

Chapter 1

Marathi Dalit Theatre: A Challenge to Upper Caste Hegemony

1.0 Introduction

The association between the caste system and theatre in India appears to be in existence since its origin as noted in Bharata's *Natyashastra*. It locates the origin of theatre in an attempt to refine the behaviour of *shudras* as their behaviour was considered to be immoral.¹ The bond between the caste system and theatre in India is evident in *An Introduction to Bharata's Natyashastra*, written by Adya Rangacharya (2005), an Indian theatre critic. According to her, since *shudras* were not allowed to have access to Vedic teachings, their lives were full of impurities. Therefore, she believes that according to the order from the gods, Brahma and Indra, Bharatamuni, a sage belonging to the first century A. D., came up with *Natyashastra* which is also known as *Natyaveda*. Rangacharya cites the conversation between the gods, Brahma and Indra from *Natyashashtra* that substantiates her view about the mythological origin of Indian theatre:

If people took to bad ways, it meant that they
were neglecting or ignoring Vedas, the sacred
lore in which was contained all knowledge.
But Indra explained that it was not so; of
course, the Vedas were there benefited by
them, But, unfortunately, the sudras were
prohibited from learning, nay even from
listening to the Vedas (I,12). In the
circumstances, the remedy lay in creating

¹ Rangacharya, Adya. *Introduction to Bharata's Natyashashtra*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2011, p.4-5.

another, a fifth Veda which would be
accessible to all the four castes. (I,12).²

Superficially, the introduction of theatre to all the four castes seems to be an attempt to democratize learning. However, it looks like an attempt to dispossess *shudras* of their theatrical traditions by calling those traditions as immoral acts and project the Brahminical idea of theatre as just and morally acceptable. As a response to this version of the origin of theatre in India, Dalits, formerly untouchable castes, appear to locate the origin of theatre in the performances of Asvaghosha, a Buddhist, belonging to the first century ACE because in comparison to Bharatamuni, Asvaghosha appears to be promoting equality and through his performances challenging the prevalent social discrimination.³

1.1. Establishment of Upper Castes Hegemony in Marathi Theatre

The denigration of theatre of the *sthudras* is noticed in the case of the origin of Marathi theatre which is noted by Meera Kosambi (Kosambi, 2015) a Marathi scholar, in the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) by Vishnudas Bhave (1819-1901). She is of the opinion that *Seetaswayamwar* is modeled on *yakshagana*, a folk performance from the present-day northern Karnataka. According to her, it was done so as to comply with the order from the ruler of the Sangli royal court, Chintamanirao Patwardhan. She gives an account of what could be the ruler's reason to pass an order to Bhave to prepare a performance suitable for the royal court.

⁴ She describes that once Chintamanrao Patwardhan went to watch a *Bhagwatmela*, a kind of

² Rangacharya, Adya. *Introduction to Bharata's Natyashashtra*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2011, p.4-5.

³ Kasbe, Raosaheb. *Deshiwad: Samaj ani Sahitya*. Mumbai: Lokwangmaya Griha, 2016, p-313.

⁴ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p-38-39.

fair and after watching a performance of *yakshagana*, he ordered Bhawe, a poet in the court, to produce something similar but with refinements to suit the decorum of the court.

Although Kosambi raises the issue of refinement of *yakshagana* as a Brahminical need, she seems to be subtle as far as her views about a Brahminical perception of theatre is concerned. This is because she does not mention why the ruler of Sangli royal court did not find *yakshagana* suitable for the people in the court. On the other hand, Tara Bhawalkar (Bhawalkar,1988), a Marathi theatre critic, appears to be clear in the analysis of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) as an example of the Brahminical domination over the folk performance like *yakshagana*.

In an essay, '*Karnatakatil Yakshagan ani Marathi Natak*' Bhawalkar has noticed that the ruler of the Sangli court, Chintamanirao Patwardhan did not like the 'horrible and rough' performance of *yakshagana*; therefore, he ordered Vishnudas Bhawe to compose a similar performance with refinements to suit the court, which was mainly attended by people who were Brahmins by caste.⁵ According to her, the idea of refinement in case of the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) is an outcome of a Brahminical perception of *yakshagana*. For her, the use of words like 'horrible and rough' by the ruler to denote *yakshagana* appears to be a Brahminical attitude towards bodily movements and language of performers who mainly belonged to the *shudras* by caste.⁶ She further states that it was an attempt by the ruler of the Sangli court to mould *yakshagana* in such a manner that would suit an aesthetic taste that was Brahminical

⁵ Bhawalkar, Tara. *Yakshagana ani Marathi Natya-Parampara*. Hyderabad: Marathi Sahitya Parishad, 1980, p.33.

⁶ Bhawalkar, Tara. *Yakshagana ani Marathi Natya-Parampara*. Hyderabad: Marathi Sahitya Parishad, 1980, p.33.

Apart from Bhawalkar's analysis of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) as a Brahminical perspective of theatre, Shanta Gokhale (Gokhale, 2000) a Marathi theatre critic, has also pointed out how *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) came into existence as an attempt to exert Brahminical domination over the folk performances, like *yakshagana* and *tamasha* which were performed by *shudras* and untouchable castes respectively. Moreover, she seems to differ from Bhawalkar as Gokhale pays attention to a threat, posed by a folk performance like *tamasha* to the Brahminical hegemony which appears to be ignored by Bhawalkar in her analysis of the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843).⁷

As *tamasha* was performed by untouchable castes, from Gokhale's point of view, it was immoral and impure by upper castes' standards. According to her, the denigration of *tamasha* as an immoral and impure act lies in the caste identity of performers. She is of the opinion that in those days whatever was produced by untouchable castes would be reckoned as immoral and impure by upper castes. According to Gokhale, in spite of its denigration as an impure act, it was performed in the royal court during the Peshwa regime and it would have Brahmin singers, especially *shahirs* (singers). Gokhale further states that the mingling of these castes in *tamasha* performances and its presence in the royal court might have posed a serious challenge to the prevalent Brahminical hegemony, and therefore *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) might have been introduced to replace *tamasha*.⁸

In accordance with Shanta Gokhale, Makrandha Sathe, a Marathi drama critic, has also recognized a challenge, posed by *tamasha* performances, to Brahminical domination. When it

⁷ Gokhale, Shanta. *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2000, p-6.

⁸ Bhawalkar, Tara. *Yakshagana ani Marathi Natya-Parampara*. Hyderabad: Marathi Sahitya Parishad, 1980, p.33.

comes to the representation of myths in *yakshagana*, he differs from Gokhale as he relates it to a response or a challenge, posed by Christian missionaries to Brahminical hegemony. He brings in the element of Christian religious conversions into the discourse of the selection of *yakshagana* as a model for refined performance.

