

Breathes among the masses"

(Varavara Rao, The Bard,1986)

"My poetry was born
 From the pangs of struggle.
 Cover it if you must
 You will see it escape through
 The spaces of your fingers,
 Its vibrant anguished notes
 Snapping in anger,
 Setting tears on fire
 And flowing forth
 A river of blood red syllables"

(Varavara Rao, Poetry is an open secret)

It may not be surprising that his poetry, particularly post-Virasam, carried ideas of revolution, class struggles and peasant rights and a critique of the state and its forces. The voices and stories of the people at the forefront of class struggle linger in the imagery he paints. What remains consistent is the sensitivity and warmth brimming over his outrage, across his poetry. When dealing with the grim realities surrounding him, he is a poet waiting for another sunrise even within a dark prison cell. Unlike many poets preceding him or his contemporaries, Rao's poetry carries a delicate lyrical quality, of soft alliterations instead of the thundering characteristic of Telugu revolutionary poetry. One could argue that writing for his people in a language which freely flows on the streets is among the most dangerous elements of Rao's poetry for the insecure and paranoid forces in power that feature in his portrayals.

Varavara Rao's poetry, which records a third-world reality crisscross with the most unending, brutal poverty and his vision for a world free of exploitation, has sustained his larger-than-life character for over half a century. His commitment to

revolutionary humanism is a real, serious one, and successive governments, both in his home state and at the Centre, have relentlessly tried to muzzle that commitment.

Now according to Gene Sharp's Theory of Power, he defines political power, which is one type of social power, as 'the totality of means, influences, and pressures - including authority, rewards and sanctions - available for use to achieve the objectives of the power-holder, especially the institutions of government, the State and groups opposing either of them' (Sharp,1980). Sharp counterposes his analysis to the common idea that power is a monolithic entity residing in the person or position of a ruler or ruling body. Sharp argues instead that power is pluralistic, residing with a variety of groups and in a diversity of locations, which he calls 'loci of power'. The loci of power provide a countervailing force against the power of the ruler, especially when the loci are numerous and widely distributed throughout society. Accepting the argument that power is not intrinsic to rulers, then it must come from somewhere else. Sharp gives the following key sources of power: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, material resources and sanctions (Sharp, 1973). What is the basis for these sources of power ? This is where the second key concept of Sharp's enters in. He says that these sources of the ruler's power 'depend intimately upon the obedience and cooperation of the subjects' (Sharp,1973). This can be called the consent theory of power. Without the consent of the subjects- either their active support or their passive acquiescence the ruler would have little power and little basis for rule.

Reading this power dynamics in Indian context, the right wing trying to propagate Hindutva is the majoritarian or the ultimate power holder whereas Forced Nationalism and Islamophobia are the products they sell by which they manipulate the followers and gain their consent(Ramachandra Guha, Democrats and Dissenters, 278).

The consent here is clearly manipulated. It is against this unjust power structure and dynamics Varavara Rao constantly uses his strongest weapon; his pen.

"He looks like a forest dweller

Lost his way in the forest of city

He looks like a tanned Palestinian

Walking all the way here from Gaza to Kashmir

He might not have left space even for his signature

On the flexis, posters and cover designs

He made for us with his imagination of a new world

But can we provide some space for him

Amidst us, in our eyes,

In our embraces, in our homes

As one among us

In response

In solidarity."

(Varavara Rao, Musafir)

The poem Musafir speaks volumes against the Islamophobia injected into the Indian Hindus and declares solidarity to the struggles and protests of all minorities in order to attain the right to dignity and life they deserve as a human being and a citizen. In this way, taking a sharp stand, Varavara Rao's works position themselves along the lines of people's struggle against inequality and brutal exploitation.

" In what discourse

Can we converse

With the heartless?

Bloodhound's gasping tongue

His neck-strap,
 The whip in the prodding master's hand,
 He assumes, from his rank.
 What language can translate the utterance
 That it's felony to shackle reflections?"

(Varavara Rao, *The Other Day*, Muktakandam, 1990)

'The heartless', 'the master's hand' etc are images of the power holder and it is against these hierarchies of power and unequal distribution of privileges, Rao protests using his poetry. Varavara Rao's poetry thus becomes a political tool of protest and resistance against the power structures.

Now another important question arises as to how effective a tool Varavara Rao's poetry is when it comes to mainstream protest against the system. What are the effects of his works in contemporary socio- political movements? In order to find answers for these questions as part of the study, certain interviews were conducted which are fully attached in the appendix. The following inferences were made from the interview:

Poetry has incorporated truth at several occasions and will continue to voice resistance every time fascist ideologies will try to manipulate and divide the nation.

