MARATHI: THE LANGUAGE AND ITS LINGUISTIC TRADITIONS

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Marathi is the language of more than fifty million people mostly residing in Maharashtra, the region in western India with Bombay as its capital. However, the name Maharashtra does not occur in the Ramayana, nor in the Mahabharata. The Chinese traveler Yuan-Chwang referred to this area, in the seventh century as Mo-ha-la-cho. In tenth century Al Beruni mentions the Marhatta region with Thane as its capital. Till then Konkana was not included in this area; Soparak was its other name (modern Sopara, the harbour).

There is no unanimity amongst scholars about the origin and antiquity of this language. The first written form is in Vijayaditya's Copper-plate, dated 739 A.D., found in Satara. In 983 A.D., the stone inscription at the feet of Shravanabelgola Gomateshwar- Chavundarajen Karaviyalen (Built by Chavandaraja, the king), is considered to be the oldest. An interesting couplet in the Jain monk Udyotan Suri's Kuvalayamala in the eighth century, refers to a bazar where different people speak differently, selling their goods: the Marhattes speak Dinnale, Gahille (given, taken).

About the geneology of the language scholars have different views: C.V. Vaidya maintained that it developed from Sanskrit, Sten Knonow maintained that it developed from Maharashtri Apabhramsa, others regard it as one of the Pancha Dravida (five Dravidian) groups. Khaire has recently found several loanwords in early and spoken Marathi from Tamil (adgule-madzule). There were many borrowings from Telugu (tup, tale) and Kannada words are the highest in Marathi spoken under Yadavas (1180-1320). In 1290A.D. the Hoyasala minister Perusmala at Mailangi made "provision for masters to teach Nagar, Kannada, Telugu and Arya (Marathi)" (B. Lewis Rice in Mysore and Coorg from inscriptions) The southern languages used to call Marathi as an Are language, i.e. Arya language. Later Marathi, in Shivaji's times imbibed many words from Persian, Arabic, Portugese and English Maharashtra Shabdakosh (in eight volumes edited by Y.G. Date and C.G. Karve) has 1,12,189 words, out of which the words from Persion-Arabic stock are 2,900 and from European stock 1,500. The script used for Marathi writing is the same as Devanagari, with an additional "L", old Marathi historical documents are found in Modi script. In 1622, Father Stephans wrote Khrista-Purana in chaste Marathi. The language was enriched by several writers who were Muslims (like saint Sheikh Muhammad, the Sufi) or Rev. N.V. Tilak (1865-1919).

Early Literature

In the Yadava period, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Panchatantra were rendered into Old Marathi. Shripati's work on astrology Ratnamala, Mukundaraja's philosophical treatise in verse Viveka Sindhu, in the indigenous Onvi metre, and Paramamita, another word on Vedanta were the earliest works. Narendra's Nalopakhyana and Rukmini-swayamvara were in ornate and sanskritised language. Though Marathi was called Deshi or a Desha-bhasha in Narada-Smriti, as Dr. Tulpule writes in the An Old Marathi Reader, "Marathi can be rightly described as a re-oriented form of its immediate predecessor viz. Apabhramsa, with a number of borrowed Sanskritisms. . . This linguistic change must have synchronized with the revival of the Vedic religion at the hands of Shankaracharya" in the ninth century.

The Mahanubhava sect founded by Chakradhar, a Gujarati princely Brahmin, in 1267 A.D., had its holy books written in cryptic scripts (Sagala, Sundari), in prose and deal with Krishna bhakti or the devotion to Dattatreya, the three-headed god, combing Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in one, followed by four dogs (the four Vedas). This was a sect which deliberately flouted the upper caste monopoly of Sanskritic learning. In Mhai-Bhata's Lila Charitra (1286 A.D.) or in the first Marathi poetess Mahadaisa's Dhavale songs, one finds this script of revolt.

The other important devotional sect was Varakari Panth. It was a combination of the Natha Panth of Gorakhnath and the Yoga practises of the Siddhas, combining the worship of God in the form of Vitthala or Vithoba, a form of Vishnu, whose main shrine is in Pandharpur. Around this god, both Aryan and Dravidian, Vaishnava and Shaiva forms of worship centred many important saint-poets beginning with Jnanadeva or Jnaneshwara (1271-93), who composed a remarkable classic in verse Jnaneshwari, a comentary on Gita in 9000 stanzas, composed at the age of nineteen. He proclaimed the equality of man in the eyes of God and openly revoked against caste tyranny and orthodoxy. He was ostrasized and had to suffer selfimmolation as its punishment. His Amritanubhava is another remarkable philosophical treatise. Namdev (1270-1350) was another great saint-poet, tailor by caste, who composed poems in Marathi, Hindi and Punjabi (61 of his padas are found in Adi Granth, the Sikh scripture). In this first wave of Bhakti poetry, there were Visoba Khechar, a grocer; Janabai, a maid-servant; Savanta, a gardener; Goroba, a potter; Chokha, a sweeper; Kanhopatra, a dancing girl; Narhari, a goldsmith. This wave also attracted Muslims: Shaha Muntoji Brahmani alias Mrintunjaya, who wrote Siddhasanketa Prabandh, Anubhavasara and many Abhangas in the fifteenth century.

