



Tools of Satire: Marathi Theatre in Colonial India

The Case of Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality

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Introduction

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial India witnessed a remarkable change in its social and political manifestations. After the Great Rebellion of 1857-8, the East India Company, until then dominating large parts of the Indian subcontinent, lost its power and the British Crown officially took over power. The collision with the British and their Raj, as the British India was also called by its contemporaries, not only created mistrust among the people and long-term resistance movements against the impact of foreign rule, it also generated an asymmetrical flow between cultural practices, ideologies, philosophies, art and literatures. This is evident in various Indian languages and Marathi is no exception. Marathi is one of the prominent modern Indian languages and the official language of the State Maharashtra. According to the Census of India 2001, it is the fourth most spoken language in India, after Hindi, Bengali and Punjabi.

Traces of satire in Marathi literature can be found in the literary works of Marathi writers as far back as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. By the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the colonial era, satire was abundantly used in the literature of Western India. Satire for these Marathi intellectuals – themselves products of the British colonial encounter – was a powerful literary mode to critique the colonial regime and the prevalent social evils of the time. The colonial influence as well as reform movements from the other parts of India rejuvenated modern Marathi literature. The ascent of an educated middle class stimulated a reformation of the literary sphere. Marathi satire from this time questioned the colonial



government and its politics and ridiculed and attacked the anglicised Marathi sections of society. It engaged with the problem of the new Marathi cultural identity and everyday lives under the overarching presence of colonialism. Although humour and satire was an integral part of Marathi literature, it struggled to establish a readership in the literary landscape overly dominated by popular nationalist newspapers.

In spite of leaving a notable mark in the Marathi literary oeuvre, satire has been neglected by literary historians and critics, thus presenting a challenge to give Marathi satire the critical attention it deserves in the realm of literature. Colonial Marathi satire not only attacked British colonial rule but also confronted the insecurities in the minds of the Marathi middle class about the rapidly changing society and hence their newly found identity. Marathi authors not only contributed highly controversial political theatre plays but also introduced legendary narrators in their novels reflecting the social and cultural transformations in the society.

About humour, it has been said that “nothing in discourse can be so many things, carry on so many meanings [...]” (Kaviraj 1995: 27). Sudipta Kaviraj explains the multifaceted function of humour with an example from Bengali literature – “Kamalakanta” written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. He defines Bankimchandra’s work as not an explicit satire, but as taking refuge in satire. “He [Bankim] made it his characteristic weapon, his way of attacking without being attacked, criticising those with whom he does not wish to enter into a dialogue. Humorous writing is in any case as unanswerable weapon [...]” (ibid.). Marathi satire under colonial power also advertises a similar philosophy and agenda to criticise without having to enter into a dialogue with its target.

Hans Harder elaborates on the difference between the satirical genres and satire as a literary mode in his article “Towards a Concept of Colonial Satire in South Asian Literatures” (Harder 2012: 165-6). He points out that there are various satirical genres such as parody, mock ode etc. but he defines satire as a “mode of expression that somewhat parasitically builds upon established genres.” He also argues that “satire is usually characterised by the deformation or dislocation (or both) of its topic or target, and therefore is in many ways an asymmetrical mode of representation.” What does that mean exactly? If a satirical text is read without contextualising it with the social and political background of its time, the reader is able to understand the literary meaning of the text but the satirical function is lost. This means that if



we look at a satirical text as a surface, then the characters and the narration are the two different dimensions of the text. One needs to identify these dimensions on the surface, dislocate them from the text and study them under the lens of the social and political events of the time. Once the social and political context is considered, the characters and narration find a new meaning and when relocated in the original text, it creates satire.

