

Perception of History in Popular Practices: A very short note on the *Powadas* of Shivaji Period

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Abstract

The specificities of the culture of a society at any given point of time in history are usually reflected through its popular institutions and practices. Story telling in different styles, mostly with modulated voice and accompanying actions, to stir the imagination of the audience has been one such practice since the ancient times. In Maharashtra, in the post-Shivaji period, *Powada*-singing had become a very popular form of such a style of story-telling. *Powadas* or ballads were composed by *Shahirs* or bards, to glorify episodes of history dealing with heroic deeds of popular folk figures and leaders. This paper takes a brief overview of the *Powadas* which were composed during the time of Shivaji. It also takes into consideration the conscious efforts to re-write many of these *Powadas* during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and examines how, during the course of India's anti-colonial struggle, these *Powadas* were used by the nationalist leaders to stir up patriotic sentiments in Maharashtra. It has been argued here that the *Powadas* proved to be an effective tool of mass mobilization against the British rule in India.

Keywords: *Powada*, Shivaji, Maratha, *Shahir*, Anti-colonial

Introduction

The bardic literature occupies an important place in the folk literature of Maharashtra. It consists mainly of *Powadas* or historical ballads, and *Lavanis* or love songs- originally composed by the Gondhali people, whose profession was to sing devotional songs in praise of the Goddess Bhavani. The Gondhals set to rhythm their compositions, especially the *Powadas*, as they played a drum kind of

instrument called *sambal*.¹ From the thirteenth century onwards Maharashtra had witnessed the development of a form of poetry which deeply influenced the cultural orientation of the Marathi society as a whole. This was the didactic and devotional form of poetry which mostly preached an ideology of moral and spiritual development of human mind and soul. In particular, the *bhajans* of Namdev, the teachings of *Dnyaneshwari*, and also the *abhangas* of Tukaram, constituted the bulk of such poetry. The teachings of these saints, popularised through vernacular, helped in the growth of social cohesion based upon the tenets of equality. It had also created consciousness and a sense of identity among the Maratha people much before Chhatrapati Shivaji unified them into a political unit.

There is a consensus among the scholars that the bardic school of literature gained prominence in Maharashtra during the latter half of the seventeenth century.² This was the period when Chhatrapati Shivaji was busy consolidating the Maratha *Swarajya* he had founded- a home land for the Maratha people. The *Swarajya* of Shivaji gave his people a definite purpose- to liberate and take control of their motherland from 'foreign rule' of the Mughals etc. Its foundations rested upon vigorous military activities. In the era of internecine battles, hence, when the mighty opponents deployed all means to demolish the very foundations of the nascent *Swarajya*, the *Shahirs*, or the authors of *Powadas*, assumed as their duty to inspire their audience- the masses, to fight back with all their strength. The life of Shivaji, therefore, constituted the subject matter of the *Powadas* composed during the late seventeenth century. These compositions, usually accentuating the unimaginable heroic deeds in terms of daring military adventures of Shivaji and his loyal associates, were publically sung so as to stimulate the spirit of brotherhood and patriotism. The *Shahirs* belonged to the same generation which lived in that age to witness such heroic acts. It became a bounden duty for them to draw up faithful account of the true events which were actually watersheds of contemporary history.³ Even though the language or words of these compositions were sometimes crude, the fast and vigorous tempo they were set tune to, created a deep impact upon the listeners. Simple rules of grammar were applied to compose the *Powadas*. It was usually an arrangement of the verses of the poem in *Chouks*

¹ R. V. Oturkar and S. N. Joshi: 'Institution of Watan and its Influence in the 18th century Maratha Society' in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (hereinafter, *PIHC*), 1945, pp. 280–85; See also, H. H. Wilson: *Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*. London, W. H. Allen & Co., 1855, p. 182.

² D. V. Rao: 'The Maratha Bardic Poetry' in *The Modern Review*, vol. 124-125, Jan-Dec 1969, pp. 749–52; See also, D. V. Rao: 'Presidential Address' (Medieval Section), in *PIHC*, vol. 26, part-2, 1964, pp. 135–145.