Makrandha Sathe is of the opinion that the selection of *yakshagana* might be an attempt to persuade upper castes away from religious conversions to Christianity by reminding them of a glorious Brahminical past, represented in *yakshagana* through mythological stories from the epic, *Ramayana*. He says that the decision to produce *Seetaswayamwar* aims at orienting the people, especially the upper castes, about Hindu mythology so that they would feel proud of their religious traditions and as a result they would not convert to Christianity. Thus, according to Sathe, the selection of *yakshagana* is an attempt, made by Chintamanirao Patwardhan to protect the values and religious beliefs of his own caste and ruling classes.⁹

In the analysis of the threat, posed by Christian missionaries, Sathe is indistinct in his approach towards the impact of religious conversions on caste hierarchy as he only mentions that it affects brahminical values and beliefs but does not explain how it disturbs the caste hierarchy and brahminical hegemony. On the contrary, C. S. Adcock (2014), in essay '*Debating Conversion, Silencing Caste: The Limited Scope of Religious Freedom*' has pointed out why the opposition to religious conversions in colonial India was made by upper castes.

According to Adcock, religious conversions, especially conversions to Christianity, were reckoned by upper castes to be a threat to the hierarchy of the *varna* system.¹⁰ Adcock says

⁹ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, p-23-24.

¹⁰ Adcock, C.K. "Debating Conversion, Silencing Castes: The Limited Scope of Religious Freedom". *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 29, Issue No- 03, 2014, p-368.

that religious conversions were considered to be a threat to the Hindu social structure, when a person from a high caste would convert to another religion, especially Christianity, and not a person from untouchable castes. Adcock believes that as untouchable castes are placed outside the *varna* system in the caste hierarchy, it seems that religious conversions of formerly untouchables were not thought to be a challenge to the *varna* system.

Thus, from Adcock's point of view, the opposition to religious conversions in colonial India was an effort to maintain the *varna* system in general and the caste system in particular. Hence, even if one takes Sathe's argument about religious conversions into consideration, it seems that the opposition to religious conversion through the production of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) was an attempt to not only protect the Brahminical values but actually the *varna* system in which Brahminical hegemony is located and maintained.

Though the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) was patronized to maintain the Brahminical hegemony through an adaptation of *yakshagana*, Vishnudas Bhave was disliked by the orthodox Brahmins in the court who saw the performance as a blasphemous act.¹¹ Orthodox Brahmins in the court opposed the idea of impersonation of gods by people working in the kitchen. The ruler had to intervene and appease them by citing a *shloka* from scripture justifying the impersonation of gods in *Seetaswayamwar* (1843).¹² The opposition might have been caused by the threat to the position of orthodox Brahmins as *bhudeo* (gods on the earth).

Probably due to the criticism of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) by the orthodox Brahmins in the Sangli royal court, Vishnudas Bhave assigned the characters of gods to Brahmins and the

¹¹ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol-01, p-23-24.

¹² Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol-01, p-23-24.

remaining characters to actors belonging to the *khatari* caste when he performed *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) in Mumbai in 1853.¹³ As far as the performance in Mumbai is concerned, he might have got Brahmin actors because in Mumbai, in the 1850s, theatre was commercialized by Parsis and legitimized by the British Governor in Mumbai by attending theatrical performances of English plays.¹⁴ Thus, in terms of both the performances of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) in Sangli and Mumbai, it appears that the assignment of roles of characters is also governed by the caste identity of performers in order to maintain the Brahminical hegemony.

Apart from the selection of subject matter for the performance and actors according to their caste identity, the difference of caste identity of spectators might have equally contributed to the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) as a performance, justifying the Brahminical supremacy in the caste hierarchy. Anant Deshmukh, a Marathi theatre scholar, has emphasized the role of spectators in shaping *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) as a Brahminical performance. He locates it in Bhave's departure from Mumbai in spite of a great commercial success in Mumbai. According to Deshmukh, the commercialization and legitimization of theatre by Parsis and British officers perhaps could not have held Vishnudas Bhave in Mumbai.¹⁵

It may be because Bhave does not seem to have received the response from spectators in Mumbai which he might have expected. He was perhaps looking for a Brahminical appreciation of performance and not just means of entertainment as was expected by spectators

¹³ Bhawalkar, Tara. *Yakshagana ani Marathi Natya-Parampara*. Hyderabad: Marathi Sahitya Parishad, 1980, p.38.

¹⁴ Deshmukh, Anant. *Natya-Vichar*. Pune: Nihara Prakashan, 1988, p-32-35.

¹⁵ Deshmukh, Anant. *Natya-Vichar*. Pune: Nihara Prakashan, 1988, p-32-35.

in Mumbai. Therefore, he might have toured towns like Pune, Satara and Kolhapur which were, in comparison of Mumbai, culturally ruled by Brahmins.¹⁶

Thus, it looks like the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) is an effort by Chintamanirao Patwardhan, the ruler of Sangli court and Vishnudas Bhave to Brahminize a folk performance like *yakshagana*, which was once performed by the *shudras* only. It might have done so in order to culturally disarm the *shudra* and untouchable castes so that these castes could have no means to protest against brahminical hegemony. Even the assignment of roles of characters was also governed by one's caste identity as found in case of performances in Sangli and Mumbai. Though Bhave enjoyed commercial success in Mumbai, he left the city because he did not get the support of spectators that he wanted. He was looking for the support of a Brahminical hegemony which would add to commercial success.

1.2 Western Education and the Maintenance of Upper Caste Hegemony

Mythological performances like *Seetaswayamwar* (1843) continued till the establishment of colleges and universities in colonial Maharashtra. The introduction of English education in colleges and universities in Maharashtra compelled the newly educated high castes, especially Brahmins, to compare and contrast mythological performances with English and Sanskrit plays, taught in the colleges and universities.¹⁶ This academic encounter with the English plays in the class might have made the newly educated Brahmins question the mythological performances at the level of the content of English plays. Meera Kosambi (2015) has illustrated this point by referring to the search for self-identity by the newly educated class:

¹⁶ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p-61.