An example¹ may be given by the following scene. If we chant or sing football scores of the World Cup finals between Germany and Argentina in the form of a prayer or a hymn, it is apparent that we are ridiculing the adulation of the statistical data and inevitably, the manner of worshipping a sport that is similar to religious beliefs towards God. So what satire does here is it infers the (hidden) relationship between the sport and its fans and/or other actors and mocks them for worshipping it. People who are unaware of the World Cup and the match results are unable to comprehend the context, and therefore, are unable to grasp the satirical factor of the text. Hans Harder argues that in this process, the prayer or the hymn also does not remain untouched. These genres assert their authority by addressing God in a self-proclaimed legitimate manner. They make their relation with God exclusive. The more exclusive this relation with God gets, the more questionable becomes its formal authority. He concludes that the impact of satirically rupturing this custom and employing the authority of this genre to an unrelated context is very fierce. He takes this thought further and proposes, that such semantical erosion may eventually change the norm and thereby devalue formerly stable forms/genres, rendering them unusable for their original purpose (Harder: forthcoming).

Setting the Scene

Socio-cultural contexts played a significant role in the development of satire in the respective literary cultures. In India, British rule prevailed in different parts of the country in the nineteenth century. The year 1818 marked the defeat of the Peshwa administration and British rule officially entered Maharashtra. Missionaries started preaching Christianity and converting the local population. Brahmins, especially chitpavan Brahmins (c. Singh 2004)², who had gained immense social power under the Peshwa administration, saw these missionaries as a threat to their religion. This insecurity and immense pride in their own religion and social status led them to form a religious movement; a



development which had an influence on the expression of satire in Marathi literature as well. The evolution of Marathi literature with satirical writing as a key component was a part of the negotiation of the emerging educated middle class with the new British Raj. The themes and tools of satire changed over time from the thirteenth century saint literature, the late nineteenth century political satire and to early twentieth century social and religious satires.

Bombay University, established in 1858, was modelled on the western education system and taught the sciences, philosophy and languages like English and Sanskrit. The first generation of graduates read Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Voltaire, Charles Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Kant, Hegel, etc. Most of the young graduates focused on challenging the conservatives, changing the ruthless traditions and emancipating women. Some others blindly imitated the British and their only concern was living the western lifestyle, wearing clothes like them and consuming alcohol. While the reformers used their direct critical words to make a change in the orthodox belief systems and engaged themselves with emancipating the suppressed society from their rigid religious beliefs, the conservatives used the tool of satire to mock this rapid change in the society and the 'anglicised' new middle class. Conservatives saw this foreign invasion as a danger to Hinduism and their virtue. They considered western ideas and everything concerned with the British Raj to be evil. Satirists of this time were caught between these two worlds.

Marathi Theatre under Colonial Power

Along with other literary genres, theatre was an influential medium of self-expression. By 1880, Marathi theatre broke the barriers of being merely entertaining and theatre plays also became introspective. It is evident from their work that playwrights from this time became aware of their surroundings and started thinking about political and social issues. Political and social movements are co-dependent and stimulate one another. From 1880 onwards, Maharashtra – the present day federal state then formed parts of the Bombay presidency and the Central Provinces – witnessed a flamboyant political and social struggle when local leaders became actively involved in national politics. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), one of the most prominent radical leaders at the time, influenced Marathi theatre with his political agenda. Tilak co-founded prominent educational institutions in Pune such as Deccan Education Society (1880), New English School (1884) and



Fergusson College (1885), was a professor of mathematics at New English School and taught Sanskrit at Fergusson College.

In 1881, Tilak started two newspapers, *Kesari* in Marathi and *Maratha* in English. He joined the Indian National Congress in 1890 and with the help of his newspapers, political career and his aggressive political approach, he quickly became a household name not only in Maharashtra but all of British India. Until Tilak's death in 1920, many Marathi people were driven by Tilak's political agenda. His leadership made Maharashtra the centre of the national anti-colonial movement between 1880 and 1920. As a result, Marathi theatre was Tilak oriented during these thirty years. Almost all theatre plays' protagonists were based on Tilak or their scripts advocated Tilak's political ideology. These plays were written by his followers and he was portrayed as the hero and the British officers were shown as the evil antagonists. Marathi theatre became a vital tool to spreading nationalistic ideology. Marathi playwright and critic Makarand Sathe has very precisely stated the reason behind the co-existence of politics and theatre:

