

A DARK AGE IN MEDIEVAL MAHARASHTRA? AN ESSAY IN INTERRELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

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History of medieval Deccan is marked by the political dominance of Muslims. Ethnically incoherent ruling Muslim nobility participated in the creation of the kingdom of Bahmanīs with the assistance of the indigenous aristocracy. The process of establishment of the independent regional state is often viewed negatively by local authors. This paper aims to show the inadequacy of such standpoint using the example of the theory named "The Dark Age of Marāṭhī Literature".

When the representatives of foreign religion subdue a country, whose religion seems to be the very opposite, as the representatives of Islam had found the religion in India the very opposite to the strong Islamic monotheism, such event could not pass without any conflict altogether. But it does not mean that the conflict became prevalent feature of the medieval life. In the medieval period, anywhere in the world, the conquest was the means of the state's economic policy. It would be a mistake to view the shifts of power during the medieval times as unacceptable threat to human liberty, for that is wherefrom the liberalism of present times evolved. Moreover the modern communalism by claiming the rights for "some" again reverted to the conquest of the "other's lands".

The destruction caused by Muslim invaders to India and the rules imposed by the sultans are often perceived much worse than the historical facts can suggest. There exist other sources of information than those purposely chosen by Dowson and Elliot¹ that differ from the latter and show India under the Muslim rule in a light of searching for a common platform on the part of both communities, sometimes ideally called Indo-Muslim culture. Muslims, as a religious group of considerably small number, had been completely depended on the local population if they wanted to create and maintain a functional state. But the facts related to the

¹ Elliot, H.M., *The History of India as told by its own Historians, The Muhammadan period*, ed. by Dowson, J., London: Trübner & com., 1867; "Original Preface", Vol. I, p. XXII, see also pp: XXIV-XXVII.

establishment of the society politically dominated by Muslims in the India are well known and here is no place to deal with them particularly. It would be enough to note that new rulers did not hamper the cultural development of the subcontinent, just redirected its progress. In Maharashtra, may be due to the revival of Hindu political power under the Marāṭhās, this understanding of the medieval reality is not yet common. However, in this part of the subcontinent, we come across convincing factual evidence to prove the cooperation and symbiosis than the mutual distaste or feuds. Moreover, especially literary sources can uncover the very interesting traditions as for example that of Ānandasampradāy² or the Muslim group of Marāṭhī authors who with their presented ideas belong more to Hindu than into the Muslim religious fold.³

In my opinion, it is the culture, which gives a real look of the country and not the religious persuasion of the rulers, so that the change, which occurred, although higher classes certainly felt its effects, did not influence much the basics of the Maharashtrian life – the rural settlement. (Compare, for example, with the medieval Europe where Muslims were ruling somewhere {e. g. Greece} more than three hundred years, that is longer than in Maharashtra, and the population stayed prevalently Christian.) Cultural power of Maharashtrian inhabitants based on at least two thousand years old tradition proved to be able to stand the impact of the politically strong immigrants of a new religion, moreover when the mutual cooperation was inevitable and often the values produced by this cooperation brought a benefit to the people of the country. Focusing on medieval Deccan, it was the mingling of the different cultural and social impulses which appeared as a result of the indigenous sectarian, ethnically and linguistically incoherent environment, enriched by the impact of similarly incoherent phenomenon called Indian Islam and its multi-ethnic representatives, which brought its fruits in a specific *Deccanese* variety of communal harmony.⁴

Contrary to this, there exists a theory which says that during the period from 1350 to 1550 the authors writing in Marāṭhī had to face difficult socio-political situation caused by the advent and later rule of Muslims. This became reflected in decreased quality and number of literary production in compare to the previous or following era. Therefore this period has been called “the dark age of Marāṭhī literature”. Especially it has been propounded in the Tulpule’s *Classical Marāṭhī Literature* and it has found its followers among the orthodox wing of the

² Ājgāvkar J. R., *Mahārāṣṭra – kavi – caritra*, Mumbaī: Jñānānjan, 1916, 65-112.

³ Dhere, R. C., *Musalmān Marāṭhī Santakavī*, Puṇe: Dnyānarāj Prakāśan, 1967 see also Ātār, P. Ś. L., *Musalmānānce Marāṭhīl jāṭiy sāhitya-Marāṭhī jangānāmā ityādī*. In: Bhārat Itihās Sanshodaka Mandal, Puṇe, Quarterly April [23-4], 1943.