The young English educated class with modern taste
was now controlled by a lacuna of its own living
theatre tradition and drama of literary excellence to
compare with its recently imbibed Western counterpart.¹⁷

Kosambi is of the opinion that after the defeat of the Peshwa regime at the hands of the British in 1818, high caste people felt defeated by the English language, English literature and modern western thought. Apart from this feeling of defeat, according to her, at the same time, they got attracted towards these thoughts through English education, introduced by the British in the early 1850s by establishing colleges and universities. She states that this attraction might have been caused by western thought exposing the backwardness of Marathi theatre and economic gains attached to English education. The mixed feelings about British education might have caused a hybrid socio-political identity of high castes, chiefly Brahmins, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The concerned hybrid identity may be located in the works of Marathi dramatists in the second half of the nineteenth century. It might have been caused because of the revival of Sanskritic traditions, to assert cultural nationalism, and borrowing of English plays through adaptations. It could have been done so to instill self-respect among Marathi spectators and earn funding from the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee, originally intended during the Peshwa regime for honouring learned Brahmins.

The depiction of hybrid identity is substantiated in the case of Marathi dramatists like M. B. Chitale and Bhatta Narayan who made use of both Marathi as well as English language in

¹⁷ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p-61.

plays, *Manorama* (1871) and *Veni-samhara* (1881). A preface to *Manorama* (1871) was written in English, whereas Bhatt Narayan wrote an epilogue in English to a play, *Veni-samhara* (1881) which was recited by a student when the play was performed in Deccan College, Pune.¹⁸

In spite of the changed identity of high castes, especially of Brahmins, due to the introduction of liberal thought through English education, brahminical hegemony continued through the performances of Sanskrit plays, translated in Marathi and English, and adaptations of English plays. Marathi dramatists chose Sanskrit plays endorsing brahminical hegemony because translation and performance of Sanskrit plays was funded by the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee in which people by Brahmin caste were dominant.¹⁹ There was a post of a ‘reviser’ who had an undisputed right to either reject or accept literary works for financial award and it was generally held by a Brahmin. For instance, when Marathi plays *Manohara* (1871) and *Veni-samhara* (1871) were awarded financial awards, Krishnashastry Chiplunkar (1824-1878), a Brahmin, was a ‘reviser/secretary’ of the committee.

In the case of adaptations of English plays, Brahminical dominance seems to exist in the caste identity of spectators. As English plays were adapted to Marathi for performances, it was quite obvious that those who had access to the English language and literature would come to watch plays. It was Brahmins who had initial access to English language and literature, therefore most of the spectators of English adaptations were Brahmins by caste.²⁰ It is one of the main differences between spectators of Parsi theatre in Mumbai and Marathi theatre in the second

¹⁸ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p-62

¹⁹ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, pp-65-66.

²⁰ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol-01, p.39.

half of the nineteenth century, brought out by Makrandh Sathe (Sathe, 2015). He says that spectators of Parsi theatre in Mumbai were cosmopolitan as far as their socio-political identity is concerned, whereas spectators of Marathi theatre were from upper strata and castes, and socio-politically cohesive.²¹ By socio-politically cohesive, he seems to refer to spectators who were Brahmin by caste.

Since spectators of Marathi theatre belonged to the high castes, especially Brahmins, the adaptations of English plays might have been made in order to suit the aesthetic taste of the high caste spectators. It is manifested in *Tara* (1877), written by V. M. Mahajani, which is a Marathi adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1610). It was performed with Tara, a lead character, with pierced nose and in sari like a Brahmin woman, speaking the language suitable to the high caste spectators.²² Thus, the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee and the caste identity of spectator made Marathi dramatists perpetuate brahminical hegemony through translation of Sanskrit plays and adaptation of English plays.

Patronizing Marathi theatre by the British and the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee appears to have influenced the caste identity of actors. As mentioned in case of the performance of *Seetaswamywar* (1843) by Vishnudas Bhave, mythological performances had actors from low castes and they were disregarded by terming performance as a *sudra* act. Though, they were performing in the royal court, they did not get respect from high castes, especially Brahmins. It is observed in relation to the performance of *Seetaswamywar* (1843) in the Sangli royal court. In Sangli, Vishnudas Bhave had to face anger of the orthodox Brahmins for performing in the

²¹ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol-01, p.42.

²² Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p.68.

court and assigning the roles of Gods to people working in the royal kitchen. The following quote substantiates how Bhave and his company were treated at the royal court of Sangli:

The Brahmins at the court revolted, calling for
a boycott of Bhave's troupe of performers on the
pretext that it was against the dharma to don
theatrical costumes. The Raja responded by
having a Brahmin to recite passages in *shastras*
which proved otherwise. The disapproving
Brahmins were silenced but Bhave's troupe,
comprising Brahmins from the Raja's kitchens,
became the object of open scorn.²³

Because of the severe criticism from the orthodox Brahmins in the court, Bhave had to choose Brahmins as actors representing gods and actors from other castes representing human beings. Though, Brahmins would act in Marathi performances before the introduction of English education in India, they were not respected for their work. It may be because they would be performing not to assert their superior position in the caste hierarchy but might be out of their economic status as poor Brahmins.

It seems that as a result of the recognition of theatrical performance by the British through English education and financial awards to theatrical performances by the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee might have made the high castes to change their perception of theatre as a *shudra* act and take part in performances as actors. It might have happened because of the translation of Sanskrit plays and their performance to revive Sanskrit traditions to counter the supremacy

²³ Gokhale, Shanta. *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2000, p.6.

of English plays. Sanskrit plays (translated in Marathi), especially written by Kalidas, were translated and enacted. It was Sanskrit tradition and its association with Kalidas, a celebrated poet among high castes that made actors belonging to high castes to feel proud of their performance which was once disregarded by them as a *shudra* act.²⁴ Brahmin actors taking part in Marathi performances is observed in the case of these plays: *Veni-samhara* and *Manorama* by Batta Narayan and M. B. Chitale respectively. For instance, Krishnashastry Chiplunkar, who was a Brahmin by caste and ‘reviser or secretary’ of the Dakshina Prize Committee, had performed the prologue to *Veni-samhara* when the play was performed in Deccan College, Pune.

In this way, the search for self-identity by the high castes, chiefly Brahmins, not only changed the high caste perception of theatre as a shudra act but perceived it as an opportunity for them to revive Sanskritic traditions to maintain their superior position in the caste hierarchy and earn money through performances of Sanskrit plays, translated in Marathi and the adaptations of English plays.

1.3 Location of Upper Caste Hegemony in Marathi History Plays

Though translation of Sanskrit plays and adaptation of English plays maintained Brahminical hegemony, they failed to pose a response to the perception of Peshwa history by British scholars like Grant Duff (1789-1858), a Scottish historian. He perceived Peshawa history with prejudiced mind and presented it as one-sided from a Eurocentric perspective to subjugate the attempt to revive the glorious history recorded in Marathi historical documents like *Peshawedaftar* (records of Peshwa administration), *bakahars* etc.²⁵

²⁴ Deshpande, V. B. *Marathi Natak ani Rangbhoomi: Pahile Shatak*. Pune: Venus Parakashan, 1988, p.16-17.