Struggle is the soul of politics, as well as of the theatre. That is why theatre becomes an influential medium to portray political and social themes. Because of this reason, theatre becomes the strongest weapon for those who are fighting against a foreign government or against an empirical power. And people, who are against the democracy, including Plato, feel the urge to ban this medium.³

Most the writers during this time were socially and/or politically active and as a result, the most discussed topics were unrest against the colonial power, social and political events and new ideologies. Social reformers, thinkers, political leaders like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Vinayak Savarkar wrote theatre plays to spread social and political awareness. They were aware of the power of theatre to bring people together and they used it in their own favour. This political theatre was used not only as a weapon against colonial rule and for advocating the political agenda of Marathi leaders, but also to get financial help for the leaders and the political movements started by them. The money gathered from the theatrical performances was used for advocating political agendas and for lawsuits against political leaders. Political theatre became so effective at galvanising people that more than a hundred plays were banned. The government began to scan every theatre play printed and performed (Sathe 2011: 140).



Tilak oriented Marathi theatre witnessed some exquisite scripts and performances. After Tilak's death in 1920, it took yet another turn. Marathi theatre had lost its pillar. Until 1930, Marathi theatre continued to seek inspiration from current national affairs. Emerging film techniques started influencing the audience in the early nineteenth century. India's first full-length feature film *Raja Harishchandra*, 1913, was directed and produced by Dadasaheb Phalke (1870-1944) also known as 'The Father of Indian Cinema'. Until 1937, he made ninety-five movies and twenty-six short films. *Raja Harishchandra* was a silent movie. Meanwhile, a new industry had started emerging in India. The first Indian sound film *Alam Ara* was directed by a Parsi director Ardeshir Irani and premiered in Mumbai in 1931. The audience was immediately drawn to this industry and after 1930 Marathi theatre started losing its glory.

The Struggle for Swarajya

By 1920, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) had already established himself as a people's leader. After his fight for the civil rights of Indians in South Africa, he returned to British India in 1915 and immediately entered national politics by protesting against excessive land taxes. However, Gandhi did not have any connection with theatre. Rather, he was of the opinion that the literary genres like theatre plays and novels encouraged deceit and should therefore be disparaged (Shanvare 1977:152). His approach was not very encouraging for Marathi theatre and after thirty years of Tilak's radical politics, Gandhi's moderate approach did not attract many Marathi speakers.⁴ Eventually they did accept Gandhi's leadership but continued to believe in Tilak's ideology. They could accept that armed resistance might not be the solution to every problem, but would not admit that it was an atrocity. In 1921, the swadeshi movement started in Mumbai. The first event of burning foreign, especially British goods took place on 31 July 1921 in Tilak's remembrance. Marathi women participated in big numbers in this movement.

In the 1930s, the demand of swarajya (self-government) began getting stronger. Viceroy Lord Mayo's Resolution in 1870 and Viceroy Lord Ripon's Resolution in 1882 reorganised local self-government and added central and provincial assemblies, which were advisory extensions of the government. In 1892, the elected representatives of these local councils were included in legislative councils. This was followed by the Indian Councils Act in 1909, also known as the Morley-Minto



Reform which limitedly increased the involvement of Indians in the governance of British India. The outcome was said to be power without responsibility. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms took the first step towards gradually introducing self-governing institutions in British India. It created enlarged territorial constituencies and transferred limited provincial responsibilities to Indian ministers. This was known as *sthanik swarajya*. (Robb 2002: 153-4; Mann 2015: 94-5)

In the struggle for independence, however, the national leaders neglected local self-government. Nevertheless, after the Morley-Minto Reforms it gained attention. N. C. Kelkar, a political and literary figure in Maharashtra and a close associate of Tilak wrote an article on the local self-government on 6 February 1912 titled "Amche Sthanik Swarajya" (our local self-government). Here is the summary of it:

