

Modern Marathi Literature: Its Cultural and Spiritual Roots

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HISTORY APPEARS quite close at hand when we think of ancient Vedic India. Here is a society full of vigour in thought and action, bubbling with enthusiasm. The Vedic Period generated a rugged philosophy that sustained India through the subsequent ages. The vigour of Vedic poetry needs to be enjoyed in a tranquil atmosphere. But how did humans arrive at that advanced stage of human contemplation which enables them to apprehend the macroscopic as well as microscopic dimensions of the human personality? In the course of evolution they managed to evolve language—characterized by abstraction, symbolization, and articulation—which would reflect their innermost thoughts and enable them to communicate. Language is a unique human achievement essential to all cultural development.

The *Chhandogya Upanishad* expresses this idea beautifully: ‘*Yad-vai vak nabhavisbyat na dharmo nadharmo vyajnapayishyat na satyam nanritam na sadhu nasadhu na hridayajno nabridayajno vag-avaitat-sarvam vijnapayati vacam-upassveti*; had there been no speech, the righteous and the unrighteous would have been dumb and still, truth and untruth, right and wrong might have remained unexpressed, human hearts would have remained unrevealed. It is speech that throws light on everything. Contemplate speech.’

Though the linguistic faculty is innate to humans, language is not; otherwise, the whole of humanity would have been monolingual. Nature has given us the faculty to produce language, and various human groups have been utilizing this faculty in different ways. Hence, the multiplicity of languages across the globe. In India this linguistic variety is

particularly marked. The languages north of the Narmada have their common ancestry in Sanskrit, while those spoken south of the Godavari trace their ancestry to the Dravidian group of languages. But though these languages have different ancestries, they inherit a common national culture.

A living nation breathes its own culture, which is vital for its existence. A nation delinked from its culture rarely survives. National culture is comparable to the human backbone—if it is intact, the human being can stand erect and can thrive. As long as a nation’s backbone is strong, it enjoys vigorous health and vitality. It can ascend new heights of glory. In India a strong moral and religious lifestyle based on the understanding of nature, both external and internal, was developed from ancient times. The study of external nature resulted in the growth of various life sciences. The study of internal nature resulted in a vision encompassing the whole of humanity. To the Vedic person the entire universe was a big nest where humanity could reside peacefully, *yatra vishvam bhavati ekanidam*.

The eighth schedule of the Indian constitution has a list of twenty-two scheduled languages spoken widely in different states. Besides, there are hundreds of dialects in use across the country. Each of these nourishes the national life of people in their own regional setting. So far as Maharashtra is concerned, we have the regional variant Marathi, the official language of the state. Yet Marathi is fairly standardized and there is no difficulty in carrying out the state administration in Marathi. Even the judiciary at district level finds it convenient to deliver judgements in Marathi, the official language of the state. This could happen only because the state

has made concerted efforts to develop Marathi language and literature during the last forty years.

Marathi as it is known today is only nine hundred years old. The earliest recorded Marathi writing is an inscription on the colossal Gomateshwara statue at Sravanabelagola, which reads: '*Chamundaraye karaviyale*; constructed by Chamundaraya.' A few earlier inscriptions have also been noticed, but they remain inconclusive. From the eleventh century onwards Marathi was used by all the saints of Maharashtra to develop rapport with common people. Chakradhara, the founder of the Mahanubhava sect, chastised his disciples for writing in Sanskrit. He insisted that his teachings be broadcast in the language of the common people. The bhakti movement was nourished in Marathi, and this helped integrate society and make it strong enough to bear the brunt of foreign aggression. There is also a large-scale seepage of cultural ethics into modern Marathi literature as a result of the work of these saints.