²⁵ Deshmukh, Anant. *Natya-Vichar*. Pune: Nihara Prakashan, 1988, p.40.

In order to disregard Maratha, he calls it the history of robbers rather than the history of great Maratha warriors as recorded in aforesaid historical documents. The prejudiced perception of Peshwa history is substantiated by Anant Deshmukh (Deshmukh, 1988) in the following statement:

Maratha history was not written systematically.

It was expected to write Maratha history by using

bakhari, Peshawedaftar and some biographical

records of historical figures. The British

administration assigned this work to Grant Duff.

As he was not free from prejudiced attitude

towards Maratha history, his partisan recording

of Maratha history resulted into one-sided account

of Maratha history.²⁶

This perception of Peshwa history made high caste Marathi dramatists turn to historical plays along with translations of Sanskrit plays and adaptations of English plays in the second half of the nineteenth century. Makrandh Sathe (2015) sees it as a response to the biased understanding of Peshwa history. According to him, the response given to the biased understanding of Marathi history is perhaps an example of cultural nationalism. Though he does not illustrate what he means by cultural nationalism, he is hinting towards the appropriation of Peshwa history by high castes, especially Brahmins, to assert their identity against the foreign invaders, particularly the British.²⁷

²⁶ Deshmukh, Anant. *Natya-Vichar*. Pune: Nihara Prakashan, 1988, p.40.

²⁷ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol-01, pp.44-46.

The aforesaid cultural nationalism seems to be located in the performance of *Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe* (1861), a history play written by V. J. Kirtane, a student of Elphinstone College in Bombay. Since the play not only makes a comparison between the reign of Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe, a Peshwa King and the prevalent kings, enslaved by the British but it persuades the audience to understand how they were being politically slaved by the British. It is also an attempt to awaken the audience politically and culturally by reminding them of a glorious episode in history through this play. It is clearly observed in the address of *Sutradhar* (narrator), one of the features of Marathi theatre who makes the comparison between the present in the form of enslaved kings and the past through the reign of Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe, a Chitpawan Brahmin. The *sutradhar* says:

Listen, O audience, I will tell you, O clown,
you also listen too. I will take them all to the
Maratha court to show them around. If you were
to ask me whose court, no, not the present ones,
why should I take them to a place where orders
of foreign islanders are followed, where the kings are
only the caged parrots and do not recognize the
shadows of their own authority? I will take them
to the court of Thorle Shreemant Madhavrao Peshawe
who treated his subjects like his children, whose name
sent a shiver down the spines of Muslims, and whose
death turned the whole Maharashtra sad and colourless
and show them the miracle.²⁸

²⁸ V. J. Kirtane. *Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe*. Pune: Vaman Narahar Kirtane, 1927, p-4-5.

After the success of the play, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe* (1861), Marathi theatre concentrated on history plays to influence the prevalent political condition. Especially plays were written to express disgust against the foreign invaders to awaken the high caste audience politically. Plays like *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* (1870) by V. S. Chhatrey was based on the life of the younger brother of Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe.

The play, *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* (1870), was about the internal disputes in the royal family as a result of that dispute, Narayanrao Peshwe got killed at the hands of his uncle, Raghunatrao Peshwe. *Narayanrao Peshwe Yanche Natak* (1870) might have been composed to remind the audience of internal clashes as one of the reasons behind the fall of the Peshwa regime. It also seems to be a message to high caste spectators to forget internal disputes and unite against the foreign invaders, the British.

On the other hand, the play, *Afzalkhanach Mrityu* (1871) by K.S. Ghate, portrays the encounter between Chhatrapati Shivaji, a Maratha King and Afzal Khan, a Muslim knight in the Adilshahi Court. The play is presented in such a manner that it looks like an attempt to spread communal hatred because these two historical figures are presented as if they are representing their religions rather than their political positions.²⁹

The representation of Maratha/Peshwa history in the above-mentioned plays was useful for the high castes, especially Brahmins because it justified brahminical hegemony located in the history of the Peshwa regime and opposition to the British in India. It may be because the history projected through these plays is the history of upper castes, mainly Brahmins. It may be substantiated by the caste identity of the rulers, mentioned in these plays except Chhatrapati

²⁹ Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema Before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015, p-80-81

Shivaji. The Peshwas were Chitpawan Brahmins by caste, whose rule is considered to be very oppressive for low castes, especially for Dalits, formerly untouchable castes. Even Chhatrapati Shivaji is represented to suit the Brahminical domination by placing him against Muslim rulers in India in the seventeenth century.

On the contrary, low castes and liberal historians seem to differ from the above-mentioned high caste perception of the history of the British rule in India, Chhatrapati Shivaji and Peshwa regime. The British administration in the nineteenth century was considered by low castes as an opportunity to liberate themselves from the oppressive caste hierarchy. It has been stated by Mukta Salve, a woman belonging to Mang caste, one of the formerly untouchable castes in Maharashtra. She, in her autobiographical essay, *Maharamanganche Dukhivishwa* (1855) has attacked brahminical hegemony, identified by her in precolonial history, especially during the Peshwa regime. Besides, attacking Brahminical hegemony, she also expects the British administration not to ignore the plight of the formerly untouchable castes. At the end of the essay, she is grateful to the British in India for allowing low castes to have education to fight against brahminical hegemony and liberate themselves from exploitation at the hands of high castes.³⁰

The high castes' perception of Chhatrapati Shivaji as an enemy of Muslims and the protector of Brahminical hegemony, expressed through Marathi plays like *Afzalkhanacha Mrityu* (1871), has been negated by Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) in his *pavada* (Ballad) on Shivaji, published in 1969. In the *pavada*, he projects Chhatrapati Shivaji as a leader of the low castes in Maharashtra. He calls him *kulwadibhushan* (pride of tillers and cultivators) rather than a king

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<https://feminisminindia.com/2017/03/20/mukta-salve-essay/#:~:text=Mukta%20Salve%20was%20one%20of%20the%20first%20Dalits,Mangs%29%20%E2%80%99%20at%20the%20mere%20age%20of%20fourteen.>

of only Brahmins who were ministers in his court rather than warriors. He says that it is the low castes who have assisted Chhatrapati Shivaji to establish the Maratha kingdom. By associating the rule of Chhatrapati Shivaji, Phule makes low castes proud of themselves as martial castes rather than passive followers of brahminical orders. Phule's perception of Chhatrapati Shivaji as a king of the low castes has been explained by Rosalind O'Hanlon (O'Hanlon, 2016) when she says:

It (Phule's *pavada* on Shivaji) presented him
(Chhatrapati Shivaji) as the leader of Maharashtra's
lower castes, ascribed his achievements to the strength
and skill of Shudra and ati-Shudra armies, rather
than to his Brahman ministers.³¹

By ascribing the achievement of Chhatrapati Shivaji to lower castes and terming him the protector of tillers and cultivators, Phule also challenges brahminical representation of Chhatrapati Shivaji as the protector of Brahmins and cows (*go-Brahman pratipalak*).³² It was an attempt to take away the narrative of Chhatrapati Shivaji as a protector of brahminical hegemony and to appropriate the same to make the low castes culturally aware of their past and to have self-respect.