[...] People have still not realised the importance of the local self-government in Hindustan. This demand could be the topic of not only a local but also a national movement. However, to demand such kind of a movement and in order to make that movement successful we need to believe that the local self-government is in our interest. We should commit to it and we should make the government work. [...] First, we should be able to rule this government, with whatever power we have. [...] If they do not want to take the responsibilities of this local self-government, then how would they get the total political independence? What right do they have to demand that kind of independence? (Shanvare 1977:226)

As Shanavare mentions, many playwrights handled this issue of *sthanik swarajya* and wrote allegorical and historical scripts between 1925 and 1940. Some of them are *Sangeet Rankache Rajya* by V. S. Khandekar, *Vande Mataram* and *Mi Ubha Ahe* by Acharya Atre, and so on. One theatre play that stands out from this list is *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality* written by Madhav Narayan Joshi in 1925.

Sangeet Natak and the Case of Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality

Sangeet Sthanik- Swarajya athva Municipality is a modern take on the long tradition of *sangeet natak* – musical theatre. Since the 1880's, Marathi theatre has had a strong tradition of *sangeet natak*. *Kirloskar Natak Mandali*⁵ performed *Sangeet Shakuntal* in Pune for the first time in 1880. Theatre critics consider this one of the most important and hugely appreciated musical theatre plays of all the times (Sathe 2011: 142). *Kirloskar Natak Mandali* initially set a benchmark for Marathi



musical theatre by using very enriched, but simple language, modern theatre technique and natural characterisation. Furthermore, their uniqueness lay in the usage of classical Hindustani music in their theatre plays. The audience of these theatre plays ranged from lower class women to nobles. Musical theatre reached a larger range of people than ever before, which encouraged the idea of establishing a Marathi cultural identity among masses (ibid.: 143) Sathe states four dominant inspirations behind Kirloskar's musical theatre. First: Mythological theatre plays by *Vishnudas Bhave*⁶, for its themes, second: Marathi farce, for its realistic and simple language, third: Parsi theatre, for its polished performances⁷ and last but not the least, fourth: Shakespeare. Sathe has quoted that in the preface of his theatre play *Sangeet Saubhadra* Kirloskar writes, "I wish to entertain in English style" (ibid.: 143).

Sangeet natak used to be predominantly based on mythological lore and used to be composed and performed by trained classical musicians. This made the songs and music rather complex in their compositions. On the other hand, while *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality* is also considered a sangeet natak, the poetry in this play is based on the folk music tradition, not on Indian classical music. The intention, as mentioned in the introduction of the play, is that common people should be able to hum these tunes so that the songs would be popular among the masses. This play focuses on the terrible condition of politics and the administration of sthanik swarajya.

The printed edition has an introduction written by V. R. Joshi, written on 29 May 1925 in Pune. In the introduction, he clarifies playwright's motive:

[...] Nowadays all are demanding our right to a complete independence and complaining as well that it should have given it to us many years ago. Against this background, Madhav Joshi has written this play in order to show us our own reflection, to point out how efficient we have been in carrying out the responsibilities of the partial self-government we have been given some forty years ago. [...] It is also possible that people, who are good at their work, would notice the mistakes of the local government and would come forward to take care of the mess. But in order to make these people come forward, it was essential to portray the horrifying condition of this local self-government through the medium of theatre. No doubt in that. [...] The kinds of candidates Joshi has shown here, are elected and make it possible for the poet to write poetry on their deeds. It is not necessary that the incidences recorded in this theatre play must be happening in any one city. However, it also cannot be said that the poet has ex-



aggerated or has painted an impossible picture. (Joshi 1961: (5)-(6))

The author of this theatre play Madhav Narayan Joshi, born in 1885, was greatly influenced by Tilak's ideology and by the playwright Krushnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar, author of the very controversial allegorical theatre play *Kichak-Vadh* (1907). Joshi wrote twenty-three theatre plays, including a few Musicals. His humorous plays got him recognition and *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality* was his biggest success. In spite of his twenty-three plays, there is surprisingly a very little information available about him.