³ See, M. K. Nadkarni: *A Short History of Marathi Literature*. Baroda, V. A. Thakkar, 1921, p. 172.

(sonnets) in a rhythmic and melodious continuity,⁴ which was rendered with force and emotion.

The rise of the bardic literature of *Powada* and *Lavani* was contemporaneous with the devotional school. In contrast, however, while the *Powadas* dealt with the theme of bravery and aimed to rouse patriotic sentiments, the *Lavanis* specialized in the theme of love- tilting towards eroticism with an emphasis on satiating the sensuous cravings of the masses. It was this radical difference between the two schools regarding the function of poetry which led to a divergence of topic and subject matter chosen for their poetry as well as in the mode and form of their expression.⁵ Moreover, the *Powada* was publically sung by the bard who also played a duff for accompanying rhythm, whereas the *Lavani* was like a dance performance by female artistes, usually belonging to low castes, with enthralling music in the background by a group of musicians. Because of the major contrast in the theme and nature of performance of the two, the *Powada* is generally considered to be masculine in nature, whereas the *Lavani* is seen as more feminine.⁶ It has also been argued that the rural folks of Maharashtra with little or no refinement (of taste) were not generally influenced by the poems or songs containing philosophical messages in a language which had Sanskrit and other words because of the simple reason that it was beyond their comprehension. These simple folks of the rural tract, far removed from the busy and varied life in towns, gathered together and diverted themselves sometimes with the love songs of *Lavanis*, at others, with the less elegant but more exciting *Powadas*, commemorating events of importance in the history of the Maratha nation.⁷

During the course of the eighteenth century, when the Maratha political influence stretched across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, the *Shahirs* came to be patronized by the ruling house of the Peshwas. It was during this period that the bardic literature prospered the most.⁸ What followed thereafter was the inclusion of the themes of conquests and bravery of the Peshwa army by the *Shahirs* in their *Powadas*. For example, *Powadas* were composed on the Maratha victory over the Portuguese at Bassein in 1739. Incidentally, the shocking defeat of the Peshwas in the third battle of Panipat in 1761 was also recorded by *Shahirs* in

⁴ Nadkarni: *Op. Cit.*, p. 177.

⁵ Rao: 'The Maratha Bardic Poetry', p. 749.

⁶ Sharmila Rege: 'Conceptualizing Popular Culture: "Lavni" and "Powada" in Maharashtra' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 11 (Mar. 16-22) 2002, pp. 1038-1047.

⁷ See, G. H. Ranade: *Music in Maharashtra*. New Delhi, Maharashtra Information Centre, 1967, p. 29; Nadkarni: *Op. Cit.*, p. 172.

⁸ Arun Sandhu: *Maharashtra*. New Delhi, National Book Trust, 2007, pp. 216-17.

their peculiar style. Further, the fratricidal struggle for power within the Peshwa family, which manifested through the treachery leading to the assassination of Narayan Rao Peshwa in 1773, was also reflected in the *Powadas*. The *Shahirs* of these *Powadas* ensured that the chosen events were presented in their true historical background as far as possible. The consolidation of the Maratha rule under the Peshwas had inaugurated an era of prosperity in comparison to the preceding period. People tended to enjoy the leisure and luxuries of life. This had created a popular demand for poetry to please and entertain a large section of population- alive with a desire for sensuous pleasure and enjoyments typical of that time. The growth and popularization of *Lavanis* could be comprehended in this light. The *Lavanis*, thus, catered to the taste of the contemporary society driven by the dynamism of a settled and prosperous lifestyle. On the whole, therefore, through the *Powadas* and *Lavanis* a vivid idea of the civil and military life, warfare as well as customs and culture of the contemporary Maratha society could be ascertained.⁹ It was late in the nineteenth century that Shaligram and Acworth embarked upon a mission to collect Maratha *Powadas* mostly pertaining to Shivaji and the Peshwa period. The collection was published in 1891. Later, Acworth made his own selection out of these and, in 1894, published English translation of twelve *Powadas*.¹⁰ During the twentieth century, continuous and untiring efforts were made to collect more *Powadas* pertaining to Maratha history. They were subsequently published by Y. N. Kelkar between 1928 and 1969.¹¹

