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**Lilacharitra: Medieval Marathi Culture in Retrospect**

**Abstract:**

Culture is a complex matrix of a variety of factors reflecting the human life from multiple perspectives and simultaneously transforming and shaping the human life dynamically. This paper is an attempt to retrospect medieval Marathi culture and its development through the medieval text "Lilacharitra". It is the seminal book in the origin and development of Marathi literary culture. Its cultural context portrays the medieval society along with its political, economic and linguistic aspects. It is also a microcosm of the medieval social insecurity, political instability, caste discrimination, contemporary customs, traditions, beliefs, superstitions and so on. The paper contemplates the text as a major source of medieval Marathi culture having the roots of the message of modern universalism in it. It also contemplates medieval Marathi literary culture as a sub-culture and a consistent thread striving to maintain the modern democratic values. It also throws a light on medieval temples, problems of the peasants, sources of earning and livelihood of the people, religious subordination of women, mass and elite culture, etc.

**Key Words:** Lilacharitra, Marathi, culture, Chakradhar Swami



—Culture is for man what water is for fish and air is for bird

Laudin Harvey

The Marathi word *samsthan* is the combination of *san* and *sthan*. *Prasthan* is of obvious nature. Attacked by *vikar*-pollution, it becomes *vikar* and when purposes are made to prevent any *vikar* then what arises is known as *samsthan*. *Samsthan* is a wide notion which covers almost everything that could shape human life anthropology, history, agriculture, religion, economics, ethics, sociology, politics, literature, etc. E. B. Tylor, the first professional anthropologist (1871-1) defines *culture* as "a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and so on."

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and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Tylor's definition is all pervasive as it includes all human activities from day to day from customary behaviour to various skills of man. The word culture is used in two different ways. One could be called the 'thin' notion of culture and the other the 'thick' notion of culture. The thin notion refers to the style of dressing, cuisine, music, arts, dances, and languages. The thick notion is more comprehensive. It connotes a whole range of living - the integrated web of ideas, values, traditions, customs and habits that offer a society/community a distinctive life style.

Literature, architecture, history, religion, customs and traditions, food, costumes, etc. are the constituents of culture. Needless to say that literature is a part of any culture and promotes the culture of that language group. However, literature contextualizes a variety of factors which governs the culture. This context leads to the literary culture of that tradition and promotes the society through literature. Moreover, it contributes a great deal to the cultural ethos of that society. Thus, literary culture is the result of a variety of cultural contextual factors from the society and it reshapes and alters those contexts in the course of time. Thus, it has a directional impact, culture affects the literature and literature affects the culture. This leads to a dynamic notion of culture. Therefore, we can define culture as, "Culture is nothing but a similar set of acquired behavioural patterns in the domain of language usage, etiquettes, clothing, food habits, customs, traditions, festivities, religious beliefs, etc. which can easily be received from the distance. If the distance is reduced either synchronically or diachronically the appeared pattern seems to transform into the different set of cultural patterns having the certain inclination profound at individual and group level."

Incorporating the above discussions the present paper pleads that *Lilocharitra* is the seminal text in Marathi literary culture because...

"Literary culture is a subculture of the whole of the culture which is autonomous and consistently updating. Literature is an aesthetic and powerful form of creativity of the society. It is the object of faith of the society. It is obvious to expect many aspects of culture and society from literature. However, it is not necessary for literature to lose the dignity and autonomy in fulfillment of those expectations. (Jadhav R. G. quoted in Paul, 2009:23)

In this paper "*Lilocharitra*" is viewed as a text contextualizing various aspects of culture such as history, religion, socio-cultural scenario, customs, beliefs and social structure of Maharashtra during the period of Yadavas. It disseminates the knowledge of religion to common people in their own language and lucid style.