Municipality is the protagonist of his theatre play *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality*. The play narrates the horrifying condition of the city municipality and holds the colonial power responsible for it. This 116 pages long theatre play revolves around sixteen main and eighteen supporting characters. This wide range of characters offers a glimpse into various social classes and religions. There are municipality workers and characters representing the educated class and the colonial system such as a doctor, a professor, a police officer, and a polling officer for the municipality election. They each use different idioms, representing their respective social backgrounds. For example - A Muslim character speaks in Hindi slang: "Toba! Toba! Yeto afat ake padi! Hay hay! Yeto nasibki khopdi futneki naubat aa pahunchi" ("Heaven forbid! What a disaster! Oh God! I am going to be ruined!") (Joshi 1961: 14). A Gujarati character speaks in his own dialect, with a mixture of Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi: "Are bhai janedo! Doso teenso tumbhi vat lena!!" ("Let it go my brother! You can divide two-three hundred rupees among yourselves! Let it go") (ibid.: 114).

There are thirty-one verses in this play. Among them are pad (a variety of metrical composition used in hymns or anthems), stuti/stotra (praise/hymn), powada (ballad, which is used to show the greatness of historic heroes), ghazal (a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets) and doha (a self-contained rhyming couplet in Urdu and Hindi poetry). The name of the form is mentioned above every verse in the theatre play. The Muslim character name Sheikh Hussein sings ghazals and doha.

For this paper two poems are discussed to bring out the satirical element in the play - A stuti and a powada. The first act opens with a prayer. Any sangeet natak starts with a prayer to the God or Goddess. But this prayer is in the honour of nagardevata - Goddess of the city and the municipality.



[O] The goddess of city! [O] Municipality! Madhav pays homage to you || by rolling over on the ground in front of you || your ambiguous play fascinates people, which is as twisted as a river, || poets are now tired by praising you ||dhru.|| every three years you arrange your magnificent wedding || you search through the city rigorously || [O] beauty decked in ornaments! My beloved! You stir the city and find | the perfect matches for you || some have a weighing scale in their hand || some sell cloth || some are farmers || some are labours || some are alcoholics || some are the care takers of widows || some are obsessed with degrees || pamper them as much as you want || you bestowed upon them your body, soul and wealth || while ignoring knowing and educated gentlemen || why do you embrace blockheads? ||1|| these hypocrites get degrees and fame by a sycophantic praise || occasionally by licking people's dirty shoes || they won't even give it a thought before backstabbing others for their own benefit || why would they have other's goodwill at heart? || Kalidas would run away if he had to describe the city organisation || I am then just a fool || still I will try my best to describe it, listen carefully || please forgive me if I make any mistake || gutters have flooded the roads || pollution is slowing down the sun || there is tons of garbage everywhere || frogs are croaking || and flock of mosquitoes are flying around || nose hair have burnt because of this odour || there is no sign of sanitation || little kids squat down in a row in small lanes || and decorate the ground with amusement || 2 || lamps are dim in the sadness of the stolen oil || many of them are already quenched || while trying to find a way through these dark times || many are stumbling and falling down || some of them have gotten a head bump || some have gotten their faces swollen || when it rains muddy water floods the roads till the knees || men and women slip and fall down || dhoti, turbans, saris get all dirty || people have to swim through || each time when they swallow the muddy water they curse the members [of the municipality] ||not just the members but their father, grandmother and great-grandmother as well || they curse the entire family ||3|| muddy water leaks through the filtered taps || as if it is crowning the śivaliṅga || but I think the taps are crying! In your name || they are sobbing and howling || when tried to drink water from the tap a fish comes out on the palm || and then rests peacefully in the stomach || people are infected with various diseases || plague has decided to reside here forever || cholera has also infected many || typhus has also spread || measles and small pox took advantage of the situation || cough and tuberculosis have terrorised everybody || poor people are scared || not so fatal influenza has now become a big problem || many weak people have died || doctors have become rich || from the money of the poor || they have now bought cars || helpless poor people are dying fast || you are their only protector ||4|| [O] The goddess of city [O] Municipality! Madhav



pays homage to you! By rolling over on the ground in front of you
||dhru.|| (Joshi 1961: 6-7)