⁴ Shyam, R., “The Succession States and Indo-Muslim Cultural Synthesis in Deccan: Medieval Period”. In: *Studies in Indology and Medieval Indian History* (Prof. G. H. Khare Felicitation Volume) ed. by Mate, M. S. and Kulkarni, G. T., Puṇe: Joshi and Lokhande Prakāśan, 1974, p. 173, Sherwani, H. K. and Joshi, P. M., ed., *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. I-II, Hyderabad: The Government of Andhrapradesh, 1973-75, Kulkarni, A.R., *Medieval Maharashtra (Marathas and the Maratha’s Country)*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1996.

Maharashtrian authors dealing with the literature in Marāṭhī.⁵ The reason for such characterization of the affairs is the conviction, that the advent of Muslims into the region led by prince ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Khaljī by 1296 and establishment of the political dominance of Delhi Sultanate that was later on followed by the creation of Bahmanī kingdom, destroyed all the cultural development of Hindus of the area. Certainly, during the 13th century Hindu culture in Maharashtra flourished and the ruling Yādavas were the first who openly gave patronage to Marāṭhī language and its literature on its way to become prevalent in this part of India.⁶ I do not aim here to show that quality literature had been produced. This is the role of a literary scientist. I would like to point out that the basic presumption of the propounder of this theory, i.e. that they were the Muslims who should be blamed for the state of literary production during the 1350 to 1550, does not take into an account the contemporary sources and even the Hindu tradition itself. Hence is there any evidence that the establishment of the Muslim political dominance⁷ brought such decay of culture and consequently literature as it is often presented?

For example the argument of “suppression of the Hindu religion” or “the destruction of temples” is very common.⁸ This is not a suggestion that such events never happened, but it would be wrong to take it as prevalent and main characteristic of the period of Muslim rule. In Maharashtra more than fifty temples from the Yādava period are recorded and only few of them were damaged as a result of the warfare. Moreover even the older temples from Chalūkyā and also from earlier period still exist.⁹ Khaljīs did not stay for long in the area. Their interests were more concerned with the northern part of the subcontinent. What could influence the region, was the transfer of the capital from Delhi to Devgiri, former capital of Yādavas, renamed as Daulatabad, which was ordered by the sultan of next dynasty

⁵ Tulpule, S. G., *Classical Marāṭhī Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979, p. 344-345, see also Kulkarni G. M., “*Santasāhitya āṇī madhyayugīn Marāṭhī sanskr̥tī ek samājāsāstrīy dṛṣṭikṣep*”. In: *Santasāhitya: Abhyāsācyā kahī diśā*, ed. by Kale, K. and Nagarkar, R. S., Puṇe: Snehavardhan Prakāśan, 1992.

⁶ Bhandarkar, R. G., *Early history of Deccan*, Calcutta: Susil Gupta Private Limited, 1957.

⁷ It is important to understand that it was only a political dominance, i.e. the rule of Muslims concerned and influenced the highest society strata in particular. Rural areas, which comprise the majority of population even now, stayed untouched and the social system of the village remained without any significant change. The Muslims actually adopted and continued the system of the previous Yādava period. For more particulars see Kulkarni, A.R., *Medieval Maharashtra*, op. cit., also Fukazawa, H., *The Medieval Deccan*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁸ see for example Sardesai, G. S., *New History of Marathas* (Vol. I), Bombay: Phoenix Publications, 1972, p. 32 or Munshi, K.M., “Foreword”. In: *The history and Culture of the Indian People – The Struggle for Empire*, (Vol. n. V.), ed. by Majumdar, R. C., Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 3rd edition, 1979, p. XI-XIX.

⁹ Deglurkar, G. B., *Temple Architecture and Sculpture of Maharashtra*, Nagpur: Nagpur University, 1974, for Yādava period see p. 23-111, for author’s statements about the temples see p. 4, p. 110, p. 167.

Muhammad ibn Tughluq (d.1351).¹⁰ Though the nobility of various ethnic origin (Turkish, Afghan, Persian and Arabic) surely enriched the capital and its surroundings by different cultural impulses, their interests were mainly political, which resulted in creation of separate Deccan kingdom of Bahmanīs established already in 1346 in Gulbarga, outside the Marāṭhī speaking territory.