The *Powadas* have helped in preserving history and memory of the past. The Royal Period of the Maratha history, roughly extending from the time of Shivaji to the accession of the Peshwas in 1713, is deficient of archival documents. The information contained in the Marathi *Bakhars* and *Powadas* enriches our understanding of the history, society, culture and traditions of the Marathas during the time of Shivaji significantly. In particular, the *Powadas* on Shivaji, which were composed during his lifetime, offer a deep insight into the tradition of valour and sacrifice for the cause of the motherland. The re-writing and publication of the *Powadas* on Shivaji during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century helped the nationalist leaders in anti-colonial struggle, as they could successfully appropriate the character of Shivaji to foster patriotic feeling among the masses and unite them for a cause.

***Powadas* of Shivaji period:**

⁹ See, Rao: 'The Maratha Bardic Poetry', p. 750; and Nadkarni: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 175–77.

¹⁰ H. A. Acworth: *Ballads of the Marathas: Rendered into English Verse from the Marathi Originals*. London, Longman, Green and Co., 1894.

¹¹ Y. N. Kelkar: *Aitehasik Powade*. (3 vols.), Poona, Bharatiya Itihas Samshodhak Mandal, vol. 1: 1928, vol. 2: 1944 and vol. 3: 1969.

Under the charismatic leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji, there was a congregation of Maratha talent- much needed to propel the *Swarajya* to the pinnacle of power. By that time, the Bhakti movement had helped forging a bond of unity among the people cutting across the caste lines; and they were keen to participate in the fight for the deliverance of their motherland. The Chhatrapati was continuously waging wars against the Mughal and Bijapuri armies. During the initial years of his military campaigns, one of his most outstanding achievements was the defeat and the destruction of a contingent of the invading Bijapuri force at Pratapgarh in 1659. The leader of the Bijapuri force, Afzal Khan, was killed in a dare-devil attack by the Chhatrapati. This episode had charged up the political atmosphere in the Maratha land, as this was no mean an achievement of their leader. To celebrate and immortalize the daring exploit of the Maratha King, *Shahir* Adnyandas was commissioned to compose a *Powada* on the orders of the queen mother Jijabai. The result – the first ever *Powada* pertaining to Shivaji period, titled ‘*Afzal Khan cha Wadh*’, i.e., ‘The *Powada* of the Killing of Afzal Khan’ was composed. The *Shahir*, being a contemporary of Shivaji, wrote by his personal knowledge and first-hand information of the event. From the religious angle, the defeat and death of the ‘Muslim tyrant’ was universally hailed as the death of a demon which could only be accomplished because of the blessings of the Hindu Goddess Tulja Bhavani. Such feelings resonated in Adnyandas’ *Powada* which had sentimental appeal on the general masses. The *Powada* is composed in the simple style of story-telling. However, to add to the public perception, the narration has been dramatized in such a manner as if it is coming from the mouth of an eye-witness. Dialogues and angry verbal duels, for example, between the protagonists, viz. Afzal Khan and Shivaji, were purposefully inserted in the *Powada* to give the audience a real feel of the event. As this *Powada* succeeded in conveying the idea of national triumph to the masses, a strong wave of patriotism gripped the whole Maratha country, such as it had not experienced for centuries.¹²

Even though the subject matter of the *Powadas* revolved around the life of Shivaji during the late seventeenth century, no *Powada* was composed on Shivaji’s escape in 1666 from the Mughal captivity at Agra, immediately. After his escape from Agra, Shivaji renewed his military campaign against the Mughals in the region around Poona. His main focus was on recovering the areas of the Maratha *Swarajya* from the Mughal which he had transferred to them after his defeat at the hands of Raja Jai Singh led Mughal army in 1665. One of the most daring Maratha military campaigns undertaken during this phase aimed to capture the Kondhana