This prayer is written in the form of stotra/stuti – a Sanskrit hymn. In Sanskrit hymns, the addressee is always greater than the speaker. The speaker is anonymous and his job is to praise the addressee and to describe the authority of the addressee by showing how small the speaker is in front of him/her. However, in this text, through self-references by the speaker, he achieves an equal status. For example, right in the beginning the author mentions his own name and says “Madhav pays homage to you”. John Hawley has written at length about author-addressee relations in Bhakti Poetry (Hawley 1988: 269-90). He argues that the signature of the author in bhakti poems communicate much more than authorship. It lends these poems authority and conviction. In this prayer, the author uses his name and instead of a pseudonym. With this action, he suggests that his name possesses an authority.

Now let us see the function of this parody in the theatre play. In this text, the traditional stotra goes through a dislocation phase. Technically, it still appears to be a stotra but does not fulfil its function of worshipping the subject. The content of this stuti (praise) takes away the importance of the literary genre and in the bigger picture it just remains a part of the prolonged introduction or commentary to a satirical theatre play. Though in this case the stotra is sung by a character in the play and not by sutradhar (moderator), the author remains present throughout the stotra. In sangeet natak (traditional Sanskrit musical theatre), the sutradhar (the moderator) starts the play by singing an ishastuti (a prayer) and then the characters enter the stage. In this sangeet natak, this nagardevata stavan (prayer to the Goddess of the city) comes after the ishastuti and Moderator’s monologue. At the end of the monologue, the moderator says:

I like things to be done my way. I do not want to borrow anybody else’s ideas, verses, translations, and jokes. However humble my work would be, I would write everything on my own. Let’s start with the prayer of the goddess Municipality. (Joshi 1961: 5)

According to the playwright Madhav Joshi, he himself is a well deserving author to write a stotra. He uses it to praise an undeserving institution in his opinion. Explicit addressee of this prayer is the municipality whereas the implicit target is the government and people appointed there. Lord Ripon’s resolution on 18 May 1882 on local self-government enabled the decentralisation of power to bring more



administrative efficiency. Local bodies were appointed to towns consisting of a large majority of elected non-official members. These non-official members were mostly politicians who had served in the British administration for 48 years. In the eyes of the author, this was essentially the British government.

In this prayer, the comical element is obvious even to someone unfamiliar with the mocked genre. But in order to understand the parody completely, one has to be aware of the literary genre - Stotra. The author personifies the municipality as a woman with a bad character. The municipality is dislocated from its usual context and positioned as a goddess but is immediately dishonoured by the mention of her deeds. This incongruity achieves the wanted satirical effect and makes the satire work in this text. The author uses the tool of parody to attack his target.

As the leaders of the independence movement were so engrossed in national politics and focused on independence, that local self-governments were largely neglected. The elected candidates neither showed any urge of making their localities a better place nor did they care about improving the people's situation. The playwright intentionally uses exaggeration and defamation in this poem. He plays a role of the Sutradhar – moderator in the theatre play – and is the thread between the protagonists and the audience. He converses with the Nati (actress) before the actual play gets started and together with the Nati, he gives us an introduction to this theatre play. When the Nati asks him the motive of this theatre play, he answers:

Sutradhar: Listen to me! I want to reveal the deeds of these selfish cheats and then want to ridicule them. I want to show the world their selfishness. I do not want to attack any particular person. I want to be courageous and show the world the dysfunction of the local self-government. This stage is a mirror. The audience will be engrossed in laughing, while looking at their own messy reflection! Once they go home, they can take, as much time they need to think about the meaning, script and the motive of this theatre play! (Joshi 1961: 3)

His conversation with the Nati tells us that the author is aware of the excessive use of mockery in this play. She asks him:

Nati: So all get similar treatment in your imaginary world? Be it a good man or a bad man or a gentleman or an educated man, you mock everybody?