During medieval era religious and spiritual discourses determined the virtuous behaviour of people. This philosophy which was confined in ancient Sanskrit books and scriptures was made available to Common people through the saints like Chakradhara. Due to lack of the knowledge of Sanskrit, it was not possible for the common people to understand Sanskrit literature. Obviously, the society based on traditional orthodox religion which was facing the cultural crisis in their daily routine was confused and caught in the encroachment of foreign cultures. Therefore, the contemporary saints felt it essential to sustain the original culture and uplift the natives from spiritual point of view.

*Lilocharitra* is the pious and pure word-sculpture by Chakradhara Swami's great disciple Mahimabhatta. It is the entire biography of the founder of Mahanubhava sect (Panchajanya Mahimabhatta). It is the entire biography of the founder of Mahanubhava sect (Panchajanya). Therefore, its scope and canvas is unlimited still it has organic unity as every other event in this text is associated with the deeds of Chakradhara Swami. It is the aesthetic expression of the sweet memories of the deeds of the founder of Mahanubhava Panth. It has a unique characterization and picturesque explanation of a variety of factors which formulates the context of the text. Most importantly, all the deeds have been told in simple prose of familiar language. The popular and practical nature of the contemporary Marathi language cannot be understood through the poetic text *Gyaneshwari*. However, *Lilocharitra* is the best and reliable medium of understanding contemporary Marathi language as well as culture.

Language is an effective means of human culture as well as literary culture. It is the medium which links human culture with literary culture. Human cognition and creation of effective literature are done only through language. As a result, social references are inevitable aspects of any literary culture. Moreover, such a literary culture has a reflexive action on human culture which it represents. It shapes, alters and contributes to develop the human culture on the path of material as well as spiritual progress. The context of various aspects of contemporary culture is amply found in *Lilocharitra*.

Shri Chakradhara Swami is one of the Panchakrishnas of Mahanubhava Panth and is considered to be the greatest incarnation. Being the founder of Mahanubhava Panth, his place in the sect is the highest one. This biography of Chakradhara is collected in three volumes.

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*Elak* (*Naravaha* and *Paravaha*). These three parts comprise of five main incidents in Chakradhara's life namely incarnation, gaining power, *pranava* (initiation) to Nagadeva, Nagdevacharya's following, and *prayasa*, the final departure. The *Elak* includes Chakradhara's lonely life from Bharuch to Pathan. *Paravaha* begins from Pathan and includes initiation to Nagambika and ends with dissemination of knowledge to Nagadeva. *Utaravaha* continues till the death of Chakradhara.

Chakradhara Swami was incarnated at Bharuch at about Shaka 1135 or 1145 and came to Pathan in about Shaka 1189 after 54 of 47 years. During this period the members of Yadava dynasty Singhadev (d-7), Kanhardev (d-19), and lastly Mahadev (d-74) ruled this region of Deccan Plateau of India. The references to Yadava history are inevitably found in Lilacharitra. New historicism insists on 'the historicity of texts and the textuality of history' (Mintz, 1989:20). Therefore, we can, realistically, reconstruct the history of the Yadava empire through this text.

There must be emity between the king of Gujarat and Devgin's Yadavas. The fact can be noticed in deed 7 when the son of the P. M. of Gujarat Harpaldeo planned a pilgrimage to Ramesh, his father cancelled his plan saying

"To deya paroko: tesh jao nat v".

Deed no. 82 explains the political scenario of the King Mahadeoraya (1260 to 1271 A.D.) Mahadeoraya killed Amadeo, the heir and the successor of Mahadeoraya by plucking his eyes and seized the power.

*Lilacharitra* can be regarded as an important source for the study of the social structure of Yadava period civilization. As Chakradhara Swami inhabited among the common people of the time, the various aspects of the social life are found in his deeds. From *Lilacharitra*, we come to know that the social structure during the Yadava Empire was based on the four *Varna*. The restrictions of varnashrama religion were very severe. Social inequality was on its highest peak. The notion of untouchability and its so-called desecration was also followed ruthlessly. Elite status or godly positions were not sanctioned to the lower caste people. When a cobbler attains a status and the state of bodilessness by mere *darshan* of Chakradhara, obviously he was criticised by the people around. But the other cobblers of his own village envied him saying

