REVIEW ESSAY

PASTS IN THE PLURAL: A REVIEW OF BHALCHANDRA NEMADE'S *HINDU: JAGANYAACHI SAMRUDDHA ADAGAL*

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Hindu: Jaganyaachi Samruddha Adagal,
Bhalchandra Nemade
Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2010, 603 pp. Rs. 650

Late in 2010, Bhalchandra Nemade's novel *Hindu: Ek Samruddha Adagal* (Hindu: The Bountiful Clutter of Living) finally hit the shelves. Awaited for over three decades since his explosive and path-breaking first novel *Kosala* (Cocoon, 1963), and the *Changdeo Chatushtya (*The Changdeo Quartet*)* novels that followed in the 1970s, this massive, six-hundred-page novel is the first of a fresh projected quartet. Alongside his fiction, Nemade has also been a wide-ranging, polemical literary critic, best known for his passionate propagation of the critical and creative philosophy of *deshivaad*. His ideas ranging from the form of the Marathi novel to the ethics of creative writing have deeply influenced the world of Marathi literature. This latest book is a powerful work, sketching afresh many of Nemade's favourite themes even as it departs significantly from his earlier novels and characters. In this review essay, I attempt to interrogate some of the novel's overarching ideas, in particular the critique of history and epistemology that is at its core.

Hindu opens with a dream. Khanderao Vitthal, the protagonist, is a promising young doctoral researcher in archaeology, part of a prestigious archaeological project at the ancient site of Harappa. In his warm tent one night, he dreams that he is presenting a paper to the project participants. He proposes a startling, new interpretation of the Indus valley script that pleases nobody, raising doubts about his future scholarly potential. Several other images from the remote past pile upon one another in the scuffle that follows, and riding a roller coaster through the millennia of history, he is flung far southeast from Mohenjo-daro towards the Satpuda range

in northern Maharashtra. He finally wakes up just as he is gently falling from the sky into a field on his father's vast property in the village of Morgao.

In the cold light of day, Khanderao's anxieties about his academic future, however, arise afresh when he receives the news that his father is dying and he must return home at once. His older brother already dead, his father's farmlands are now Khanderao's: he must decide whether to return home to be a farmer, or to go forth into the world – to the West - and pursue his academic interests. As he completes the slow and complicated journey from Sindh up to Lahore to Amritsar and Delhi down to Bhusawal and thence to Morgao, Khanderao muses on his patrimony, his past, and his options. These musings make up the bulk of the novel, ending ambiguously with Khanderao once more in a dreamlike state between the past, present and future.

The conundrum of a young man torn in two between a rural home and a (rosier) urban alternative has the danger of becoming schematic with its predictable binaries of tradition and modernity, community and individualism, stasis and dynamism. But Nemade infuses several rich themes into this bare formula, making *Hindu* a powerful exploration of agrarian labour on the one hand, and of education, social memory and disciplinary knowledge on the other. Its primary concern is with the tremendous human cost that agrarian society extracts from those who work the land, focusing starkly on its caste and gender dimensions. But it argues equally unflinchingly that escaping agrarian society for jobs in the cities is not the answer to this thorny question. An urban modernity founded on service jobs and energy hunger, with no labouring connection to the resources it consumes is parasitical, and carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. This is not a romantic celebration of the bucolic idyll. Its power lies in the vivid, pulsating, emotionally rich world it creates with extraordinary sympathy for its characters, to plead for a serious consideration of the horrors of rural society by embracing a life on and with the land, warts and all.

"Who is it?

I am I, Khanderao.

Silence. Then I ask, who are you?

I am you, Khanderao.

Thoroughly confused, I say, Eh? So I asked *you* who I am? That is to say I asked *myself* who I am? Then who is *he*? Just me?

There you go. Now we might actually recount something, Khanderao. He, you and I are the same.

Utter silence. Of many a century. Wordless.

by the way, Khanderao, be sure to tell only a story, okay?
By God, this is truly a hassle for a person like me. Nowadays people have everything except stories to tell."