Medieval Literature

From 1350 to 1550 A.D. it was a dark period, as wars and famine disturbed the people. After the great saint-poets like Eknath (1548-99) and Tukarama (1588-1649), a number of Pandit poets followed. Eknath wrote his Bhavartha Ramayana in 20,000 ovin stanzas. Tukarama preached on egalitarian society, and criticized, like Kabir, the false paradars under the name of spiritualism. Tukarama said-

> Let them bark, why imitate them
>
> the real devotees should not believe the bad-men
>
> with all your might, expose these villains
>
> Tuka says there is no sin, in beating up these dupes.

Mukteshwara (1608-60) translated Mahabharata, Vamana Pandita (1615-78), Raghunath Pandita (C-1650), Shridhar (1678-1728) and Mayur Pandita or Moropanta (1729-94) were the well-known scholar poets, who were well-versed in Sanskrit and mostly verified the epics, on the classical lines. Now Marathi language was highly Sanskritized and became restricted to the Brahmanic elite class. Samartha Ramdas Swami (1608-82), with his Dasbodh, introduced a more virile and forthright note and his poetry reached to the rustics by its rhetoric.

Marathi poetry and historical prose became more secular, realistic and reached the masses, with the compositions of Shahirs (folk-poets) who wrote ballads called powadas and amorous songs called Lavanis (used in the folk-dances and folk-plays called Tamasha). The first famous powada were by Agnidas and Tulsidasa mostly based on Shivaji's exploits. Honaji Bala, Prabhakar, Sagonbhau, Parashuram and others wrote haunting songs on earthly love. Bakhar's were the historical records in prose, which were written, beginning from 1697 to Sabhaasad.

Modern Poetry

From the profound heights of Jnaneshwar and theocentric poetry of Bhakti movement, poetry became regiocentric and fell to level of hagiography in Shivaji and Peshwa period. It became homo-centric and more secular in the later 19th century renaissance. Poetry passed through didactic, nationalist, romantic, revolutionary and disillusioned existentialist phases. To exemplify Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Sane Guruji; Govind and Vinayak were the early revolutionary and patriotic poets. 'Balkavi' (T.B. Thombre 1890-1918), Narayan Murlidhar Gupte alias Bee's (1872-1947), Ram Ganesh Gadkari (1885-1919), Bhaskar Ramchandra Tambe (1874-1941) and Madhav Tryambak Patwardhan alias Madhav Julian were good exponents of romantic resurgence. The older idealism and sentimentalism was lampooned by Prahlad Keshav Atre (1898-1968) by his collection of parodies Jhenduchi Phulen in 1925. Real modern spirit was ushered by Keshavasut (1866-1905) who heralded a new dawn by his single posthumously published collection.

Keshavasut (1866-1905), th poetic name of Krishnaji Keshav Damle, was the pioneer of modern poerty. He wrote poems on 'A worker forced to starve' in 1889, and 'The first Question of an untouchable Boy in 1888. He wrote in his 'New Soldier'-

> Who dares bind me!
>
> I am neither a Brahmin, nor a Hindu, nor of any sect, -
>
> The fallen circumscribe the universal.
>
> Insatiable my hungers
>
> No crumbs will do.
>
> I am not a frog in the well.

B.S. Mardhekar, the other great pioneer of modernism (1907-1956 wrote these lines after Gandhi's martyrdom in 1948:

> May blast (was the mad hope)
>
> the pious terminus of sky
>
> or there may be terrific cracks
>
> to the half-body of the Earth.
>
> But nothing happened only
>
> innumerabie elegiac words arose
>
> Two minutes' rotten silence.
>
> Quivered and closed on respectables!
>
> —So said January
>
> While going back to February
>
> The Christian year marched
>
> with measured steps and passed:
>
> Let many years pass
>
> Let the future Mahatma come
>
> Let us introspect again
>
> Removing from our eyes spectacles!

P.S. Rege, another most significant poet wrote almost 'Koans' in verse, for example:

> One word is more than two lips
>
> Two lips than four steps
>
> Watching all this at distance
>
> and suffering.