¹² N. S. Takakhav: *The Life of Shivaji Maharaj: The Founder of the Maratha Swarajya* (adapted from the original Marathi work written by K. A. Keluskar). Bombay, Manoranjan Press, 1921, p. 176.

fort (renamed as *Simhagad*, or the fort of the lion) situated on the peak of a mountain on the outskirts of modern city of Pune. The task was extremely difficult and equally dangerous, but Tanaji Malusare- one of Shivaji's trusted lieutenants, came forward to undertake it for his master. With his select band of *Mavle* soldiers, Tanaji accomplished the task, but not before laying down his life in this process. To commemorate this inconceivable feat, a *Powada* titled *Simhagad Powada*, consisting of fifty-five *Chouks*, was composed by one *Shahir* Tulasidas.¹³ Through the *Simhagad Powada*, the *Shahir* conveyed his message in the format of story-telling. Using his creative imagination, the *Shahir* has made it livelier by incorporating into the plot, an animated conversation between Tanaji and his uncle (Selhar Mama), which appears to have taken place in the thick of the action. The story of Tanaji's bravery, and his tragic death in a hand-to-hand combat on one of the bastions of the Kondhana fort, successfully conveyed the idea of 'duty before self' and served as a motivation for more brave people to come forward for the cause of *Swarajya*. According to the *Powada*, Jijabai had demanded, as a gift or prize, the fort of *Simhagad* from Shivaji, as he was outplayed in a game of dice with her.¹⁴ The *Simhagad* fort, it ought to be remembered, was one of the strongest forts in the vicinity of Poona which was lost to the Mughals. The insertion of the character of Jijabai, the mother, in the *Powada* seems to be an attempt by the bard to remind every Maratha man to keep his promise towards the motherland, and selflessly contribute in the mission to liberate her from foreign dominion. The *Powada* also portrays Tanaji Malusare- the protagonist, as a man of gigantic proportions who was fearsome not just by his physical appearance, but possessed such muscular strength with which he could control the movements of an elephant by drawing it about its tusks. At the same time, the *Simhagad Powada* also underscores the exceptional qualities of compassion and generosity in the character of Shivaji, which made him the true leader of the masses. The *Powada* represents Shivaji in a saddened state immediately after he received the news of his commander Tanaji's death. The depiction a mournful Chhatrapati in the *Powada*, as he escorted the slain warrior's mortal remains to his village, embodies the human and emotional aspect of the Maratha Emperor. The last *Chouk* of the *Powada* presents Shivaji's words of consolation to martyr Tanaji's son Rayaba, whose marriage ceremony was due in a couple of days. The *Shahir* puts the following words into the mouth of Shivaji who is consoling Rayaba, "Don't be afraid, my son, Shivaji himself has died; Henceforth, I will be your Tanaji *Subedar*." Shivaji, thereafter, performed the wedding of Rayaba and also installs

¹³ Nadkarni: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 178–79

¹⁴ Takakhav: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 313–14.

him in his (late) father's office.¹⁵ A *Powada* glorifying the extraordinary gallantry of yet another Maratha military commander by the name Yashwantrao Baji Pasalkar was composed by *Shahir* Yamaji. The *Powada* narrates how Baji Pasalkar sacrificed his life and won the Purandhar fort back from Adil Shahi control. In this *Powada*, Baji Pasalkar is also described as one of the childhood friends of Shivaji.¹⁶