Sutradhar: You are still on the same topic. You silly woman, mocking a fool or a worthless person does not actually mean prai-



sing the virtuous? And you are saying that I treat them all the same! How would that happen? Is it even possible? There are so many patriots, selfless, great men in the audience right here, right now. Any amount of praise for them is not enough! (ibid.)

As mentioned earlier, the playwright has chosen the characters in his play to be of different religions and of different social strata. Most of them are employed with the municipality. These different characters allow him not only to use the various aspects of a society, but also enable him to use various folk music traditions. A poetic genre that appears in this play quite frequently is Powada. Powada emerged under Shivaji Bhonsle's reign (1674-1680, chhatrapati, founder of the Maratha Kingdom; cf. Mann 2015: 28-31). It is written in the style of a ballad and is used to show the greatness of historic heroes. However, in this theatre play one of the Powada is satirically used to show the inability of the fire department.

There goes the English fire engine. Rushing down with a loud siren || There goes municipality's fire engine || dhru. The siren of two bells is howling | a household has caught fire || Fire is at one place and firefighters are at some other place, people are astonished ||1|| Firefighters are high on bhang⁸, trembling on the fire engine || The hose is torn, the wagon is kaput and the engine stopped working ||2|| There is no water in the tank and no well is nearby. Fire plug [sic!] is nowhere to find || By the time the fire engine reaches the site of the fire, it is turned into coal ||3|| There comes back the empty fire engine || (ibid.:27)

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This is a parody of the literary genre Powada. Instead of using it to show the greatness of any individual or any institution, it is used to mock the fire department – an institution introduced by the British. The verse describes the incapability of the firefighters to extinguish a domestic fire because they are irresponsible and high on bhang. While ridiculing the fire department as part of the foreign institution, the author does not exclude his employed fellow countrymen from the mockery. Their inefficiency to work as the city's safety providers is made fun of. The incompetence of a governmental department as well as the negligence of its employees is seen as a threat to the well-functioning of the municipality.

In this four-act play, the playwright's main focus is to show the malfunction of the municipality as a system and people affiliated with it and how they are interested in their own profit. At the end of the play, a character called Pandoba talks directly to the audience. His monologue tells us the whole gist of the play:



Pandoba: Ladies and gentlemen! Stop. Very politely I ask you all, whom are you laughing at? From 9.30pm to 2.30am, last five hours, we have been holding this twenty-five feet wide and twenty feet tall mirror in front of you all. Didn't you realise it? Whom are you laughing at? At yourselves? Why do we need a reservation for different religions and different castes in the audience? Only a genuine intelligent, experienced and selfless person, who thrusts for people's welfare, deserves to be here. Knowledge should possess power and might eternally! Where uneducated, cheats try to snatch away the power from the truth and wisdom those regions, cities and countries don't sustain. [...] Don't laugh! You all should feel ashamed and disgusted! (ibid.: 115-6)

Again, the voice of the author is present in this monologue and summarises the pedagogical function of the play. This monologue is a bridge between the author and the audience in order to explain the satirical purpose of this theatre play. He assumes that the audience have not really understood that the theatre play was a tool to criticise them – the unaware citizens - about their dysfunctional municipality. He does not want to risk letting the audience leave without realising the real purpose of his theatre play. He discloses his intention and surprises the audience by the fact that the last five hours of 'entertainment' were a mere reflection of them and their city.

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Though the theatrical performances were open to all casts, religions and professions, there was a certain sitting arrangement to separate them from one another. This separation is also disapproved in this monologue. By protesting against it, he does not demand equality among all, but wants his audience to be of "genuine intelligent, experienced and selfless people, who thrusts for others welfare". (ibid.: 115) According to him, people not satisfying that criteria should not be allowed to be in the audience. He wants knowledge to rule the city. He believes that to be the solution to the city's betterment. Despite the humour and satire in this theatre play, at the end, the author demands the audience to stop laughing and wants them to be introspective. He expects them to feel ashamed and disgusted by the condition of the municipality.