Blank Verse

The pioneer of blank verse Atmaram Raoji Deshpande 'Anil', the progressive poet Saratchandra Muktibodh, the lyricist B.B. Borkar passed away during last three years. Amongst the living the older generation has Yashwant and Kusumagraj, the nationalist poets; Indira Sant, the poetess of tender feelings, the trio who ushered fresh air into poetry: Vinda Karandikar, Mangesh Padgaonkar and Vasant Bapat. While the iconoclats like Dilip Chitre 'Grace' and Amrun Kolatkar experimented with new frontiers of poetic imagery, the angry 'Dalit' poets like Namdev Dhasal, Daya Pawar and Kesav Meshram trailed a new path and exposed the sham in middle class hypocritic society and raised much storm of controversy. Thus Marathi poetry passed through all the shades and hues of the spectrum, which is natural, in a fast-changing society and various levels of readership response. Religious or mystic poetry is conspicuously absent. 'Howl' is the hell raiser's lingo fairy .

Fiction and Drama

The first Marathi novel was Baba Padmanji, a Christian writer's Yamuna-Paryatan written in 1857. The next most important name was of the Scott of Marathi Hari Narayan Apte (1864-1919). Vaman Malhar Joshi (1882-1943), the father of reflectve novel, was followed by many who used this genre for social reform and moral discussion, prominent among them were S.V. Kekkar, P.L. Deshpande, V.S. Khandekar (1898-1976), Saneguruji (1899-1950), G.T. Madkholkar and others. But N.S. Phadke mostly wrote novels as 'roman' and there were several popular practitioners of this art. Malti Bedekar (Vibhavare Shirurkar) was the first feminist, to be followed by Gita Sane and a host of others. Modernist trend was set by Bhalchandra Nemade's Kosla in the sixtees and S.N. Pendse or G.N. Dandekar's earlier social realistic documentaries receded. There is plethora of biographical novels in Marathi, and a revival of the historical and mythological novels is also popular. Shivaji's times, Mahabharata, lives of great political and social revolutionaries are all a favourite fare.

Marathi people are great dramalovers. Tamil dramatic form like Kuravanji exercised a deep infiuence on early Marathi mythological plays. The first play was V.A. Bhave's Sita Swayamvar in 1841. Later Kirioskar (1843-85) and G.B. Deval (1854-19l6) brought a romantic aroma and social content. But Krishnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar (1872 1948) with his banned play Kichaka-Vadh (1910) set the trend of political playwriting. Ram Ganesh Gadkari's plays were a rage on the stage, with Balgandharva's acting, for their masterly dialogues and poetic use of language. D.V. alias Mama Warerkar (1883 1964) and Prahlad Keshav Atre were the dominating figures till the fiftees. They were replaced by P.L. Deshpande and Vijay Tendulkar, who exposed social 'double talk double think' in a masterly manner.

Almost all novelist wrote short stories. New short story was ushered by five pioneers in the fiftees: Gangadhar Gadgil, Aravind Gokhale, Vyankatesh Madgulkar, P.B. Bhave and 'Shantaram' (K.J. Purohit). After these psychoanalytical and realistic writers G.A. Kulkarni carried the genre to its archaic and premordial form.

Other fields of prose were richly contributed to by discursive and polimical writings of great nationalist leaders and editors, social reformers and encyclopedists, literary critics and scholars like-Krishna Shastri and Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar (1850-82), Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856-1895), Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1907), Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915), Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak(1856-1920), S.M. Paranjape (1864-1929), Jotiba Phule (1827-89), Dr Bhimrao R. Ambedkar (1891 -1956) and Dr R.G. Bhandarkar (1837-1925). This galaxy of scholars at the turn of the century was followed by a different generation consisting of Vinoba Bhave, N.C. Kelkar, Dharmanand Kosambi, G.S. Sardesai, S.V. Kekkar, G.S. Ghurye, Kaka Kalelkar, Senapati Bapat, N.V. Gadgil; Chitrava Shastri, N.R. Phatak, S.K. Kshirasagar, K.P. Kulkarni, Prabhakar Padhye, Kusumavati Deshpande, Iravati Karve and so on, who are no more.

"Beehive of Workers"

Amongst the living scholars Tarkatirth Laxmanshastri Joshi, the editor of Marathi Encyclopedia; Durga Bhagwat who translated Jatakas and Tagore; Jayant Narlikar, the physicist; Ashok Kelkar, the linguist, Surendra Barlinge, the philosopher; R.B. Patankar, aesthetician; Sharad Patil, Marxist-sociologist; G .V. Tagore, thetranslator of Puranas, S.B. Varnekar, the Sanskritist, V.V. Mirashi, the historian are some of the names which one remembers with respect. Now is the age of specialization and no doubt Maharashtra, which Gandhiji called "a beehive of workers" has the eighty-year old Achyut Patwardhan and S.M. Joshi, the selfless philanthropists, like Baba Amte and nonegerian S.A. Dange to be proud of. In the field of performing arts and visual-arts, one has great names to reckon from Kumar Gandharva, N.S. Bendre to Lata and Smita. They have crossed the barriers of language and region.

The End

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