Apart from nineteenth century scholars like Mukta Salve and Jyotiba Phule, twentieth century liberal historians have also pointed out how the Peshwa regime was unjust to low castes, especially Dalits. For instance, Hiroshi Fukuzawa (Fukuzawa, 1968) has located the oppression of untouchable castes during the Peshwa regime in two orders, passed by the Peshwa in 1784.

³¹ O'Hanlon, Rosalind. *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016, p-166.

³² O'Hanlon, Rosalind. *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016, p.167.

According to him, the first order was passed to prohibit untouchable castes from taking *darshan* of Chokhamela³³ in Pandharpur. He says that they were prohibited in order to avoid their touch to high caste people. According to him, high castes had to pass from Chokhamela temple to reach Vitthal Temple, therefore the touch of untouchables was inevitable. In order to avoid the touch of untouchable castes, the order was passed by the Peshwa administration prohibiting untouchables to have *darshan* of Chokhamela.³⁴

As far as the second order is concerned, the huts belonging to the untouchable castes were destroyed because they were ‘too close’ to the homes of the high castes.³⁵ Untouchable castes are still living on the outskirts of towns and villages because they are considered to be impure, whose presence among high castes is prohibited. A similar situation was observed strictly during the Peshwa regime; therefore, the order could have been passed to remove the huts of untouchable castes by setting them on fire. The manner in which the order was passed and the manner in which the huts were removed suggests how untouchable castes were treated during the Peshwa regime.

Apart from the historical account of the Peshwa regime from low caste and liberal historians’ perspective, the Marathi play, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1861) also describes how low castes and Muslims were made to live within their socio-cultural limits during the Peshwa rule. Interestingly, the same play has been utilized by the prevalent high castes to revive a glorious past to counter the British version of the Peshwa history. So, its utilization seems to have been

³³ Chokhamela, a saint belonging to the Mahar caste, one of the formerly untouchable castes in Maharashtra.

³⁴ Fukuzawa, Hiroshi. “State and the Caste System (Jati) in the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Kingdom”. *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, Vol. 9, No.1, 1968, pp.42-43.

³⁵ Fukuzawa, Hiroshi. “State and the Caste System (Jati) in the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Kingdom”. *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*, Vol. 9, No.1, 1968, pp.42-43.

caused not to just respond to the prejudiced history of the Peshwas but to maintain brahminical hegemony. The exertion of brahminical hegemony can be detected in the conversation between Ramshastri and Madhav, characters in the play. In this conversation, Madhav refers to the order by the Peshwa concerning the status of Muslims and low castes saying:

Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Dhed, Muslims and others
might be of low castes, but as long as they live
within the dictates of their religion, should continue
to enjoy my compassion and shelter. Let this be
known to all.³⁶

Thus, after considering Maratha/Peshwa history as unjust and exploitative for low castes, one may say that Marathi history plays have contributed to the maintenance of brahminical hegemony rather than just a response to the biased perception of Maratha/Peshwa history by the British in India.

1.4 *Tritiya Ratna* (1855): A Challenge to Upper Caste Hegemony

As Marathi theatre was controlled by Brahminical hegemony, it remained unchallenged due to the presence of high castes, mainly Brahmins in most of the sections of theatre such as dramatists, actors, spectators and its supporters in government institutions like the Dakshina Prize Committee. In the nineteenth century Marathi theatre, there is hardly a play that has challenged brahminical hegemony except, *Tritiya Ratna* (1855) by Jyotiba Phule, a nineteenth century social reformer. The play is about how a low caste couple is economically and socially exploited by a Brahmin priest. It also questions the religious authority of Brahmins by placing

³⁶ V.J. Kirtane. *Thorle Madhavrao Peshawe*. Pune: Vaman Narahar Kirtane, 1927, p-36-37.

it against the liberal thought, introduced by English education and Christian missionaries in those days.³⁷

In the play *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), the clown functions as a link between a low caste couple and a Christian missionary when they discuss notions like God and religion. The utilization of the character of the clown seems to be a departure from the Brahminical tradition of *sutradhar* which is spotted in Marathi history plays like *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1861) in which the *sutradhar* has been assigned complete control over the actions of the play.

On the other hand, the clown in *Tritiya Ratna* (1855) functions as a modifier rather than the maker of an argument, depicted in the play. He is also a witness to the exploitation and liberation of a low caste couple at the hands of a Brahmin priest. Though, he is present throughout the play, he is not in control of actions unlike *sutradhar* who remains absent for some time, but is aware of actions on stage. The authority, enjoyed by the *sutradhar* in Marathi plays represents Brahminical domination over low castes, whereas the clown represents a social reformer, probably Jotiba Phule himself.³⁸ Thus, the play challenges the notion of brahminical hegemony through the clown who, unlike *sutradhar* in brahminically dominated Marathi plays, does not control actions in plays from a certain distance but becomes a part of it by playing the role of a character.

Though the play was written in 1855, it remained unknown till 1979 when it was published for the first time. It remained in exile due to Brahminical hegemony, present in government institutions in Colonial India like the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee. It is mentioned by

³⁷ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, pp.33-34.

³⁸ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, pp.33-34.

Rosalind O’Hanlon (Hanlon, 2016) that Phule has attempted to get the play published through The Dakshina Prize Fund Committee but it was not accepted by the committee.³⁹ According to her, Phule holds brahminical hegemony responsible for the rejection of the play as the play attempts to dismantle it through English education for low castes. She says that Brahmins in the committee might have thought the play as a danger to their superior position in the caste hierarchy, since it advocates education for low castes as a way of their liberation from caste discrimination. Thus, the only attempt in the nineteenth century Marathi theatre to question brahminical hegemony appears to have remained in exile due to the dominance of Brahmins in colonial institutions like the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee.