But the Bahmanīs are known to be tolerant in religious matters (take for instance the worship of sultan Shihāb al-Dīn by Hindu Lingāyats or the belief in saintly powers of Nṛsimha Saraswatī by sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Ahmad II),¹¹ and it has been already proved that Maharashtrian nobles, who were the patrons of the local culture, also participated in the creation of the new kingdom.¹² Necessity of cooperation caused local language to be considered as a medium of communication of official orders.¹³ The centers of knowledge and religious education such as Nāsik, Paiṭhan, Nevāsa, Nadgāon, Pandharpur and Tuljāpur never ceased to perform their role in the religio-cultural processes evolving in the region.¹⁴ Five of the twelve sacred *Jyotirlingas* belong also to this particular area and were acting as spots of gatherings for the devotees of Śiva continuously throughout the whole period of the sultans’ rule. Finally the famous Someśwar’s temple from the period of Rāshtrakūtas, the powerful place of Gṛṇeśwar’s *Jyotirlinga*, the city of Khuldabad – centre of Sufism in Maharashtra and the city of Daulatabad – center of Muslim power in the region – all stand nearby each other even now, thus providing a proof of mutual respect. But let us speak about the big loss in the literary production from the historical point of view.

Two hundred years after Nāmdev the Marāṭhī authors did not produce the quality literature in previous quantity. That’s the theory.¹⁵ Did they fear something? Were they forced not to write? Was Marāṭhī literature (one should bear in mind that literature of the medieval period is permanently connected with the religion) prohibited by the new rulers? Tulpule admits the institutions of the *kīrtana*, *bhajana*,

¹⁰ Though strange personality (for example he built a tomb for his tooth), this sultan did not rigidly opposed the Hindus. He is known to be interested in meeting with yogis. See the account of Ibn Battūta in his *Travels in Asia & Africa 1325-1354*, trans. and selected by Gibb, H. A. R., London: George Routledge & sons LTD, 1929, rpt. 1939, pp. 225-226, see also Ashraf, K. M., *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan (1200 – 1550)*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1970, p. 102.

¹¹ Sherwani, H. K., “The Bahmanīs”. In: *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. I, ed. by Sherwani, H. K. and Joshi, P. M., Hyderabad: The Government of Andhrapradesh, 1973, p. 166, *Śṛīgurucaritra*, ed. R. K. Kāmat, Chandgadkar, Mumbai: Keśav Bhikājī Dhavaḷe, last rpt. 1993, 50 : 164-251.

¹² Joshi, P. M., “The Bahmanīs: Social and Economic Conditions”. In: *History of Medieval Deccan*, op. cit., p. 207.

¹³ see Dhavalikar, M. K., “Epigraphy – Marathi”. In: *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 402, also Desai, Z. A., “Epigraphy – Arabic and Persian”. In: *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 378.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁵ Tulpule, S.G., *Classical Marāṭhī Literature*, op. cit., p. 344.

purāṇa and *gondhaḷa* (regional performance genres where the literary texts were used).¹⁶ These were freely performed in mostly rural areas of the country and often by common man. It is necessary to understand, that one can find the real picture of the affairs in the Marāṭhī speaking region only if the common population is considered and examined, because their life reflection properly presents the general situation in the country. That devotional songs were composed in big numbers¹⁷ shows that people could worship their gods without fear.

There exist literary as well as scholarly works of the Mahānubhāva sect from this period mentioned by Tulpule and others.¹⁸ These were not orthodox but in Marāṭhī. We should not forget to mention that Mahānubhāvas were the first to produce the Marāṭhī literature at all. Is it the antibrahmanical standpoint of the sect¹⁹ reason why their works are not counted as the valuable literature? But the other authors from the Hindu mainstream as Bahirā Jātaveda, Nāmā Pāṭhaka, Mukundarāja (there are few authors of this name known to Marāṭhī tradition), Bhānudās or Kānhopātrā²⁰ were also active. Furthermore it is well known fact for the Maharashtra audience that sant Eknāth (16th cent) had to correct and purify *Dnyāneśvarī* of Dnyānadev (late 13th cent, nowadays the sacred book of many Maharashtrians), because of its plenty of corrupted versions.²¹ When these spread throughout Maharashtra if not during the “dark period”? And what about the success of Dattātreya cult culminating in writing the *Gurucaritra* by Saraswatī Gangādhār? On a top of all, the next period (i.e after 1550) when appeared Eknāth, Tukārām, Mukteśvar, Bahinābāi, Vāman Pandit, Rāmdās and other well known figures of Marāṭhī literature, was also a period of the Muslim political dominance, which is necessary to be mentioned. In the following period (1650 – 1818), which can be called the period of independence or a period during which Marāṭhas created their own state, one would expect the national revival in literature after so many “dark” years, but he would not come across comparatively greater number of the appreciated authors.²² Can one blame Muslims for that?