The saints of Maharashtra elaborated upon the philosophy and ethics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These epics, together with the Puranas, in turn elucidate the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads. The saints, with their love for God and concern for common people, laid the norms of pious and ethical living. This also helped integrate society and advanced its efforts for independence from Mughal domination. The masses found their leader in Shivaji. It was through stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as the *abhangas* and *ovis* of saints, that his mother Jijabai inculcated in Shivaji the sterling qualities of leadership and governance. Shivaji succeeded in emancipating the masses from the tyranny of the then rulers and gave them political independence. Although he did not live long after his coronation, Shivaji created a sense of self-confidence among his nobles and warriors, and their combat skill and military power remained dominant for the next hundred years.

With the advent of the British in the seventeenth century, first as traders and later as overlords,

the Maharashtra society looked forward to the language of the rulers for sustenance. By the mid-nineteenth century the British had brought most of India under their sway. They also laid the foundation of modern university education by establishing universities at Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. By the end of the nineteenth century Marathi was recognized as an indigenous language usable for academic purposes. The introduction of English literature brought about a great change in modern Marathi literature. The liberal thought of English literature was picked up by Marathi writers and this was reflected in Marathi writings of the early twentieth century.

Twentieth-century Developments

Hari Narayan Apte (1864–1919), a representative Marathi writer of the early twentieth century, is known for his short stories and historic novels. His short stories have social themes which depict the emancipation of women from rigid social shackles. He reveals a world of human relationships, which speaks of the immense strength displayed by women in meeting the social situations that come their way. Another writer, Y G Joshi, wrote a number of stories depicting the traditional Marathi culture. All his stories have the touch of the distinct human element that characterizes ancient Indian culture. Bhargavaram Vitthal 'Mama' Warerkar (1883–1964), is another important litterateur of this time. His drama *Sita Swayamvar* (Sita's Marriage) portrays Sita's emotional conflict in a modern setting. Mama Warerkar is known for his translations of Sharatchandra Chatterjee's Bengali novels into Marathi. In their original Bengali, these novels are the finest depictions of the twentieth-century Bengali household, so deeply rooted in traditional culture. At the same time, they sensitively delineate human sentiments, thus showing the refinement of their spiritual heritage.

Marathi culture is also depicted admirably in the novels of Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar (1898–1976). Both Khandekar and Narayan Sitaram Phadke (1894–1978) made major contributions to

modern Marathi literature. But while Khandekar's novels, such as *Yayati*, reflect a deep inheritance of spiritual and cultural traditions, it is not so with Phadke's fiction. In consequence, people have almost forgotten Phadke the novelist while they still read and enjoy Khandekar's works. Khandekar was the first Marathi author to receive the Jnanpith Award, and his novels have been extensively translated into Kannada, Tamil, and Gujarati.

B R Tambe (1874–1941) is another great Marathi poet who has sustained the love of poetry among Maharashtrians. His poems have various moods and a deep emotional ring. Marathi-speaking people of my generation have been greatly inspired by this poetry. His 'Rudra' is a vigorous piece of poetry invoking heroism. I remember our college principal getting us to sing this poem in chorus during the border hostilities of the mid-sixties. Poetry that evokes heroism among youth is a national heritage and should never be forgotten.

The history of Marathi literature will not be complete unless we take into consideration the contributions of Pandurang Sadashiv Sane (1899–1950), popularly known as Sane Guruji. He was a teacher and also a faithful follower of Mahatma Gandhi. His writings are imbued with a nationalist spirit. His *Shyamchi Aai* (Shyam's Mother) is a best-seller. The book contains memoirs of his childhood woven around his mother. That the mother's role is crucial in the formation of the psyche and the spiritual personality of the adult is brought out very insightfully in this novel. Mothers with little or no formal education can shape their children into strong and righteous youths. This is what Shyam's mother did. She had inherited the spoken literature of the saints. She would sing the *ovis* and *abhangas* of Marathi poets on the grinding wheel and Shyam would listen and enjoy the melody, absorbing thus the ancient wisdom. This enriched his inner life. His dedication to the cause of freedom and upliftment of the masses is now part of the history of India's freedom struggle.