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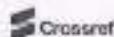
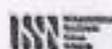
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around temple means a wall beyond the yard of a temple (103). *Podhala*, an outhouse (5), and *Overs* means *veranda* (42), trunk shaped platform in front of *Mahadev*, main gate (44). Courtyard and sanctuary of the temple (29). *Ujari, Madh*, upper story (8, 19) and its projected mosaic attractive railing (13, 14, 19), the artificial fruits made of soil, suspended to awning of the temple, etc. details can be still noticed in the present day temples. Small temples were nomenclature as *Madh* (1, 49). The place where an ascetic or a mendicant used to live was called as *Gumpha*, a cave (1). *Dent, Devuli, Madh and Sanje* are various types of temples.

Along with social life, *Lilacharitra* is the genuine record of life about the contemporary politics. We can reconstruct the information about Devgiri's Yadava true to, Seja Jadhav of Ramtek, Nizam from Marathwada, Yadava's Commander-in-Chief Kholanayaka and Yadava king Krishnadeva from several deeds. Some deeds of *Lilacharitra* show that royal dynasties had a great respect and high honour for Sages. Chakradhara was so handsome that during his stay at Alajpur, people thought that the king has found a son-in-law for his daughter Umadevi (55). Rajmata would worship Chakradhara daily by offering Basil leaves before taking food (54). All the same, during his stay at Lonar in Buldhana district, Yadava king Kamberdev met swamiji and offered a golden coin. Swamiji refused it. This shows that the Royal families had a high honour for Sages of the time. In deed no. 343 there is a historical reference of political power transfer. This deed narrates the story of toppling down the power of Amandeva by Randeoraya. In the *Uttaravaha* the reference of Khalasayachi Dhadi denotes the attack of Malik Kafur, the commander-in-chief of Alauddin Khilaji (1228, deed no. 8). In this attack *Mahanubhava Pandha* was dispersed to a great extent. Even the copy of *Lilacharitra* was misplaced or destroyed.

Festival and Celebrations are inevitable aspects of any culture. *Lilacharitra* provides ample space and scope for explanation of contemporary festivals and celebrations. In deed no. 182 of Bhadegaon the festival of Shinge is mentioned. In the *Pandha*, a first day of a lunar month of Falgun Chakradhara swami encountered the festival of colours *Holi* on his way. He flung the ashes of *Holi* through his foot thumb. In deed no. 180 *Maw*, i.e. investiture of a young child is explained and various eatables such as, Mande, Purya, Gharaya, noodles, Laddus, etc. are also mentioned. Moreover, Mahimbhata also mentions funeral rites in deed no. 132.

*Lilacharitra* throws light on some customs of the time like ceremony of naming a child, marriage ceremony, wedding procession, the rights of guests, entertaining and feasting the guests, custom of divorce, following impurity (*rutak*) after death in the family, funeral rites,

etc. The references of the custom of consuming food are also found. The people used to have their meals either in plates or banana leaves. Usually the food was served in plates to the rich and elites. Others were served in leaves. They used to have buttermilk, curd-rice, dal-rice, water-rice etc. in their meals. A roll of betel leaves was usually served after meals. The mannerism in the family relations such as mother-father, brother-sister, mother-in-law-daughter-in-law, husband-wife, etc. are unveiled through many deeds.

The references to contemporary sources of earning and livelihood are found at many places. Considering the economical condition of the time a huge gap between prosperity at one side and poverty at the other is remarkable. In the first deed of Parvadhā, the farmer happily allows the disciple of Chakradhara to take grants as much he wants.

"Lage to gheya ja."

On the other hand, a poor woman like Ranaisa explains her sorry state of domestic life when asked by Swami. However, such examples are very rare. Almost everywhere prosperity is seen in the contemporary society.