1.5 *Satyashodhak Jalsa*: Encountering Upper Caste Hegemony

In order to counter Brahminical authority in Marathi theatre, as mentioned by Rosalind O’Hanlon, anti-caste activists like *Satyashodhak Samaj*, founded by Jyotiba Phule in 1873, turned to folk performances like *tamasha* and *jalsa* traditions to spread the message of the liberation of low castes. Initially these forms of folk performances were used for entertainment only but the *Satyashodhak Samaj* converted these forms into vehicles for social reformation to spread the message of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*.⁴⁰ It was done so because these two traditions would be well received by low castes. People from nearby towns and villages would come to watch these performances and moreover most of the people would belong to low castes, who were the target audience of *Jalsa*. As the aim of *Satyashodhak Jalsa* was to educate low castes about caste oppression, these two forms might have chosen to counter Brahminical hegemony, maintained and developed through Sanskrit plays.

³⁹ O’Hanlon, Rosalind. *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016, pp.122-124.

⁴⁰ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Jalse*. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 2005, p.33.

Bhagwan Tahakur has explained how *Satyashodhak Jalsa* came into existence. He says that *jalsa*, is actually the combination of *nautanki*, a folk form in north India and the *sangitbari*, from the Vidharbha region in Maharashtra. Both these forms were performed by low castes for the purpose of entertaining the high castes.

The *Satyashodhak Samaj* activists combined these two forms in such a manner that it reached the low castes easily. Thakur is of the opinion that anti-caste *Satyashodhak* artists took the tunes and music from *sangitbari* and replaced songs meant for entertainment with songs containing teachings of *Satyashodhak Samaj*.⁴¹ He says that as *Jalsa* was appropriated by *Satyashodhak Samaj* to make people aware of their socio-religious oppression, it was being called *Satyashodhak Jalsa*.

The social issues, discussed by the *Satyashodhak Samaj* has caused the emergence of *Satyashodhak Jalsa* because Marathi theatre was dominated by high castes and it was not representing issues like widow remarriage, the spread of education among low castes, wickedness by Brahmin priests and untouchability, which were the prime concerns of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*.⁴² On the other hand, Marathi theatre was engrossed in promoting cultural nationalism, suitable to brahminical hegemony through Marathi history plays and revival of the Sanskrit traditions to establish self-respect, lost due to the defeat of the Peshwas by the British in 1818.⁴³

⁴¹ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Jalse*. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 2005, p.33.

⁴² Ajotikar, Raskia. "Marathi Sangeet Natak and the Affirmation of Hindu Nationalist Cultural Politics in Western India". *The World of Music*, 2021, vol.10, no.01, p.108.

⁴³ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, p.33-34.

It is not just the social issues represented by the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* performances but the techniques, employed by the *jalsa* also brings out the difference between the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* and Brahminical Marathi theatre. The difference lies in the beginning of both these different traditions of performances. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* replaces the invocation of the god, Ganapati which is used in brahminical theatre. It was done so by changing the meaning of the word, Ganapati by dividing into *gana* (the people) and *pati* (leader).⁴⁴ Thus, instead of the invocation of the god, Ganapati, *jalsa* would begin with the invocation of people and the state (leader/the British) to make them aware that Brahminical hegemony, permeated into the government administration in those days due to the government jobs, held by high castes, mainly Brahmins.

The use of mockery or farce in *Satyashodhak Jalsa* also distinguishes it from Marathi theatre dominated by the high castes. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* employed farce to ridicule brahminical customs and exploitation of peasants by money-lenders, chiefly either Brahmins or Marwaris. It continued the use of farce as an important part of performance till the 1930s. The form was suitable for attacking social customs like the caste hierarchy and exploitation of women irrespective of castes.⁴⁵ On the other hand, Marathi theatre utilized farce in 1860s to laugh at the hybrid identity of high caste, a result of a combination of English as well as Sanskrit traditions. However, it gave up farce because the newly established identity of high castes became normal after 1870s. As the Brahminical theatre was mainly dealing with placing identity in history and mythology, it became just a passive receptor of what was presented on

⁴⁴ Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, p.51.

⁴⁵ Omvedt, Gail. "The Satyashodhak Samaj and Peasant Agitation", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 3, 1973, Vol. 8, No. 44 (Nov. 3, 1973), p.1973-1974.

stage. The passive reception might have been caused by an inability to question what was presented which seems to be one of the features of brahminical hegemony.

Both, *Satyashodhak Jalsa* and the brahminically-dominated Marathi theatre are different from each other with regard to use of language as well. It is observed in *Satyanarayanachya Pujecha Farce* (1872) and *Adhyanrao Bhole Deshmukh* (1872) written and performed by Krishnarao Bhalekar in 1872. To perform these farces, instead of the language of elite brahminical Marathi theatre, he has employed the language of low castes with some words from *Marwari* and intonational patterns of Brahminical chanting. It was done so because he was ridiculing money-lenders who were mainly Marwari, and Brahmin priests who would amass wealth from uneducated low castes by making them perform various religious rituals.⁴⁶ On the other hand, plays especially translated from Sanskrit and English were meant for a specific audience, newly educated Brahmins, who would seek the justification of their supremacy in the performances. In order to satisfy their need, language (Marathi) employed in such performances was either loaded with Sanskrit words or newly coined words to function as English equivalents.

The economy of these performances was also distinct in its nature. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* was organized to educate low castes who were economically poor because of their socio-religious oppression by *shethhi and bhatji*. As a result, spectators were not charged for attending *jalsa* performances, therefore it was performed on the open ground to reach as many people as possible.

Financial support was needed to meet the daily needs of performers. It received sponsorship from Chhatrapati Shahu of Kolhapur.⁴⁷ On the contrary, the Brahminical Marathi theatre was

⁴⁶ Thakur Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Sahitya: Sthiti ani Shityantare*. Nagpur: Akanksha Prakashan, 2009, p.04-05.

⁴⁷ Rege, Sharmila. "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 16-22, 2002, Vol. 37, No. 11 (Mar. 16-22, 2002), p.1045.

performed in well-constructed theatre houses or make-shift theatre houses and spectators were charged for viewing performances. It was financially independent as it would receive money by charging for performances.