In the 1950s Acharya Prahlad Keshav Atre (1898–1969), a popular and versatile Marathi author, ren-

dered *Shyamchi Aai* into a film that turned out to be very popular throughout Maharashtra as well as outside and also received the President's award. Sane Guruji was the first to translate *Tirukkural*, a Tamil text on ethics of great antiquity, into Marathi. He had sponsored the Bhasha Bharati movement that wanted various linguistic groups to come together and work for the development of all Indian languages.

The Sants and Social Writers

The poet Dilip Chitre (1938–2009) has presented the notable Maharashtrian saint Tukaram to English readers. Sant Tukaram had the intelligence of a common man and a powerful diction. Next to those of Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Tukaram's works are probably the most widely read devotional literature across Maharashtra—and now these are also greatly appreciated in regions where Marathi is least spoken. The tradition of religious and social democracy was firmly laid by Sant Chakradhar and Sant Jnaneshwar in the thirteenth century, and Sant Tukaram gave it a fresh impetus in the seventeenth.

Another saint who has left his mark on the Marathi mind is Samarth Ramdas, an ardent devotee of Sri Rama. He promoted the worship of Hanuman—a symbol of self-control, service, sacrifice, and power—by having temples dedicated to this deity built in virtually every village of Maharashtra. He inspired people to undertake self-governance and infused them with the love of motherland. Shivaji, the heroic seventeenth-century ruler of Maharashtra, owes much to the teachings of Tukaram and Ramdas.

S M Mate (1886–1957) and G B Sardar of Pune wrote extensively about the social handicaps of the depressed classes. Both were exposed to Rama-krishna-Vivekananda literature in their youth and this gave their writings an edge of social reform. Both eschewed politics and strove for social uplift. Gopal Nilkanth Dandekar (1916–98) is another notable and widely read Marathi writer. In his early youth, Dandekar circumambulated the great River

Sant Gadge Baba

Debuji Zingraji Janorkar was born in the family of village washermen on 23 February 1876. He lost his father when he was just eight. His mother moved to her brother's house with her son, and both mother and son had to lead a very hard life. Debu grazed the village cattle and worked hard in the fields belonging to his maternal uncle. After the death of his uncle, the village moneylender grabbed his uncle's land, although the loan drawn by his uncle had been duly repaid along with all the accrued interest. Debu left home and wandered from village to village observing the poverty and indebtedness of the village people.

He swept and sanitized villages and talked to the people in the evenings. He pleaded with his village audience for cleanliness and sanitation and for the education of their children. Eventually, Gadge Baba, as he was called—because of the broken earthen water pot he always carried, often worn upturned on his head—became a great social force that changed the lives of village folk. His message is encapsulated in the following ten-point programme:

- Food to the hungry
- Clean water to the thirsty
- Clothing for the poor
- Schooling for poor village boys
- Shelter for the disabled
- Treatment for the sick
- Employment for the poor
- Kind treatment of draught animals
- Encouragement for young men and women
- Hope for the desolate

He exhorted: 'Educate your children; starve yourself if necessary, but see that your children are properly educated.' That was the work of his lifetime and his ever-assuring message.



Narmada barefoot. Later, he spent a number of years in the company of the great saint Gadge Baba (1876–1956) and participated in his philanthropic activities. Gadge Baba was a peripatetic sadhu and Dandekar lived with him as his helpmate and companion for over a decade. Gadge Baba had no disciples. He would go from village to village, cleaning the grounds, river banks, and water tanks—so that people and their livestock could get safe drinking water—roads, and gutters. He rebuked villagers for not sending their children to school and for lavishly spending in marriages even at the cost of incurring debts. Thus, in the company of Gadge Baba, Dandekar had an education that sustained him throughout life. He studied *Jnaneshwari* and

Tukaram Gatha. This enriched his language and style. Later he went round the various historical forts of Maharashtra, alone or in the company of youth groups, writing about them extensively.

