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Critical Reflective Journalism

SMALL
INDEPENDENT
MEDIA



“Some people are afraid of what they might find if they try to analyze themselves too much, but you have to crawl into your wounds to discover where your fears are. Once the bleeding starts, the cleansing can begin.”

- Tori Amos



OF MIXTAPE, EMANCIPATORY JOURNALISM & BLACK POWER

While India still grapples with the idea of the 'alternative', solutions await discovery ironically in the neo-colonialist capitalist epicentre of the world, where people have echoed our struggles and sweated through the same fears. Here's a look at two such gems of examples through the eyes of Saswat Pattanayak.

“No amount of popular, sanctioned media is anti-colonial. They are all consciously racist products that operate as systemic defense mechanisms. Decolonization can only come with unsanctioned media.” - Jared A. Ball

In an era marked by endorsements and visibilities, approval ratings and democratic victories, success standards and wealth celebrations, Jared Ball's Mixtape Manifesto, "I Mix What I Like" is an utterly unsettling work. A discomfiting body of literature that denounces the past human progresses to be opportunistic, privileges to be racist, and freedom to be colonialist. Grounded in revolutionary social theories, this book addresses the limits of Marxist canons while uniquely stretching their potentials in a Fanon-ical fashion.

Only someone as unacceptable as Ward Churchill can hold Jared Ball's work at par with those of Fanon, Cabral, Malcolm X and Steve Biko. For, this is a book that lacks liberal pretense, necessary sophistications and usual suspects scholarships. If a form of media must be envisaged as emancipatory, it has to be the small independent press, the underground newspapers, the basement radio stations, the invisible blogs, the black power mixtapes. If a radical thought process must be inculcated, it has to necessarily question the existing status quo, challenge the political-economy, turn the cultural coinages upside down, recognize the apartheid, organize an actionable manifesto against colonialism. Indeed, if a truly revolutionary theory for the oppressed must germinate, it must find growth amidst the crude, the vulgar, the dispossessed, the losers, the forgotten, the reviled, the imprisoned, the colonized, the mixtape messengers.

"I Mix What I Like" (AK Press, 2011, \$14.95) is unabashedly radical, and in true spirit of a radical work, it spares none. Renowned Marxists have analyzed political economy of media, and many cultural studies scholars have dwelt over dominant cultural givens. But what Dr. Ball brings to the debate is not just a departure, but a vibrant powerful tool that can be employed as a form of alternative journalism to combat the corporate media monopolists. The Manifesto provides underground journalists an unbridled imaginative capacity, to take on the mightiest with weapons of the masses. If the transnational media are the empire, mixtape productions are the streets. If pen is mightier than the sword, the mixtape is more resilient than the bullets.

Bootlegging of music harms the original artists way less than the profiteering industry projects. The various copyright laws are in place to protect corporate interests, not that of the artists. Artists world over aim for maximum reach of their music, which invariably gets throttled at the expense of unjust pricing system and limited distribution methods adopted by the corporations that end up owning the creative products as disposable yet controlled commodities. Used constructively, the wider distribution of music challenges the monopolistic nature of a ruthless industry, while democratizing the process of communication by recreating empowering tracks that are more accessible among the masses. Activists such as Jared Ball have been producing politically educating radio shows, and infusing the established musical tracks with liberating political messages at relevant segments, with an aim to freely distribute the content by subverting the power hierarchies. With just three major record labels controlling the entire industry, the issue is

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not merely economic. More importantly, considering these companies determine which artists are heard and seen in the mainstream today, the question at stake is ideological - cultural, social and political.

"If money is ultimately only a surrogate for other forms of social control, then a population able to derive financial sustenance from sources other than those provided by the colonizer is a population that may become unmanageable. This is the underlying reason behind assaults on street-vendors, including mixtape vendors, who engage in the surreptitious acts of daring to earn money and disseminate ideas, breeding forms of dissident communication and culture all without dependance on or sanction from the colonizer. The ability of the colonizer to wage psychic violence requires the ability to maintain levels of poverty among the colonized while also maintaining order over their communicative potential" Ball writes. He argues the big media control is not merely a symptom of media monopoly, but is the manifestation of media colonialism. Refusing to entertain the postcolonial, the postmodern, and the post-racial, the Manifesto borrows from Kwame Nkrumah, "Capitalism at home is domestic colonialism".