Besides, all the other differences mentioned above, the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* and Marathi theatre, dominated by Brahminical hegemony also differ in terms of how the exploitation of women is represented in both these forms of performances. The *Satyashodhak Jalsa* dealt with Brahminical customs, which would control the mobility of women, especially of young widows. One can see the mentioning of widow remarriage and tonsuring of young widows as the main themes of *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. Especially tonsuring of young Brahmin widows was one of the popular scenes in the *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. It would be presented through an emotional conversation between a young widow and her father. It can be substantiated by the following quotation from a play:

“Dear father, I am your dear and loved one,
How can you force me to shave off my
Hair...
Why don't you change your mind and
Arrange a *pat* (second) marriage for me
Instead?...”⁴⁸

According to Rege, it is not just the exploitation of Brahmin women but sexual exploitation of low caste women especially from formerly untouchable castes that was addressed in *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. As far as the Brahminical Marathi theatre is concerned, it has ignored social oppression of women and instead it has represented women either singing in the garden or becoming a *sati* which is noticed in the play, *Thorle Madhavrao Peshwe* (1861) in which

⁴⁸ Rege, Sharmila. “Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 16-22, 2002, Vol. 37, No. 11 (Mar. 16-22, 2002), p.1045.

the wife of Madhavrao Peshwa becomes a *sati*. Interestingly, it is celebrated by spectators worshipping the character performing the concerned role.

Apart from all the above differences, *Satyashodhak Jalsa* and the Brahminical Marathi theatre share a similarity. It is the absence of women actors in performances. Though exploitation of women was addressed in the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, women were absent from *jalsa* programmes as actors. Women's roles were enacted by men. The absence of women in *jalsa* performances is attributed to low caste patriarchy.⁴⁹ In accordance with *jalsa*, the Brahminical theatre also would not allow women to take part as actors, and roles of women were impersonated by men who would follow Brahmin women as models because Brahmin men would attend the performances.

Thus, the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* posed a serious challenge to brahminical domination which can be located in the scornful remarks by newspapers like *Kesari*, which were run by high castes, especially Brahmins. In those days, *Kesari* would look upon the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* as an inferior act of performance. It would call *Jalsa* performers as *tamasgir*, a derogatory word for *jalsa* actors whereas *Jalsa* performers would feel proud to call themselves as *Jalsa shikshak*⁵⁰ The scornful words in *Kesari* for *Jalsa* performers suggests how *Jalsa* had deeply penetrated into brahminical hegemony to dismantle it.

1.6 Ambedkari Jalsa and Dalit Activism

Though, *Satyashodhak Jalsa* posed a serious challenge to Brahminical hegemony, it did not survive after the fall of the *Satyashodhak Samaj* in 1930s. The fall of *Satyashodhak Samaj* was

⁴⁹ Rege, Sharmila. "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 16-22, 2002, Vol. 37, No. 11 (Mar. 16-22, 2002), p.1046.

⁵⁰ Rege, Sharmila. "Conceptualising Popular Culture: 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar. 16-22, 2002, Vol. 37, No. 11 (Mar. 16-22, 2002), p.1046.

caused by peasant castes who began to identify themselves with *Kshatriya* status and started to consider other low castes inferior to them.⁵¹ With the fall of the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, *Jalsa* ceased to exist because its existence was associated with the social reformations, carried out by the *Satyashodhak Samaj*.

Though *Satyashodhak Jalsa* ceased to exist in 1930s, it succeeded in creating a tradition of theatre challenging brahminical hegemony by representing issues like caste discrimination and liberation of women. It also paved the way for a similar kind of theatre tradition which looks like its successor. It is evident in the emergence of *Ambedkari Jalsa*, which is considered to be an extension of *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. It is substantiated by Makrandh Sathe (Sathe, 2015) who says, “*Ambedkari Jalsas* are the next stage of *Satyashodhak Jalsa*.”⁵²

The emergence of *Ambedkari Jalsa* has roots in anti-caste activism in 1930s under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956). In 1930, Dr. Ambedkar held a meeting with formerly untouchable castes and expressed the need to educate untouchable castes about caste oppression, especially untouchability. He did so because he knew that the people for whom he was working were uneducated and they could be reached through folk performances like *Jalsa*.⁵³ The youth, present in that meeting, got inspired by the thought of forming an association to spread the message, given by Ambedkar, among untouchables who were mainly uneducated. The youth under the leadership of Bhimrao Kardak, reckoned to be the first *Ambedkari Jalsa*, founded *Nashik Zilla Yuvak Sangeet Jalsa Mandal*.

⁵¹ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Sahitya: Sthiti ani Shityantare*. Nagpur: Akanksha Prakashan, 2009, p.23.

⁵² Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, p.381.

⁵³ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, p.381.

Bhimrao Kardak was aware of the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* tradition as once in his hometown, Niphad, he had experienced the performance of *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. As a result, Bhimrao Kardak and his friends decided to imitate the *Satyashodhak Jalsa* to promote Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's ideology and the eradication of untouchability.⁵⁴ They were aware of the popularity of the *jalsa* performances, conducted by *Satyashodhak Samaj* activists before 1930s. In this way, *Satyashodhak Jalsa* caused the emergence of *Ambedkari Jalsa*.

Nonetheless, both differ from each other in terms of the caste identity of performers and the purpose. *The Satyashodhak Jalsa* was performed by low castes or probably peasant castes promoting awareness among low castes about their exploitation at the hands of *shethji and bhatji*. There was hardly any performer belonging to untouchable castes in the *Satyashodhak Jalsa*. On the contrary, the *Ambedkari Jalsa* remained limited to untouchable castes as far as the caste identity of performers is concerned.⁵⁵

Another difference is noticed in the case of the beginning of these performances. The *Satyashodhak Jalsa* begins with an invocation of *gana* (people) and *pati* (the leader) that distinguished it from the brahminical performances of Marathi plays which begins with an invocation of the god, *Ganpati* for the success of performance. However, the *Ambedkari Jalsa* begins with *naman* (salute) to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. It is evident in how Bhimrao Kardak, an *Ambedkari Jalsakar* would begin with the performance *Satygrahacha Vag* (Farce):

Mangalacharan
Hey Bheemraya I touch your feet,
Please give us intellectual strength
so that we can sing in your praise
There is no other savior for us...⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Jalse*. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 2005, p.102.

⁵⁵ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Jalse*. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 2005, p.102.

⁵⁶ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.01, p.384.