Marathi literature is rich in fiction, especially novels and short stories. The earliest Marathi novel is *Yamuna Paryatana* (Travels by the Yamuna) by Baba Padmanji (1831–1906), and the first Marathi drama *Sita Swayamvar* (Sita's Self-choice) is by Vishnudas Bhave (d.1901). These were composed in the mid-nineteenth century. Both these genres developed in the course of the next few decades, and by the mid-twentieth century Marathi had a number of novelists and story writers.

Dwarkanath Madhav Pithale 'Nath Madhav'

(1882–1928) wrote historical and social novels, ‘the latter dealing with encouragement of women’s education and remarriages of widows, condemnation of the abhorrent practice of arranged marriages of children with adults, and similar social issues of his times’; Narayan Hari Apte (1889–1971) focused on ‘ways to experiencing happy family life’; V V Bokil (1903–73) introduced humour as well as pathos in the Marathi novel; Malati Bedekar ‘Vibhavari Shirurkar’ (1905–2001) dwelt on feminist issues; Gajanan Tryambak Madkholkar (1900–76) wrote political fiction; Vaman Malhar Joshi (1882–1943) preached a progressive social philosophy; and P B Bhave (1910–80) explored the emotional and moral significance of human life. The historical novels of Ranjit Desai (1928–92) and N S Inamdar (1923–2010), the existentialist writings of T V Sardeshmukh and Bhalchandra Nemade (b.1938), Jayawant Dalvi’s (1925–94) humour as well as description of impressions of complex experiences lying deep within the human mind, and Madhu Mangesh Karnik’s (b.1931) realistic portrayal of dalits and fringe groups have left a significant impression on contemporary Marathi thought. Marathi drama has been enriched by the musical plays of Vishnu Vaman Shirwadkar ‘Kusumagraj’ (1912–99), Vasant Shankar Kanetkar (1920–2000), and Vidyadhar Gokhale (1924–96). S N Navare (b.1927) and Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) are two of the other contemporary dramatists that have had a serious impact on the Marathi stage. Most of these writers are trendsetters in Marathi fiction. A new generation of writers is coming up and Marathi drama has a bright future.

It was not my intention to give a resume of Marathi literature here; I have only mentioned some salient features that strongly reflect its Indian ethos. The human mind, with its deep seated emotions of love and kindness, is the perennial source of literature. History is woven through literature. The literature that reflects a nation’s spiritual inheritance can live long and sustain the culture of the land. It is suicidal to forget one’s cultural heritage. India has a bright future because she has a glorious spiritual heritage to draw upon. It is worthwhile to study the

regional literature of India and to find out to what extent it reflects the cultural ethos of this ancient land. If it does, then the regional literature will stay alive for long, otherwise it will die in its own land. As we see positive thoughts being reflected in modern Marathi literature, we can foresee that its cultural roots will continue to spread in postmodern times.



Sant Tukdoji Maharaj (1909–68)

Born of Bandoji and Manjula, in the village Yavali of Amravati district, and christened Manik, Tukdoji Maharaj neglected school and studies and followed an unlettered mystic, Sant Adkoji Maharaj of Warkhed. This led to the boy’s spiritual unfoldment, and he also started showing signs of being a gifted poet. He learnt to play rhythmically on the *khanjiri*, tambourine. He adapted popular film tunes to his devotional lyrics. Now called Tukadyadas—as he signed off each of his bhajans with the refrain ‘*tukadya kahe, Tukadya says*’—Manik travelled widely and his Hindi bhajans became very popular throughout North India. He played a crucial role in the Quit India movement by activating the masses with his heroic bhajans.

Tukdoji Maharaj set up an organization called Sri Guru-dev Seva Mandal with its headquarters at Mozari—now called Gurukunj. Volunteers of this organization are found all over Maharashtra and even outside. They organize evening prayers and spread the message of religious harmony. They

also undertake village uplift activities based on the *Grama*

Gita, Tukdoji Maharaj’s magnum opus. The message of right living is traceable on every page of this text. Recently, the Amravati and Nagpur Universities have been renamed after Sant Gadge Baba and Sant Tukdoji Maharaj.