During Yadava period basically it was an agrarian society. Therefore, the first half of *Lilacharita* has many citations regarding farming. Deed no. 163 mentions the cellars of grain. Deed no. 137 mentions yoke tiller along with these farm labourers. Cattle feeding is also represented as a means of livelihood in *Lilacharita*. One can understand the poverty of the cattle feeders as they meagerly earn two meals a day after the labour of whole day on cattle feeding. Along with this form of labourers picking cotton and cotton blocks; and the overburdened debt of farmers is portrayed in deed no. 173. In this deed a farmer named Dhandu complains in the court of Indra that-

"Mata avaghe shet khadale: ara mi see dawa karani fea"

"My whole fields have been snatched. How can I repay the debt?"

In such miserable state farmer is still happy even if buttermilk and fermented food is provided to his daughter-in-laws at home. Gardening is also a part of farming, it is mentioned in deed no. 176

The period was remarkable for the growth and development of knowledge, arts and literature. Dance in a temple, *jebhane* (20), singing of devotee *karvadhā* (13, 44), education of Gopalpandita in King's court (78), a debate between two scholars (56), folktales of Dhandu



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... kavayakali (13), deserve to be mentioned in the context of this paper. There are many references to several *vidyas* (techniques) and *vidyavans* (scholars) e.g. *Prakrit Vidya* (49), *Anarikahridya* (space science) (29), Missiles and *Astravidya* (56, 57), *Channrangvidya* (109), *Shabdavi*, *Skriti vidya* (110), *Hathyogvidya* (53), *Gopabhantravidya* (12), *Society* (58), the technique of isolating from one's own body as performed by Mahadevi (159), *Prabudya* (73) etc. were several techniques and *vidyas* known to the people. Education is an important aspect of any culture, and this fact can be proved from deed no. 29 which mentions the pupils studying in a school at Nanded.

Scholarly discussion was the major feature of contemporary culture. A triumphant ascetic was once defeated in a debate by another ascetic and obviously he loses his hermitage, scriptures, books, farm, house, etc. Chakradhara Swami supposed to occupy the central position as he used to preside over any debate to pass a verdict after judging the opinions of every participant (49, 50).

*Lilacharita* is the beautiful gallery of portraits showing different people in the contemporary society. These word portraits have covered almost every section of the society. Thus, it is the true character spectrum of the Yadava period. It covers Royalty from the top and wages at the bottom. It includes Chakradhara swami, Nagdevacharya, Mahimbhata, Mahadaja, Baisa, Bhandarekar, Ramdeva, Changdeo Raul, Govindacharya, etc. as the major characters along with other minor characters such as different men and women, children and old people, etc. with a variety of tendencies and personalities. The characterization skill of Mahimbhata has breathed life into those characters as if the characters are alive.

It is the collection of the *Ilas* i.e. the deeds of Chakradhara in this biography. Needless to say that Chakradhara occupies the central position in this text. However, it also portrays a number of other characters came in contact with Swamiji. Nagdevacharya, the successor of Chakradhara had a tremendous faith in Chakradhara. He is a wily, mischievous, playing evil tricks and pranks, and an addict person. When he eats the morsel left out by Chakradhara he becomes passionless. Mahadaja is the curious inquisitor and interrogator. She likes to listen to the *Pravachana*. The early life of Chakradhara came to the limelight because of her. She is the first ever lady participating in spiritual discussions and taking an ascetic's path. The credit of the first ever woman poetess also goes to her. *Dhawali* in Marathi is the collection of her own creative poetry. When she was ordered...

"Loki gaye gaye rehane"