Poetry as a medium of protest goes back to the time of India's independence but yet again bloomed during the Anti-CAA NRC protests in India and saw the new poets coming with their verses of resistance to show their dissent. Anti-CAA NRC protests and the recent Farmers' protests were not only highly political in nature but also extraordinarily creative and aesthetic. This creativity is undoubtedly owed to literature and arts. Graffiti on the walls, slogan songs and poetry became their voice of resistance. Poetry was written and recited from Shaheen Bagh in Delhi to Azad

Maidan in Mumbai. The decade-old poems of Varavara Rao, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Habib Jalib resurfaced.

The Anti CAA protest and the Farmers' protest saw the students, artists, farmers, writers coming together and expressing their dissent fearlessly through poems especially that of great leaders like Varavara Rao. Just like how we can't imagine the civil rights movement without freedom songs and the politics of women's movements without poetry, contemporary Indian protests without Varavara Rao's poems are also unimaginable.

Another vital aspect regarding the effectiveness of Varavara Rao's activism is the incredible participation of people across the nation demanding Rao's release from imprisonment. Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms went through the biggest storm when millions of youngsters led the social media campaign for releasing political prisoners. It had huge pressure on the government and the movement as such had massive socio political impacts. All these instances mark the unparalleled influence Varavara Rao has in the protest culture and resistance movements of a struggling democracy like India.

Conclusion

“If liberty is to mean anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear” (George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 1945).

Ramachandra Guha characterizes our country as a '50-50 democracy' (Ramachandra Guha, *Democrats and Dissenters*, 23) India is largely democratic in some respects such as free and fair elections and the free movement of people, but only partly democratic in other respects such as the near collapse of the criminal justice system and the inability to eliminate large scale political corruption. One area in which the democratic deficit is substantial relates to freedom of expression. There are limits to what writers and artists and film-makers can and cannot do in this country. India is in fact the democracy which has the most number of political prisoners. Varavara Rao, the central point of our study is one such activist who has been the longest political prisoner in the history of the nation. He was released from Nanavati Hospital, Mumbai on 6th March 2021. On 22 February, Rao was granted bail for six months on medical grounds by the Bombay High Court in view of advanced age and inadequate facilities at Taloja jail.

The fire of revolution that was kindled in him by the Naxalbari movement when he was a young lecturer fresh out of university, has remained unextinguished for six decades and continues to scatter ashes and sparks, igniting flames that can burn entire prairies of neoliberalism, repression, casteism and religious dogma. It's no wonder that a state which shows a clear affinity for fascism and seeks to smother all forms of dissent, considers him a foe, and fears and incarcerates him.

The study approached and examined Rao's style of poetry using the Theory of Resistance as given in the 'Resistance Literature' written by Barbara Harlow and the Theory of Power proposed by Gene Sharp. Based on this detailed analysis, we have

reached a conclusion that Varavara Rao's poetry is an effective political tool of protest and resistance against the power structures. His works continue to stand alongside the oppressed, the marginalised and the minorities in their fight against the oppressor; the fascist authoritarian regime. His works will continue to do the same as long as there are students who study and struggle; as long as there is a working class who kindle the fire of freedom, fraternity and courage.

Appendix

The methodology includes a short interview conducted in order to test and attain the objective. The person interviewed is:

Mr. Nitheesh Narayanan,

Central Secretariat Member, SFI

Editor, Student Struggle Journal

PhD Scholar, JNU

Researcher, Tricontinental Institute for Social Research

The full interview is as given below:

Q : Sir, do you think Varavara Rao's poems have been successful in creating a mode of protest and resistance ?

A : Literature, from the time of its origin has been crucial in enlightening and educating people. And with enlightenment and education occurred several unlearning processes and major deconstruction. This made common man to question the injustice happening around and he slowly started standing up for himself and his fellow beings. This paved way to a rebellious nature and gradually a protest culture. So the basics of resistance is from the flourishing of literature itself. And when it comes to Varavara Rao, he is such an influential activist poet whose political ideology and writing style has definitely influenced the minds of youngsters. His poems have been influential in building a strong resistance culture.

Q : If Varavara Rao's poetry is an effective political tool of protest and resistance against power structures, what do you think are its effects in contemporary India ?

A : See all these Anti CAA NRC protests, Farmer protests which are happening in the country, they are not only highly political but extraordinarily creative in nature. This flow of creativity comes from literature and arts. And by literature I specifically mean poetry and by poetry I particularly refer to Varavara Rao and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poems. The anti CAA protestors turned arts and aesthetics into the weapon of protest and this is a very positive effect of Rao's poetry being influential in protest and resistance.

Q - Sir what is your opinion about the social media campaign that happened demanding the release of Rao from prison ?

A: The campaign was something revolutionary. Twitter, Instagram and other social media saw the biggest storm and it definitely put the government under pressure. As a technically well literate generation we should look forward to more such innovative campaigns.

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