Conclusion

These translated verses from *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality* are a few representative examples to establish the function and tools of satire in colonial Marathi theatre. There was an abundance of political theatre plays during this time but only a few were satires.



Marathi theatre from the late nineteenth century onwards was scrutinised by British officers. The political theatre became so effective that more than hundred theatre plays were banned (Sathe 2011: 140). Every theatre play printed and performed was scanned by the government. Government detectives followed 'scandalous' playwrights and the *Dramatic Performance Act* was introduced in 1876 (Shanvare 1977: 105). This act was said to be:

An act for the better control of public dramatic performances. Whereas it is expedient to empower the Government to prohibit public dramatic performances which are scandalous, defamatory, seditious, or obscene.⁹

Allegories and parodies were the tools used by satirists in Marathi theatre to avoid the ban on the printed copies and to prolong it on the theatrical performance under the *Dramatic Performance Act*. Krushnaji Prabhakar Khadilkar's *Kichak - Vadh*, written in 1907, is a great example of allegorical theatre. This is based on the mythological narration of the assassination of Kichak by Pandav in Virat Parva of Mahabharata. The allegory is based on the confrontation between the Indian nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak¹⁰ and British Imperialist Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905. The theatre play achieved a lot of critical as well as public acclaim for its excellent political allegory.

More than twenty years after this allegory *Sangeet Sthanik-Swarajya athva Municipality* was performed. The richness of the parodic verses in this theatre play makes it stand out. The ensemble of thirty-four characters brings out the versatility of the religions, castes and social identities. Each character is chosen with thought and plays a significant role in unfolding the diverse layers of social institutions. Interaction of these characters in the setting of non-functioning local self-government enhances the incongruity and makes their communication quite asymmetrical. This incongruity and asymmetry provides a solid base to the satire in this theatre play. As seen earlier, the voice of the author in the text makes the audience aware of his intentions and tries his best to make his audience aware of the tragic condition of the local government and educates them to be better citizens. One wonders the reason for scarcity of secondary literature available on this theatre play in spite of it being a very remarkable satirical piece.

After attacking the British rule explicitly in the late nineteenth century, Marathi satire takes a turn in the beginning of the twentieth century and focuses upon satirising the religious and social occurrences under colonial rule. It confronts the insecurity in the minds of



Marathi middle class about the rapidly changing society and hence their newly found identity. The formation of Marathi middle class identity and its inextricable linkage with the contemporary discourse on gender relations in Marathi society becomes one of the prominent themes of colonial satire. Early twentieth century colonial Marathi literature witnesses the birth of some phenomenal narrators like Balakram and Cimanrao among others who paint a vibrant picture of a middle class Marathi society and its identity. They portray the virtues and insecurities of the common man. These vivid examples of colonial satire from the late nineteenth century encouraged postcolonial authors to experiment with various social, political and philosophical themes and created a strong tradition of satire in Marathi literary oeuvre.

Endnotes

¹ I owe this example to a discussion with Hans Harder.

² Also known as Kokaṇastha Brahmins.

³ All translations by the author, unless otherwise specified.

⁴ People from Maharashtra.

⁵ Established by Annasaheb Kirloskar in 1880. It was the largest theatre performing company in Marathi theatre. This company produced some legendary singer – actors. The most celebrated among them was Balagandharva.

⁶ His theatre play *Sita Svayamvar* was the first theatre play to be performed on the stage in front of the audience in 1843.

⁷ Zoroastrian community in British Bombay was a prominent business community. The first Parsi theatre company "*Parsi Natak Mandali*" was founded as early as 1853 in Bombay by Gustadji Dala, Dadabhai Naoroji a.o. For more see Gupta; Hansen: *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*, Seagull Books, 2005.

⁸ Indian cannabis beverage.

⁹ The Dramatic Performance Act, also known as Act XIX of 1876 is reprinted in Shanvare's *Rajakiya Chalval ani Marathi Nstiyasrushti*, pp. 235-8.

¹⁰ See endnote 4.

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