Re-writing *Powada* in the early twentieth century

In the year 1660, when Adil Shahi forces had besieged Shivaji in the Panhala fort, another Maratha hero named Baji Prabhu Deshpande, got his name engraved in the annals of Maratha history by exhibiting an exemplary act of bravery. His selfless sacrifice, which came in the process of an intense military engagement with the Bijapuri forces while he secured the safe escape of his master from Panhala to the Vishalgad fort, inspired many young talents for the cause of *Swarajya*.¹⁷ Though a *Powada* was not immediately composed to celebrate the event, the story and the accompanying values remained firmly entrenched in public memory. It was early in the twentieth century that V. D. Savarkar composed a *Powada* to commemorate this great warrior of the *Swarajya*.¹⁸ The question which arises here is, what made Savarkar compose a *Powada* on a hero of Shivaji's period? Why was the theme overlooked during the eighteenth century- perhaps the 'golden age' of the Maratha bardic literature with the illustrious names such as Ram Joshi, Anant Fandi, Prabhakar, Sagan Bhau and Honaji Baal?¹⁹ Was it to enrich the public perception of history, or was it to make use of this exceptional incident as a tool in the nationalist struggle against the colonial rule? It could not have been simply to enrich public perception, because the Marathas have, right from the very beginning, given their own accounts of these episodes (contained mainly in the *Bakhar* literature and *Powadas*) which entirely differ from Mohammedan and European views. Regarding the need to re-write, Prachi Deshpande argues that it

¹⁵ Prachi Deshpande: *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 55–57.

¹⁶ Suryakant Ramchandra Khandekar: *Marathi Powada*. Kolhapur, 2007, pp. 62–65.

¹⁷ Jadunath Sarkar: *Shivaji and his Times*. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 5th edition (reprint), 1973, pp. 76–78.

¹⁸ See, Vikram Sampath: *Savarkar: Echoes from Forgotten Past, 1883-1924*. Gurgaon, Viking, 2019, pp. 71-72. Savarkar also composed a *Powada* on the life of Tanaji Malusare. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, in 1909, had written a long poem 'Baji Prabhou' on the life of Baji Prabhu Deshpande.

¹⁹ Nadkarni: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 176–77.

was perhaps because of the fact that in the late nineteenth century Marathi writers and scholars felt the need to combat colonial discourses on Indian society and culture; in addition there could also be seen an emerging nationalist need for India to 'write for itself the account of its past'.²⁰ The fact also remains that the early historical writings did not outline the conception of usefulness of history against colonial rule or the perception of history as a powerful tool for nationalism. For example, the great social reformer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had also composed a *Powada* on Shivaji, which he had used as a tool to propagate his ideas on social reform.²¹ To effectively combat the colonial rule, hence, there was a need to devise new methods. It was Bal Gangadhar Tilak who, for the first time, successfully harnessed the growing popularity and evolving historical memory of the Marathas among the middle classes for the growing anti-colonial movement by organizing Shivaji Festival in 1894. In a way, Tilak was making an attempt to use the legacy of Shivaji by projecting him as the central symbol of identity in public debate. *Powada* singing was an integral part of the 'Shivaji Festival' celebrations as *Powadas* were the most effective media for communicating thoughts to the unlettered masses. Further, the power of using historical themes for anti-colonial protest was effectively demonstrated in 1897, when *Kesari*-Tilak's newspaper, published a speech delivered by Professor G. C. Bhanu on the Afzal Khan episode at Pune, in which he had praised Shivaji's killing of the Bijapur general as justifiable for the greater cause of Maratha freedom.²²

By the early twentieth century, new *Powadas* were being composed centring on the theme of the life and times of Shivaji. In a way, the older themes were recast to address the most immediate, contemporary needs. The past, in this sense, was used to 'shed light upon the present'.²³ In the year 1903, for example, Hari Narayan published a novel titled '*Gad Aala Pan Simha Gela!*' (I Won the Fort but Lost My Lion!). The novel was based on the *Simhagad Powada*. The title of the novel was Shivaji's expression of angst upon hearing the news of the martyrdom of Tanaji Malusare. This text is a fascinating example of the ways Marathi writers in the colonial period recast older representations of the historical events of the Marathas to suit a different set of ideological needs, thus ensuring the continued, albeit

²⁰ Deshpande: *Op. Cit.*, p. 85 (Chapter 4: Historiography and Nationalism, pp. 84–108)

²¹ Dhananjay Keer, S. G. Malshe and Y. D. Phadke (eds.): *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*. Mumbai, Maharashtra State Literature and Culture Board, 2nd edition (revised), 2006, pp. 63–109.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 118–20.