And so Khanderao, a man given to muttering to himself and wandering off topic, recounts the story of this rural society, his own multiple selves – an intense individualist here, an unreconstructed conservative or a guilty status quo-ist there – dissenting, arguing with, heckling and interrupting his narrative all the way. Structurally and linguistically, this punctured narrative of rural life is a brilliant achievement (I will have more to say about its political dimensions below). A continuous, often confusing back and forth between options and opposing positions churns up the memories in the protagonist's head. The novel unfolds on two spatio-temporal journeys at once. Khanderao's historical musings about the march of history from ancient Mohenjo-daro to present-day Morgao occurs simultaneously with his own journey from Sindh to the Satpudas. Even as he ponders on the deep connections between past and present, we read of how he grew into the person he now is, a farmer's son turned academic aspirant.

One chapter closes in like concentric circles, starting on the outside with the wandering tribes and outcastes who live on the village outskirts, meeting various balutedars along the way to the Kunbis that Khanderao belongs to. This path is followed in the next chapter by a journey through Khanderao's own ancestry, with a mind-boggling mix of relatives across several generations. Some are within the local environs, others far flung – an aunt in Vidarbha, an uncle who went to Benares, a grandmother in Baroda. The furthest of these is Tironi atya, Khanderao's own father's sister, who was initiated into the Mahanubhav sect as a nun as a young girl. Stranded in Pakistan after Partition during her pilgrimage to one of its numerous mathas in the subcontinent's northwest, she loses touch with the family. While in Pakistan, Khanderao's activities include trying to find her. The narratives in these chapters are episodic, focused on intense life histories and struggles. This makes the novel as a whole difficult to read but the individual episodes – the Pendhari massacre of the Labhana settlement, Chindhu-atya's escape from her inlaws, Khanderao's eye accident, his grandmother's efforts to save his father's life as a child – are tight, fast-paced stories.

This is the warp and weft of the social fabric that is the substance of the term Hindu. It appears not as a religion, rituals or community, but as a geographical and social spread in the village, which intersects with the deep roots that every family – of multiple social and religious backgrounds – strikes into the land, with a million cross-woven threads of individual relations. Nemade peers at this richly detailed woven carpet, painstakingly

sorting out the strands of emotion and speech patterns in each motif. The novelist himself offers this weaving metaphor to the reader early on in the novel, where we read that the somewhat obsessive and insomniac Khanderao has a habit of undoing knots and winding up balls of twine. Yet another chapter neatly intertwines Khanderao's growing intellectual awareness with his continued, if diminishing, presence in the family's daily farm work, culminating in one where he finally quits the village for higher studies in Aurangabad and Pune.

It is into this trajectory that Nemade builds his critique of disciplinary knowledge about the past. As noted above, he rejects a nationalist or religious foundation, or an Indo-Aryan, Sanskritic origin for the term in favour of an older geographic and material association – the subcontinent east of the river Sindhu, and everybody in it. D.D. Kosambi's arguments about material life as a living lens, and a combined method spanning archaeology and textual criticism in approaching the past certainly inform this critique – it is no accident that Khanderao is a keen student of archaeology. But even as he carefully cleans bits of pottery that are elusive traces of the past, Khanderao also remembers a spooky childhood tale, reflecting beautifully on both the possibilities and limits of such material remains:

> [Hoping to find the coins he had heard clattering earlier, Dhanji thrust his hand into the pot] To his shock, he could feel nothing. He moved his hand about, but that heavy, clanging pot was empty. He thrust his hand in further, to his elbow, arm and shoulder, but still nothing. He couldn't even feel the bottom of the tiny pot. Dhanji broke out into a sweat. He then threw one of his own coins into the pot, and it clattered tann, tann, far down as if into a deep well, kept falling for a long while. As if for years on end. Throwing the rest of the coins down, listening to their sweet echoes, Dhanji realized that this hollow was from quite another world. This wondrous realization made him shiver, and thrusting his face into the pot, craning his neck and straining his eyes, he gazed on the depths of endless years. Forever. The end.
>
> The next day the farmers' broke down Dhanji's door to find that he had got his head stuck in the pot and suffocated to death. (77-9)

Rather than simply echo Kosambi on the indispensability of archaeology for recovering ancient history, Nemade re-examines the link between material traces and language. Khanderao is eager to recover popular consciousness through material remains, an approach his guide Dr. Sankhalia dismisses as being unsuited to scientific archaeological

protocols. But this is a bugbear with the young scholar. In his fevered dream Khanderao puts forward two very different couplets as interpretations of one of the symbols of the Harappan script. Any one symbol, he argues, can serve as the starting point for an original reading of the script, and there may be multiple, real interpretations. On hearing one such interpretation, his friend Yasin says – "I don't care if this couplet is from Harappa, it's brilliant!" Yasin is content with the moral core of Khanderao's reading, and doesn't care about whether it can be perfectly historicized. Yet all the senior scholars are upset and demand proof, even as they get their own categories all muddled up.

