



FEATURES, BOOKS

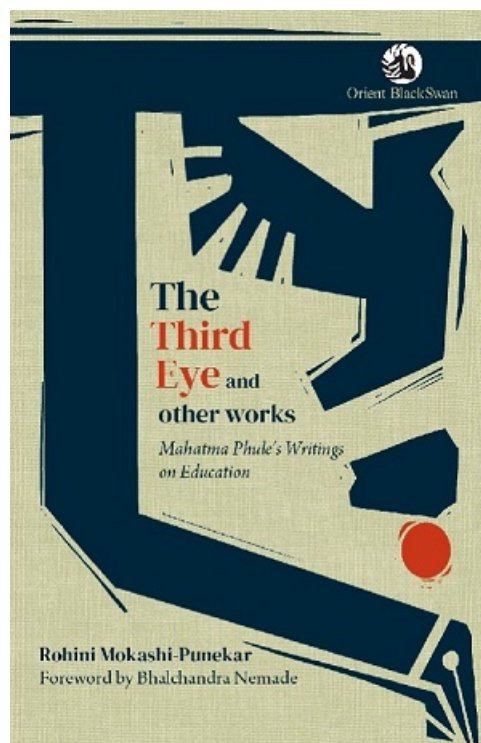
The Third Eye and Other Works

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar – JULY 15, 2023

In *The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education* (*Orient Blackswan*, 2023), Rohini Mokashi-Punekar brings to light Mahatma Jotiba Phule's belief that a modern, inclusive education alone could emancipate the oppressed orders and women; because only education democratises knowledge and the power it brings, and leads to self-awareness.

Translated for the first time into English, this volume offers two of his seminal works that underline why education is essential for social change and empowerment: *Tritiya Ratna* (The Third Eye), his subversive play of ideas written in 1855 and published 124 years later in 1979, and his satirical ballad 'Vidyakhatyateel Brahman Pantoji' ('Brahmin Teachers in the Education Department'). In his best-known work, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), Phule wrote a preface in English, exhorting the British government to fund the education of the lower castes.

The following are excerpts from the book.



The Powada in Marathi Literary and Performative tradition

...like the ballad in Western literature, the powada is a commemorative and celebratory form of poetry, with vivid evocations of battles and descriptions of the various victories of the chief or the warlord, as the case may be, meant to inspire valour and affinity with the ruling class. Originally performed by a Dalit community belonging to the Gondhal caste, such itinerant performances knit together the diverse populations of the Marathi-speaking region with their tales of contemporary Maratha history. The first powada according to the gazette of Maharashtra is 'Afzal Khanacha Vadh' performed in 1659 which describes the killing of Afzal Khan by Shivaji as a stirring act of courage and war strategy. Subsequently there were several powadas on Shivaji's heroism commemorating his victories over the Mughal in various battles. The itinerant performances of the powadas commemorating heroes and battles and the circulation of these in the countryside was crucial, as Prachi Deshpande notes, in the creation of a shared historical memory (Deshpande 2007: 56–57). The common folk also identified with this history since the concerns of the foot soldier, who was generally a peasant when not a part of military excursions, and his world of folk religious practices were an integral part of these narrations. The lead singers/composers of the powada are known as shahirs in Marathi, and the Peshwa period is known for shahirs such as Ram Joshi, Anant Phandi and Honaji Bala who composed many powadas celebrating the military exploits of the Peshwa rulers (Nadkarni 1921: 172).

As an oral and performative genre, a great deal of improvisation marks the actual performance of the powada which factors in the specific cultural and political features of its immediate surroundings. Traditionally shahirs were known for their ability to compose almost instantaneously as they sang, each performance being a variation on certain set events or well-known historical persons. Even if written versions of powadas are available today (and they were also written down historically: perhaps records of oral performances), a shahir almost never performs from any written text; it is always an extempore performance. Powadas have starkly alternating rhythms and movements to represent the narrator/singer's voice typically addressing different events or persons, known as chaal, rendered in my translation as 'movement'.

Within a few decades after the end of the Peshwa rule, marking the change in the ruling dispensation, the early nationalist leaders of Maharashtra began to use the powada as a means of articulating anti-imperialist sentiments, questioning colonial power. However, Phule's preoccupation was with the toiling masses and not with the elite aspiration for freedom. Typically, he employed the powada, as was the case with all his writings, to raise the consciousness of exploitation and oppression amongst the lower-caste masses.

Radical as always and original in his invention of new forms or reinvention of existing literary forms, Phule is almost certainly the first person to employ the powada as a satire and an interrogation of Brahmin hegemony. Intriguingly, Phule's reinvention of the powada has set the tradition for its deployment in post-independence India. In the 1950s shahirs such as Amar Sheikh, Annabhau Sathe and others belonging to the Communist Party of India used the powada to expose and interrogate the policies of the government. From the 1980s a new consensus between Ambedkarite forces and the left ideology has marked protests against exploitation. Sambhaji Bhagat is perhaps the most well-known contemporary shahir who sings powadas satirising imperialist globalising forces, communal politics and the age-old caste system.

[...]

Movement

They say he is virtuous: the school master.
 They praise him to the skies, swell his ego.
 I know him well and this is what I sing:
 An overseer by caste, all he does
 Is inspect the muster,
 And inflate his report!

The Pundit proclaims falsehoods: he says
 The Shudra caste is dull,
 Has no love for letters.

The Brahmin is the true seeker they affirm,
 Has anyone tested these claims ever?

Selfish fabrications these, so blindly consumed.
 The result: no needy child gets an education!

The Pundit is busy with his daily rites,
 It's the other kids that mark attendance,

Fool around with the children of the Shudra,
 Bully them in his stead.

At eight the Pundit enters with a show of hurry,
 Enthroned on his chair, yet restless still

Watchful of the shadows and the clock,
He teaches the Brahmin kids till ten.

Pressing his forehead as if tired,
He mops the sweat off his brow.

Feigning how hard at work he really is,
Slowly rests his head on the table.

Wakes at lunch hour with a start,
In a wink he is off!

Movement

After lunch a blissful slumber,
Then the newspaper;
Perhaps a letter that must be sent,
And to the school only later,
After the midday sun has cooled,
And teach only if it suits his mood.

We speak from our history, we do,
The Pundit turns to dust
All our yearning to learn
And educate.

Brahmins recite the scriptures,
Assert their rights, and dupe
The guileless Shudra.

Extract fees and offerings,
But block their aspiration for learning,

Then hold the Shudra up to ridicule:
These are their wily games and politics.

Liberal thoughts only to please the English,
Back home stone idols are their worship.

Such are the frauds they appoint
And anoint those whom they teach as educated!

They are learned frogs preaching to snakes,
What an end to enlightenment!

Movement

Appoint teachers from other castes, we appeal,
Who are models of true understanding:
They will take over the task of teaching.
Choose some among the Malis and Kunbis;
Others from Mahars and Mangs,
Let's have teachers with experience.

Only then will the tree flower
And hang heavy with ripening fruit.
Only then may the Shudra rejoice
And the English be shamed.

No one cares for the Shudra child, Joti grieves,
Besides a few Christian missionaries.

If you, our lords, are to be hailed as great,
Ensure schooling for the disadvantaged.

This is an excerpt from Rohini Mokashi-Punekar's *The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education*, published by [Orient Blackswan](#). Republished here with permission from the publisher.

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar is Professor of English, Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati.
