Translation as Archiving Ideas and Their Form

Phule's Poetics on Education

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, *New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp 248, ₹855.*

Rohini Mokashi-Punekar's *The Third Eye and Other Works: Mahatma Phule's Writings on Education* is one of the first authoritative English translations of the play *Trutiya Ratna*. Translated as the Third Eye, this is a Marathi play written by Jotiba Phule in 1855, also termed as the first modern Marathi "play of ideas." The play traces an encounter of a peasant caste family with religious superstition, internal and external critiques of Brahminical religion, and an eventual understanding that they develop vis-à-vis education. The play has been read in Marathi literary scholarship as a Socratic dialogue where countering views and arguments are presented for the characters to eventually tease out a more refined understanding. Though the refined understanding that gets teased out here is not that of a concept or an ideal but of one's own situation and self-knowledge.

The book primarily consists of translations from Marathi into English of two of Phule's works, the play and a ballad poem (*Vidyakhataytil Brahman Pantoji* translated as Brahmin Teachers in the Education Department). Along with these translations, it also includes the preface to Phule's work *Gulamgiri*, written in 1873 and his 1882 memorial addressed to the education commission, both originally written in English. These writings are put together to form a corpus of Phule's writings on education. The author provides critical introductions to these translations and reproductions, apart from a general introductory note on Phule at the beginning of the book.

Dramatic Critique of Brahminism

The Third Eye or *Trutiya Ratna* is introduced via an elaborate discussion on the modern play in India and specifically in Marathi to establish Phule's play as both a "bookish play" (a play in the written form that could be published and read) and as a "play of ideas" (focusing on the arguments and exchanges to recover a moral or a message rather than focused on the opulence of characters or ornate mythological worlds. Its characters, themes and devices are then discussed in detail while also drawing heavily from Datta Bhagat's (2001) introduction of the same play, originally written in Marathi. The ballad and the other two writings describe and build a critique of the ensuing system of education under the British. The author, however, provides a short and separate introduction for the ballad, focusing on the use of poetry as a form of resistance. The other two writings, which are reproductions, are prefaced by a long essay on situating Phule within the larger history of education in India. This review will thus discuss the book in three parts, dealing first with the play, then the ballad and then the reproductions, along with the background information, contextual foregrounding and the analyses presented in the introductions of all three of these.

Though the broader introduction on Phule is useful for the uninitiated, the essay that serves as an introduction to the play takes a long-winded and rather general route to situate Phule's work among modern Indian drama, often failing to tether the connections to the subject at hand convincingly. The discussion around the Censorship Act, 1876 and the transition of the themes of Indian plays from social to political themes, though interesting, do not foreground sufficiently Phule's coupling of the "social" as a political issue in most of his writings, including in the play. This underwritten feature of Phule's writings is underdeveloped in the analyses of his work. The author nevertheless succeeds in establishing that since the modern Indian theatre is a combination of Sanskrit and European drama, Phule's play, which "deploys by and large western dramatic conventions" (p 17), stands out as one of the first modern plays and thus has literary—apart from sociopolitical—value. She also notes the delay in the publication, reception and proper critical appreciation of the play as a literary work in the Marathi literary scholarship. The discussion on Marathi prose drama of the historical and the musical kind paints a vivid picture and brings out in sharp contrast what Phule was essaying with his experiments in his own writing. Her underlining of the role of the *vidushak* (the interjecting clown) as a device that is taken from the local folk tradition's *songadya* (a village jester) to do the work of evoking ideational questions is quite educative and helps us see Phule's own voice as an alternative critique of the Brahmins that may be more easily accessible to the agrarian non-Brahmins, independent of its critique from the more theological quarters of Christian missionaries.