Here, the script and its images and scratches, is at once a literal material trace from the Harappan past. Any one of the symbols is a good enough starting point for a very original "reading" of this civilization. By underscoring the malleability of these readings, Nemade undercuts the stability of both archaeological finds as well as textual sources. Proof is itself as slippery a concept as the categories it is embedded in. Instead, he appears to suggest, the past is transmitted as memory. These memories flow through multiple modes and practices of everyday life; Khanderao's recollections, accordingly, are mediated through a large variety of oral poetry, formulaic conversations and the rehearsing of family lore, festival competitions, idle gossip and political talk.

When an old matriarch at the door of the city of Harappa asks Khanderao for the password, he answers *anekvachani bhutakali* (lit. third person plural past tense). "Hindu" pasts, then, are necessarily in the plural; it is only on acknowledging this can one "enter" Harappa. Khanderao, however, wrestles with this plurality throughout as he contrasts his own memories, received from different sources, with his intellectual apparatus, and seeks to stamp his own understanding of the past against the mocking, contrapuntal voices in his head. His agony over his career choices is at once a dilemma about whether he should *live* this memory-as-knowledge, or whether he should reclaim it intellectually as a scholar at far remove. Although somewhat predictable and weaker in comparison to the rest of the novel, the actual descriptions of university life and professorial intrigue, detailing the sorry state of formal education, elaborate this epistemological point.

Modern Marathi public culture is replete with contested narratives of the past that bear a very thorny relationship with documentary evidence and its authority, but which are powerful carriers of social and political claims and regional pride and consciousness. This is true of both nationalist or elite narratives of Maratha and Indian nationalist history as well as Dalit narratives of protest and identity. The exact authority of the textual archive, of mining documents for proof, and by extension the status of individual

or collective memories that depart from the textual archive, ha - been, and continue to be, politically charged debates in Marathi cultural discourse.

Nemade decenters the familiar, iconic motifs of regional historical memory – Khanderao's genealogical memories foreground the material drudgery of a Kunbi life and identity, aggressively distancing it from the narratives of high Maratha warrior families, their Rajput lineages and their twice-born claims. Maratha history itself is fragmented in the memories the novel excavates, into a Holkar anecdote, a Pendhari raid, an inam grant, a seventh-generation ancestor, a dysfunctional Deshmukh family. Any notion of a Hindu religious community, much less a political one, is similarly fragmented into smaller devotional groups and practices that overlap with a range of Muslim pirs and shrines. Much as Maratha history and its popularly perceived glories are denied coherence in the narrative, so also is the category Hindu, which remains disorderly and contradictory. This is one of the meanings of the novel's subtitle, *jaganyaachii samruddha adagal* – the bountiful clutter generated by the daily business of living that defies any effort at tidiness.

The particular importance of language in this argument merits a closer look. Khanderao is contemptuous of any civilization that rejects the centrality of labour in favour of a social order based on language. This applies as much to Sanskrit as it does to English. But language in this sense is implied as ritual and recitation, on a fetishizing of pronunciation and literary skill; throughout the novel, this 'alienated' sense of language is undercut with the more everyday task it performs as an archive of memory. Multiple registers of Marathi mingle with each other, even as Khandeshi, local to Morgao and its environs, dominates. Nemade has a keen ability to seamlessly integrate descriptions of mood and environment with the sketching of characters and lively dialogue. Rarely resorting to physical descriptions of people, he brings characters to life through a spectrum of speech patterns - Sanskritized bombastic speech, everyday rural familial vocabulary, college slang, urbanized pretensions of Pune-Bombay migrants, political sugar-baron-speak, or words and accents particular to caste and context, including a spectacular array of swear-words. Dakhni, Marwari, Gujarati, Hindi mix easily and frequently into Marathi speech.