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She spontaneously starts singing *Shubhavitrayamvaya*. Changdeo Raul was regarded as pre-incarnation of Chakradhara. Raul means incarnation of the God. He accepted the incarnation of embryo in the house of a Brahmin from Karad. Once Changdeo's wife exposed sexual intercourse during the *shradhika*, a programme of death anniversary of the ancestors, fulfills her desire and leaves the house. Dattatreya Prabhu meets him at Devgiri. After seeing the *darshana* of Dattatreya, Prabhu empowers him with internal as well as external powers (*Pranava* and *Apur Shakti*). When he comes to Dvarika, he cleans it. He transforms *phalgun* to the soul of Govindprabhu at the bank of Gosavi River. In a hut a *Shakti* of Kamakhya comes to Changdeo and requests him to fulfill her sexual desire. Obviously he rejects her request; enters into the state of *sannyas* and ends his life. He reincarnates into the dead body of Harpaldeo at Bharich in Gujarat. This is the *darshana* of Chakradhara swami. Along with these major characters ample space and scope is given to portray Kings, King's men, farmers, artisans, laborers, ascetics, housewives, *balwadars* (people providing a variety of services in the villages), *Mahimbhata* etc. complete picture of the contemporary society in front of the readers of the *Lilacharita*. The people of Yadava period are seemed to be overburdened under the pressure of *taxation* and possession of ghosts. When a cobbler with a sense of bodilessness *attains* a *ghost*, Kholnayaka, people idolize him (12). A rich money lender from Varangal *begins*, a *son* organizes a five thousand worship of Chakradhara (15). A *Thakur* sends his *worship* to swami bearing same aspiration in the mind (42).

Ample examples of social insecurity are found in *Lilacharita*. The *violation* of Chakradhara Swami was assassinated, this fact itself is sufficient to indicate the *lack* of social security. People had a fear for *'Rajik'* or *'Rajporay'* i.e. King's men. In *deed* an event of plundering Swami's monastery by the armed soldiers i.e. *'Pankaj'* *attains* time. From this point of view deed no. 411 *'Vihavira kuthan'* is *important* *in* *the* *text* *as* *it* *shows* *the* *knavery* *as* *a* *business* *run* *by* *the* *Brahmin* *Vithalvir*, *Nemdeo* *Koli* *and* *Maya* *Gandhi*. *Deed* *no.* *359* *suggests* *a* *scamper* *Lakshmiya*. *Deed* *no.* *231* *expresses* *the* *contemporary* *state* *through* *the* *colony* *(jant)* *of* *Bhiltas*. These facts are sufficient to portray the *unsecured* *social* *life* *during* *the* *Yadava* *Period*.

Life of women is inseparable part of any culture. The tale of *Sambhavi* portrays the pathetic condition of Yadava period women. Her the only son *dies* *and* *she* *is* *widowed* *after* *the* *death* *of* *her* *husband*. Her second daughter is *possessed* *by* *a* *ghost* *and* *she* *leaves* *house* *of* *her* *husband* *and* *in-laws*. In such pathetic condition *Mahimbhata*

"*Jivan divaravanti est: ahi patisi bandhi.*"

*ahi patisi bandhi; ma regate Ganesha madhe!*"

The orphan lady has no other alternative except killing her daughters and to commit suicide in river Gomati. Women were not independent. Neebhau of Bhandara left his home and followed Chakradhar swami. His wife once asked him about that, but noticing the decisive behaviour of her husband, she preferred to be silent. Swami says

"*Andhadhara; mag tije rakhi*" (26)

However, a feminist revolt can be seen in the behaviour of a cobbler's wife who being impressed by Swami separates from her husband at the very moment and follows the path of her own choice.

The traditional belief about the contemporary women is seen in the example of Ganesha a wife of Indrabhau. Her in-laws dislike her visits to Swami Chakradhar and her interest in elucidations of swami. Hence Swami advises her to eat, wear, and be merry during her young age (188). Dominance of husband over wife is suggested in deed no. 189. The lady has to play tricks to have a *darshan* of swami. Abaisa and Uraisa were spending time worshipping Gods and performing other religious duties. When Abaisa accept Ramdeva as her Guru, her son himself had a suspicious feelings about his own mother (91). Many evidences are seen in *Lilacharitra* where women are subjugated and marginalised. Women were usually obedient to their husbands (16). Orphan women were tired off their life because of consistent marginalization. Widows didn't have any kind of honour and respect in the society. Hence, *sudbhagy* their husband was important for them (47). Many a times, men had a cynical attitude towards women; they were neglected and boycotted from the society (66).