In the above-mentioned citation, the word, *Bheemraya* is used for Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and instead of asking for blessing which is generally found in the Brahminical performances, *Ambedkari Jalsakar*, Bhimrao Kardak demands intellectual strength and critical thinking. The invocation of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is an attempt at his deification that leads to the decline in the popularity of *Ambedkari Jalsa* after the death of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar.⁵⁷

The difference between places where these performances would be held also separate Satyashodhak and Ambedkari Jalsa from each other. Satyashodhak Jalsa would either address issues concerning peasant castes and their oppression by Brahmin priests, therefore Jalsa performances would be held in rural areas.⁵⁸ Ambedkari Jalsa would be performed in urban areas where untouchable castes were concentrated. It is evident in the first performance of Ambedkari Jalsa. It was held in Nashik at the time of *Kalaram Mandir Satyagraha*, which was organized for the right of untouchable castes to temple entry.

Apart from the differences between *Satyashodhak* and *Ambedkari Jalsa*, there is a similarity between these two traditions of performances. It is a challenge posed by these theatrical traditions to brahminical hegemony. *Satyashodhak Jalsa* questions the exploitation of low castes and locates it in brahminical hegemony, maintained through social and economic exploitation of low castes. However, the *Ambedkari Jalsa* critiques the brahminical notions of purity and impurity which is the root cause of untouchability and caste hierarchy. The critique of untouchability is evident in an *Ambedkari Jalsa*, *Sanatani Brahmin va Asprushya Satyagrahi Samvad* in which the character of an orthodox Brahmin opposes the entry of untouchables in temples as he considers them impure.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Thakur, Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Sahitya: Sthiti ani Shityantare*. Nagpur: Akanksha Prakashan, 2009, p-24.

⁵⁸ Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, p.51.

⁵⁹ Thakur Bhagwan. *Ambedkari Sahitya: Sthiti ani Shityantare*. Nagpur: Akanksha Prakashan, 2009, p.24.

Another similarity between *Satyashodhak* and *Ambedkari Jalsa* is located in the high castes' inability to recognize these performances by allowing them to have space just like the Brahmin-dominated Marathi theatre. Both these performances did not get entry into the cultural space, enjoyed by high castes, especially by Brahmins. Hence, there is hardly any example of the recognition of either the *Satyashodhak* or *Ambedkari Jalsa* by upper castes/Brahmins except Shridhar Tilak (1886-1928) who provided the space to perform an *Ambedkari Jalsa* in front of his home, popularly known as Kesariwada in Pune. For that act, he had to face anger from his relatives who happened to be orthodox Brahmins.⁶⁰ He could have done so because he was influenced by the anti-caste movement led by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar who was the chief guest of *Sahbhajan*, organized along with the *jalsa* performance.

1.7 Marathi Dalit Theatre and the Dalit Panther Movement

Like the *Ambedkari Jalsa*, Marathi plays written by Dalit dramatists after Independence also did not get recognition from high castes. Therefore, such plays would be performed not in cities like Mumbai and Pune which were the centres of brahminical Marathi theatre, but places where Dalits, the formerly untouchable castes would gather to demonstrate against caste violence. For instance, a Marathi play, written by M. B. Chitnis, *Yugyatra* was performed on the occasion of the religious conversion of the formerly untouchable castes into Buddhism in 1956.⁶¹

Marathi Dalit plays remained outside Brahminical spaces till the rise of the Dalit Panthers, an organization of newly educated Dalit youth, who were not satisfied with the performance of the Republican Party of India, a party representing scheduled castes in Maharashtra, especially the *Mahar* caste. According to the Dalit Panthers, the Republican Party of India was not able

⁶⁰ Tilak, Jaywantrao. "Shridhar Balwant Tilak", *Shrivatsa Prakashan* Diwali Ank, Nagpur, p-48. 1989.

⁶¹ Sathe, Makrandh. *A Socio-political History of Marathi Theatre*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, vol.03, p.993.

to solve the issues of caste violence against Dalits. As a result, they formed a militant group, the Dalit Panthers in 1972 and published a manifesto mentioning the definition of the word, Dalit and the aims of the organization. The manifesto was published in a Marathi newspaper, *Navakal* which was controlled by the socialists in Mumbai.⁶²

It is not just the publication of the manifesto by a socialist newspaper but the publication of an article, *Kala Swantrayadin* (1974) by Raja Dhale, one of the panthers, that made the Dalit Panthers famous because it was reckoned to be a controversial article. The article questions the notion of freedom from Dalits' point of view because according to Dhale, Dalits are yet to get freedom from caste discrimination. The article was published with the support of a socialist magazine *Sadhana*. To publish this article in *Sadhana* periodical was an effort by socialists in Maharashtra to incorporate the Dalit Panthers in its fold.⁶³ The socialists wanted to form a strong opposition against the Congress Party and therefore they might have supported the Panthers to publish their writings in socialist periodicals.

Along with support from socialists, the Panthers received strong literary support from The Little Magazine movement in Marathi, a literary movement against the monopoly of high castes, especially Brahmin Marathi writers. Namdeo Dhasal, one of the Panthers and a Marathi poet could publish his poems in these magazines and reach out to Marathi readers irrespective of their caste identity. There were other Marathi Dalit writers and Panthers who would publish in these magazines along with Namdeo Dhasal. The literary presence of the Panthers through these little magazines changed the perception of high castes towards Marathi Dalit Writing.⁶⁴

⁶² Murugkar, Lata. *Dalit Panther Chalwal*. Pune: Sugawa Prakashan, 1995, p.76.

⁶³ Pawar, JV. *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History*. New Delhi: Marginalized, 2017, pp.45-46.

⁶⁴ Contursi, Janet A. "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (May, 1993), p.325.

It is the support from socialists and the literary presence of the Panthers through the little magazines that made non-Dalit Marathi dramatists take notice of caste discrimination as a theme in Marathi plays. Otherwise, before the rise of the Panthers, Marathi theatre was interested in addressing the life of upper castes. Though upper caste Marathi dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar and Jaywant Dalvi brought life to the brahminical Marathi theatre, they failed to represent it from Dalits' perspective. It caused the rise of Marathi Dalit dramatists to make corrections in the representation of Dalit life in non-Dalit Marathi plays.

1.8 Conclusion:

Thus, since the performance of *Seetaswayamwar* in 1843, the upper caste Marathi theatre remained out of reach for low castes, especially Dalits till the rise of the Dalit Panthers. Marathi plays like *Tritiya Ratna* (1843) by Jyotiba Phule tried to penetrate the upper caste hegemony but it was rejected by the Dakshina Prize Fund Committee, dominated by orthodox Brahmins in the nineteenth century. Even folk performances like *Satyashodhak* and *Ambedkari Jalsa* had to challenge upper caste hegemony from the margins. Therefore, the Dalit Panthers are credited for a significant contribution to Marathi Dalit theatre as it made upper caste Marathi dramatists accept caste discrimination as one of the important themes in Marathi theatre.

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