This technique yields one of the finest passages in the book, which captures the sheer diversity of the people packed together in the unreserved train compartment simply through snatches of conversation. Interspersed with this focused use of language is a light vein of humorous wordplay. English words are inflected with their everyday Marathi pronunciation, and bilingual puns that play on the quite different, and hilarious, Marathi

meanings of English words vernacularize the presence of English in the Marathi sphere. Unlike writers like Salman Rushdie, who also employ similar wordplay in order to lay claim to a legitimate Indian idiom for English, Nemade's interest is in absorbing the English words to fit a Marathi idiom. In English critical writing, translated (very poorly, by Nemade himself) as nativism, the discussion on deshiyata or deshivaad has tended to disproportionately focus on the ahistorical essentialism inherent in the category nativism, and the authenticity of Indian English writing relative to that in the 'vernaculars.' But this archival approach to language is the methodological core of literary deshivaad - deshi vocabulary that takes shape from a material, local existence, employed to delineate the world from which it springs. This particular fidelity to language, it must be emphasized, is not concerned with an imagined purity, but refers to the nitty gritty of choice of registers, pitch and pace of narration or conversational lilts.

Nemade's effort to depict the social order and labouring population in all its linguistic richness recalls the 1915 classic of Marathi literature, Trimbak Narayan Atre's *Gaavgada*. A revenue official who had served under the colonial ethnographic survey, Atre combined the thoroughness of colonial sociology with a self-consciously native, reformist perspective on the village social order in a dense idiom replete with localized, work-related, caste-specific terminology. Khanderao's memories in this part of the book pile up in list after list in an overwhelming excess of language that is not only informative, but also *enumerative*.

> The [farmers'] craze for cultivating the land meant work, and more work, night and day, all year, for their wives. Backbreaking work. A start to the day with the sound of grinding flour, laid out by the mother-in-law. The husbands won't let them go, but downstairs the morning chores pile up – the grinder, churner, whisk, broom, ash, dung for smearing, fireplace, mortar and pestle, bhakri for breakfast, bhakri to be packed, baths, washing, dishes, the cows and buffaloes, firewood, groggily drawing water as if in a trance, milk boiling, curd-setting, children whining, a long line of morning alms people– vasudev, gondhali, nandibailwale, bhadangwale, tirmal, bairagis, nathpanthis, malangs, gosains, sanyasis, cripples, karunaru, and in the afternoon the fortunetelling joshis, almanac reading brahmans, holy men – all with a rightful claim at the large kunbi's house. Then again the evening balutedars, beggars, food for the buffaloes and cows, and cooking again for twenty five people. However simple, just a vegetable in a pot and a basket of bhakris it might be, it has to be enough to allow everyone, including the wage labourers, to take on nature all day. Getting up to make yet more bhakris when the last one has been picked up from the basket. Sore by the time everything is cleared up. It is as if the women of the household perform thousands of bharatnatyam gestures all day. Fingers, thumbs, neck, shoulders, hands, wrists, thighs, feet, waist – how many movements? In the air, bent to the floor, upright or seated, sweeping, rolling, patting, pouring, mashing, sifting, picking...

agrarian civilization has swayed for ten thousand years to the rhythm of this age-old female dance. (202-3)

This enumerative form almost seems like Nemade's answer to imperial, statistical knowledge. The details are present here too, but distributed into particular characters and relationships. The deeply contradictory nature of these relationships overwhelms Khanderao, who is both drawn to, and repelled by this social web. But without wrapping oneself in this web, the novelist seems to suggest, any effort at constructing knowledge – whether as modern scientific sociology, as a dispassionate scholarly study of the past, or through another language – is meaningless.

Nemade has been characteristically dismissive of post-colonialism as yet another Western import that remains anchored to English in India, but the themes of history and epistemology that run through this novel resonate considerably with postcolonial historiography – whether it is the critique of colonial knowledge, the centralizing, imperializing impulse of the colonial and postcolonial Indian state, or the critique of collective categories and identity. The localism of *deshivaad*, finding expression through the necessarily flexible cadences of language rather than fixed boundaries, has at its base a thoroughgoing rejection of the Indian nation-state, and the native, anglicized elite that took it over from it colonial predecessors. Far from being a parochial celebration of "regional vernaculars" that is also nationalist at its core, it rejects the imperializing impulse in nationalism. Nemade's critics in the Marathi sphere have tended to evaluate this position from a perspective that, for all its denunciation of colonial exploitation, takes the concepts of modernity, progress and universalism as its starting point and is suspicious of a vaguely designated "post-modernism" as a cover for conservatism. This has been the general tenor of the "progressive" reviews of *Hindu* too. English critics, for their part, have generally been content to reference Nemade's nativism as a generalized example of the identitarian pitfalls of rejecting English and all its promised, progressive possibilities.