Domestic colonialism, in turn, threatens unsanctioned communication among the colonized. So the Manifesto argues, whereas top DJs receive exclusive tracks from major record labels to generate "street buzz", the dissenting DJs await incarceration. Using Hemant Shah's model of "Emancipatory Journalism", as an anti-colonial philosophy, Ball demands that underground hip-hop is employed as a weapon to dismantle colonialism. He writes, "Colonization is predatory and it distorts communication, dislocates victims from their cultural origins and creates an ever-evolving and all-encompassing environment that inhibits the very establishment of a 'political vocabulary' necessary for its identification." And because "Colonialism requires an assault on the immaterial culture of a people in order to protect an assault on their material resources," there is a growing need to recognize and combat this system, proponents of which are apparently working overtime while the subjects are soaking in a state of complacency.

The Manifesto cites George Jackson as saying there are three elements to a successful revolution: a secret army, a political party, and an underground press with a mass appeal. Jared Ball situates mixtape as the third. And make no mistake, like Malcolm X, he proceeds with a plan that must succeed by any means necessary: "The violent reclamation of media space or journalistic practice is a decolonizing activity...an action just within the context of international law. If, for instance, the United Nations ruled - as it did in 1987 - that populations in "the struggle for self-

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determination, freedom, and independence against 'colonial or racist regimes' or 'foreign occupiers' can do nothing that falls "under the rubric of terrorism" then why not at least engage in mixtape radio or any other form of unsanctioned media work?"

"I Mix What I Like" makes Black Power relevant in today's age, charts out a map for underground media potentials, and while at it, is neither wistfully nostalgic, nor merely hopeful. It is a radical manifesto, a grassroots vision, and above all an empowering weapon for the independent journalists to overthrow racism, colonialism and capitalism.

In contrast, stands the much heralded and a significant new release, "The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975", a documentary in 9 chapters, written and directed by Goran Hugo Olsson comprising rare and never-before-seen footage shot in America by a group of Swedish reporters. Olsson has titled his documentary as "Black Power Mixtape" but hardly dwells upon the critical role of mixtape in black peoples' history of struggles. More importantly, lending to the grand irony for this attractive title, this is a documentary which makes Black Power irrelevant to the present times.

As much as an independent medium posits a weapon for the oppressed, it also stands to be co-opted, and normalized, when anthropologically condescending overtones narrate the story from the Eurocentric lens. Olsson begins by declaring his advantages of being an "outsider" to present the black power struggle to the world. He conveniently forgets that this very approach is problematic when judged from the strictly colonial/historical sense. Besides, not only has Black Power story been already told via first hand narratives of most leaders of the era (Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Elridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, among scores of others) through inspiring bodies of literatures, they have also been laboriously archived via various documentaries in the past (Philip Foner's "Black Panthers Speak", Henry Hampton's "Eyes on the Prize", etc).

Amidst a hurried rehash of random yet precious footage, Olsson has however managed to put together a few recent interviews with revolutionaries such as Kwame Ture and Angela Davis, but has treated them as no more than mere historical subjects. If Carmichael is quoted in 1965 as saying the United States has no conscience, there is nowhere an attempt in the documentary to seek if the conscience has been strived for in 2010. Although most interviewees such as Harry Belafonte, Abiodun Oyewole, Kathleen Cleaver, Bobby Seale, Robin Kelley, and Sonia Sanchez have been interviewed within last couple of years, they have hardly been probed about their current engagements with the existing state of black America.

Likewise, even as Angela Davis is used as a central figure in the documentary, Olsson entirely misses out on her ongoing political activism. Her call for prison abolition is one of the most radical black power statements of the day, considering that police brutalities have increased manifold since the 1970's, despite, and because of, the silence in the corporate media coverages, and yet the documentary stops just short of exoticizing her as a celebrated icon of the past, without depicting her as an agitating activist in the present.

Whereas the "Black Power Mixtape" chronicles a radical peoples' history from the "outside", and leaves it at that, the Mixtape Manifesto "I Mix What I Like" strengthens from within an otherwise unappreciated media movement to actualize the goals of the peoples' history.

With these two recent works of monumental magnitude, what is heartening to note however, is that a portion of the Eurocentric scholarship is getting compelled to become historically reflective, with some of its subversive elements becoming cognizant of their undue privileges. At the same time, the Afrocentric scholarship, and the hitherto oppressed peoples worldwide are organizing with greater revolutionary zeals than ever before to overthrow the canonical, and, colonial legacies. For social justice to prevail, history is not merely a lesson, it is an active tool to carve out the envisioned collective future. This time around, with agreements abound, the future clearly belongs to the historically underground.