I would, however, like to take issue with the author's reading of the motivations that made Phule turn to the cultural literary field. The author asserts that since the institutional channels of colonial modernity in both the legal and educational fields were denied to Phule (p 29), he hoped to access a mode of empowerment in the literary route. Archival records contradict this. We know that Phule not only taught in the Scottish Mission's school for female boarders in 1854, a year before he wrote *Trutiya Ratna* but was also offered its warmest commendation by the Board of Education.

His recruitment was reported by the colonial government as "fulfilling their highest expectations; the progress of the girls has been most satisfactory" (O'Hanlon 2007: 121). So, it is not that it was the lack of access to colonial institutional modernity that made Phule turn to the use of literary devices, but the sheer power with which cultural spaces were dominated by reformist Brahmins, who even in their move away from their more orthodox brethren were articulating a reformulation of premodern hierarchies into a nationalist swadeshi strain. Given that the book wants to investigate the literary conventions in Phule's writings, his attitudes and motivations in using a wide variety of literary forms to intervene in the structures of domination of his time need to be seen as a conscious decision, just like the decision to run his own schools. These decisions were based on a critical distance not just from Brahminism but also from Christianity as a doctrine, as well as the limitations of the colonial government's efforts vis-à-vis the education of the ryots.

The author translates the play adroitly, bringing to the reader the world interjected by gods and planets, distant both linguistically and temporally, to the modern English reader. She also uses simple sentence construction, drawing on Phule's own avoidance of very decorated or ostentatious ways of writing, especially in playwriting, that set him apart from other playwrights of his time. There are, however, rare instances where the vernacular idioms do not get captured very well or are mistranslated. A stark example is the translation of the Marathi idiom *kanala khada lawne*, which means a resolve to detest oneself from doing something in the future. This has been translated as "stop our ears" (p 85), which is inaccurate. Hopefully, such oversights will be addressed in the second edition.

Popular Forms and Phule

The translation of the *powada* on Brahmin teachers in the education department has a short introduction where the author underlines the importance of the poetic form in the creation and preservation of the shared memories of the reigns of Shivaji and Sambhaji and their identification with the agrarian communities. She also rightly points out how Phule uses this ballad form—dominantly associated with the singing of glory and pathos related to war and kings—to evoke satire and critique of how the new schools opened up by the colonial government were being used to reproduce the exclusion of non-Brahmins from learning and education. As the author herself notes, it is a challenge to bring out the musical quality of the ballad form in translation, though she manages to capture the sense of Phule's ballad faithfully. Again, here the author does not reflect a lot on translation choices and challenges. Further and more consequently, the translation loses the opportunity to bring to the English reader important annotations about the decisions to omit certain footnotes from the original manuscript over the course of its republications. The original 1869 publication in the Marathi magazine *Satyadipika* had three footnotes which were not included in the government's publication of the third volume of his collected works, but were later reintroduced for the Marathi reader. The author does not mention this history, which could be of interest to researchers on Phule, but neither does she use these important footnotes that Phule uses to make several important points. These footnotes relate to the use of the word *Maha-ari* (the great enemy), instead of Mahars (a caste name), which is part of Phule's larger etymological excavation of non-Brahmin pasts, a qualification that he is aware that not all Brahmin teachers mistreat their non-Brahmin pupils, and third footnote is about him advocating for mixed-caste classrooms (Keer et al 2006 [1969]: 85). It is unclear why the author decided to not add or even discuss these notes, which add to the rich history associated with Phule's oeuvre.

Finally, the essay situating Phule within the history of education in India, which serves as an introduction to the reproduction of the preface to Gulamgiri and the Memorandum to the Education Commission, is a comprehensive account of important scholarly interventions in accounting for the history of education efforts in India and the debates therein. This comprehensive survey foregrounds the two reproductions to identify Phule's singular contribution to thinking about education for the large majority of Indians in an organic and original fashion. Overall, the volume is a useful contribution as it brings together Phule's writings on education in one place for the English reader while also trying to make these writings speak to the larger cultural and political developments of the colonial polity and the relevance of these undying questions to our present context.

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