For all the discussion deshivaad has prompted, its conceptual categories have remained under-theorized in favour of a commonsensical, self-evident articulation of its assumptions. The strength of the novel is in bringing these questions to the fore through a richly textured narrative with no easy answers, keeping categorical abstractions at bay. But these remain of immense importance in the wider context of the deshivaadi framework. Nemade is contemptuous of Hindutva, its anti-Muslim rhetoric and its visions of a pure, Hindu past; the title of the novel is squarely intended to take this category back from the votaries of politicized religion. But his argument about the freedom of memory from the burden of historical proof comes perilously close to these very Hindutva claims

to the past that also rest on a deft, slippery negotiation between archaeological proof and collective memory. Moreover, this inclusivity of "Hindu" also rests on the easy assumption that local Muslims would either unproblematically self-identify with it in their local contexts, or – as the novel seems to convey - this question would not arise in the first place were it not for nationalist troublemakers, since all religious communities would be necessarily locally fragmented.

Khanderao accepts the idea of plural pasts in principle. But in practice, like his creator, he is reluctant to explicitly engage the power relations that discipline such pluralities. Some of the best parts of the book are those that gently illuminate the world of young male sociality. Khanderao's school friends from humbler, landless backgrounds who dream of giving up their hereditary occupations in favour of more modern jobs and he sympathizes with them; indeed, he too wants out of the village. Fully aware of the pressures farm work put on women's labour detailed in the quote above, his radical self warns him that he must choose whether to be a good husband or a good farmer; he cannot be both. Indeed, the novel's imbrication of women's work and the sustainability of agriculture, and the treatment of female sociality – fresh terrain for Nemade – and its intertwining with everyday work and popular culture ranging from children's songs to family fights is extraordinary. These contradictions trouble Khanderao greatly, but he nevertheless cannot sympathize with his own sisters who wish to escape the drudgery of farm labour through an urban husband. The reader is left wondering what kind of fevered dream and narrative of the past, if any, these sisters too might have had.

Nemade remains within the broad, century-long theme in non-Brahman discourse that displaces the problems of hierarchy or politicized religion squarely onto Brahman groups. Social claims of Kshatriya or twice-born status by elite non-Brahman groups themselves are displaced in turn on to colonial enumerative instruments such as the census, which hardened caste identities into a hierarchical order. Contrasted against these twin evils of Brahmanism and colonialism is a diffuse, horizontal local life that has somehow got along well over the millennia, untouchability, invasions and all. Indeed, politics appears in the novel mostly as caricature – self-serving chiefs, the brute colonialists, hollow nationalists and finally pompous sugar barons. There may well be a case to be made through *deshivaad* for how Brahmanism and colonialism are responsible for most of the ills that plague us, but this requires a historicization and attention to politics and power that Nemade resists exploring.

For all the critique of colonial knowledge, then, his repeated use of the "thousands of years" phrase with respect to local life ends up rehearsing the familiar, and ahistorical colonial motif of the unchanging village

community. And yet, Khanderao's family lands do not remain static and subsistence-level over the generations; they grow and prosper. His father manages to strike a harmony between his simple Varkari devotion and his chemically fertilized cash crops through the green revolution and presides benevolently over cooperative societies and political party workers. It is this empire that his prodigal son is recalled to take over, not a long-held, tiny patch of land. The question of return to rural society, prompted by the dramatic urbanization across Maharashtra (and across India) in the post-independence period is an urgent question with diverse political, economic and environmental causes and consequences for all of us. Indeed, Nemade chronicles this phenomenon with great poignancy, keeping this very urbanized, newly educated, young (male) reader experiencing it, in mind. Yet, besides the ideal of localized self-sufficiency, this critique must also acknowledge and engage the historical tendency of expansionism within agriculture, and its links with urban areas.

Nemade is an extraordinarily gifted wordsmith, with the ability to bend and mould his language to suit a dizzying variety of situations. Certainly, linguistically, *Hindu* is *deshivaad* in action par excellence, Nemade's master text to demonstrate how it can be done. Although a challenge for translators – not entirely an undesirable feature - this is Marathi writing at its best, whetting the reader's appetite for the remaining three novels in the quartet. It is impossible to do full justice to the richness of the novel and its ideas in this single review. *Hindu* deserves to be read and discussed widely.