²³ See, Daniel Jasper: 'Commemorating the "Golden Age" of Shivaji in Maharashtra, India and the Development of Maharashtrian Public Politics' in *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2003, pp. 215–30. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45293740> Accessed 28 Mar. 2023.

modified, presence of such narratives and images in the public imagination.²⁴ In 1910, the Abhinav Bharat Mala published three *Powadas*, respectively on the themes of *Simhagad*, Baji Prabhu Deshpande, and Afzal Khan's assassination, in a series. The *Powadas* were proscribed immediately as 'they encouraged the use of prowess against the government'.²⁵ Yet another captivating *Powada*, titled '*Nana at Large: The New Shivaji*', describes a Robin Hood-like figure called Nana Pharari who was active during the Civil Disobedience Movement, and had eluded the police for months in the Khandesh region around 1930. This *Powada*, was also proscribed by the Colonial authorities.²⁶ The reactionary approach of banning the *Powadas* by the colonial government proves the point that the *Powadas* had become an effectual instrument of mass-mobilization during the anti-colonial struggle.

As the anti-colonial struggle gained momentum, more *Powadas* were composed as ballad-singing interspersed with nationalist propaganda to motivate the masses. An altogether new trend could be seen in *Powada* writing in the 1930s. The *Powadas* no longer remained confined to the themes from Maratha history, or even the themes of the past. In place, the contemporary incidents conjoined with the anti-colonial struggle, but not necessarily pertaining to Maharashtra, were picked up as the theme of the *Powadas*. In 1931, for example, two *Powadas* were published on the life of Bhagat Singh. *Powadas* on the lives of Rajguru and Sukhdev were also composed by Manmohan, which were published in the *Kesari*, on 21 April, 1931. It was perhaps well understood by the nationalist leaders of the anti-colonial struggle that the style of the *Powadas* made the most lasting impact to effectively propagate the message among the masses. The banning of the *Powadas* bears a testimony to a phase in the socio-political life of India when the people could no more patiently bear the humiliation of subjection and became desirous and also active to regain the lost self-respect. It was a period marked by the mood of retrospection. The subject race looked upon their past glory with profound nostalgia and tried to seek inspiration from it.²⁷

Conclusion

The *Powadas* acted as indispensable source of understanding of the local and regional history. It is true that they were composed in a particular style which

²⁴ Deshpande: *Op. Cit.*, p. 135. In 1923 this novel, writes Deshpande, traveled from the printed page into the silver screen as India's first full scale historical silent film in the runaway success.

²⁵ Anil Samarth: 'A Study of some Proscribed Historical Marathi Biographies and the Nationalist Movement in Maharashtra' in S. P. Sen (ed.) *Historical Biography in Indian Literature*, Calcutta, Institute of Historical Studies, 1979, pp. 307–08.

²⁶ Deshpande: *Op. Cit.*, pp. 125–26.

²⁷ Samarth: *Op. Cit.*, p. 308.

involved the fanciful imagination of the *Shahirs*, who would often add animated discussions and dialogues to dramatize the event. Because of this, the scholars of history have rejected the historical value of the *Powadas* by dubbing them as literature containing mere acts of eulogy. But, we must remember that such ‘over-exaggerated writings’, when the appropriate time came, served their purpose well by influencing a common man who neither was a student of history, nor a critic of literature. Singing of the heroic deeds and exploits of the brave Maratha personalities of the past had a powerful appeal to the pride and patriotism of the general public. As mnemonic device, the *Powadas* went on being chanted from mouth to mouth, and thus became very popular in course of time till they were written and re-written as per the demands of the changed circumstances. The publication of the *Powadas* has indeed given a new voice to this vocal tradition of the past. Samarth appears to be correct when he argues that a series of proscription orders during the anti-colonial struggle was the official recognition of the potentiality of its complementary character which occasionally provoked violence against the British Raj. The recognition did have justification.²⁸ By way of conclusion, thus, one may submit that the new versions of the *Powadas* contributed to the decolonised discourses of understanding India's past in a significant manner.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 310.