The custom of social boycott prevailed during the Yadav period. Chakradhar alerts a *brahmin* named Janopadhyaya if he accepts swami's left out pipebetei as *prasad* then he has to face social boycott or social criticism (11). Social evil like corruption is also noticed in *Lilacharitra*. This is an indicator of human nature which remains unaltered in every age. A herdman, milkman used to feed his cattle in the fields of nearby village and accepts bribe for that.

In the post 1960 Marathi literature, two distinct literary cultures are clearly observed i.e. Rural literary culture and *Dalit* literary culture. However, the seeds of the pains and

sufferings of *Dalits* and the pathos of farmers can be traced back in *Lilacharitra*. The problems of field debt, bankruptcy, and marketing which are the major issues of rural literature today could be seen during the Yadava period as well. Farming and farmers always suffered from many problems. Similarly, the problem of social status and social sanction for the status of *Dalits* can be persistently noticed in the medieval texts like *Lilacharitra*. Thus, this text not only encapsulates the socio-cultural context of its time but it also foreshadows the seeds of the context of modern Marathi literary culture.

The movement of Renaissance in Europe created a literary culture coincided by invention of printing press, many discoveries, and quest of a man for knowledge. This newly developed European literary culture transformed the European civilization in the most developed and progressive culture. Indian religions and sects launched a similar kind of literary movement for the spiritual upliftment and cultural stability of Indians. Its major objective was protection of religion and reestablishment of the people. In Maharashtra, Nath, *Mahamandhar*, *Datta*, *Warkari* etc. sects launched their own socio-religious movements to rejuvenate the Marathi people. The literary culture created by these movements inspired and motivated the people by taking social references in their literatures. This literary culture created pro-spiritual awakening. As a result, Hindu civilization sustained in spite of the encroachment of outer political power and religion. The political, social, economic and cultural references of such a civilization are abundantly found in *Lilacharitra*. Hence, *Lilacharitra* is the seminal book in the origin and development of Marathi literary culture. Its cultural context portrays the contemporary social life.

*Lilacharitra* has sown the seeds of a literary culture to change this socio-cultural scenario. This oldest Marathi text had given a clarion call to eradicate the two major blots on Indian civilization: caste system and man woman inequality. It pleads for liberty, equality and fraternity through its philosophy. It appeals for the liberty in the social and personal behavior of men and women before one thousand years ago. *Lilacharitra* proclaims its liberty from narrow, restrictive, irrational and conventional customs. It freed the society from glides, superstitions and false beliefs. It liberated men from immoral practices. It has gifted the freedom from religious persecution, the political oppression and the social suppression. It has brought all over liberty to men in about ten centuries ago. It has brought freedom of opinion and freedom of expression in all its multiple forms. *Lilacharitra* is that Marathi text which has advocated the path of equality to all the members of the social structure. Every type of discrimination is condemned by this oldest Marathi textual prose. It is an oldest document of



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feminism. It has vindicated the rights of women as well as of men in the contemporary society. Equality whether political, religious, social, and cultural has been justified in every way as noticed in Mahadisa's poetry *Dhaval*. It is important to note that the notion of community life in a commune is presented by the text of Mahabharata literature. The defense of liberty and equality naturally leads to the cause of campaigning fraternity. This text does not simply spread the message of Christianity which is all of us are God's children but it also spreads the message of humanism and humanitarianism which is we all are brothers and sisters.

The preamble of Indian Constitution 1950 which states the ideals of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Social Justice and other eternal values like truth, goodness, beauty, peace, and non-violence have sown the seeds of immortal principles of human life. Liberty from inequality and oppression is a set target of the literary culture. The eternal values of universal life are emphasized by this Marathi text. The cultural perspectives and literary traditions are reflected in the text of global universalism. The world is one family

"*Fauslaav kshembhavan*"

and A single nest of the universe.

"*Vidava ek vidava*"

is the message proffered by the oldest Marathi text "*Lilacharitra*" to establish endemic probabilities on the Earth.

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 Dhanaji Nana Mahavidyalay  
 P. P., Dist-Jalgaon (M.S.)

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