The religion is living with the people who profess it. If all the people were of indigenous religious tradition before the Muslim arrival it is simply not possible for a few thousands of Muslim newcomers²³ to damage the religious life in the

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 344-345.

¹⁷ see *Śrīsakalasantagāthā*, collected by Śrī Nānāmahārāj Sākhre, ed. R. R. Gosāvī, Puṇe: Sārthī Prakāśan, 2000.

¹⁸ Tulpule, S.G., op. cit., pp. 348-352, Kulkarni, K. P., “Marathi 983-1600”. In: *Maharashtra State Gazeteers: Language and Literature*, Bombay: Directorate of Government Printing, Stationery and Publications, Maharashtra State, 1971, pp. 9-25.

¹⁹ for the teachings of the Mahānubhāvas see Feldhaus, A., trans., *The Religious System of the Mahānubhāva Sect (The Mahānubhāva Sūtrapāṭha)*, Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1983.

²⁰ Tulpule, S.G., op. cit., pp. 346-347, 354.

²¹ Ibid., p.359, see also Abbot J.E., trans., *The life of Eknath – Śrī Eknāth Caritra translated from the Bhaktalīlāmṛta*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981, p. 137.

²² Priyolkar, A. K., “Marathi – 1600-1800”. In: *Maharashtra State Gazeteers*, op. cit., pp. 30-34.

whole Marāṭhī speaking area, anyhow they could try. There can be given a contra – argument that they created fear and used the force, but even the great saints of Maharashtra who belonged to Vārkarīs – the most popular devotional sect of the area – speak against such perception of the reality. There are references in the *abhāngas* of Nāmdev, Cokhāmeḷa, Bhānudās (first two of them lived during the period of shifting the power from Hindu hands into Muslims’), where these saints sing about the pilgrimage to Pandharpur and plenty of the pilgrims who are coming to see their beloved Viṭṭhal with all the pomp and without fear.

Nāmdev:

In the month of Āśādh, in the month of Kārtik,
Devotees come and take a bath in the Chandrabhaga River.
They get liberated from the circle of the rebirths
as soon as they see the God.²⁴

Cokhāmeḷa:

Clap the hands and start your journey,
Take the road to Pandharī!
With Hari’s name on your lips, there’s no fear and no worry.
That’s what Gītā and Bhāgavata say in their stories.
Plenty of banners gathered on the bank of Bhīmā
and the air rezones with Victory, Victory!
Vārkarīs of all casts came and assembled
In Kaula borough, where’s the fair of Pandharī.
“One comes as a villain and leaves purified!”
– proclaims Cokhāmeḷa while beating his drum.²⁵

Bhānudās:

Understand Pandharpur as the original place of liberation of the soul!
Happily Vaiṣṇavas are shouting Victory, Victory!²⁶
Sound of the brass plates and *chiplis*²⁷ is rezoning in the air.
Carrying the banners they sing the name of Viṭṭhal with joy...²⁸

²³ There are 9.67 % of Muslims in recent Maharashtra, the Muslims ruled for min. 250 years, *Census of India 1991*, “Maharashtra”.

²⁴ *Śrīsakalasantagāthā*, collected by Śrī Nānāmahārāj Sākhre, ed. R.C. Dhere, Puṇe: Vardā Prakāśan, Vol. 2, 1983, (n. 2319) p. 675.

²⁵ *Śrīsantagāthā (Cokhāmeḷa)*, collected by Śrī Nānāmahārāj Sākhre, published by Bhāve, H. A., Puṇe: Vardā Books, 1990, (n. 2) p. 147.

²⁶ of their beloved God, i. e. Viṭṭhal.

²⁷ two wooden sticks used for clapping together by the devotees of Viṭṭhal.

²⁸ *Śrīsakalasantagāthā (Śrī Bhānudāsānce abhānga)*, collected by Śrī Nānāmahārāj Sākhre, ed. K. A. Joṣī, Puṇe: Śrīsantavāñmay Prakāśan Mandir, 1923, (n. 22) p. 3.

The pilgrims used to come to Pancharpur, located in the southern part of the country, from the different parts of Maharashtra (for example Bhānūdās from Paithan²⁹). Therefore if they were able to perform the pilgrimage in such a way as they described (and why not to believe the saints?) it seems that the religious life of the Vārkarīs was not even disturbed. The tradition of pilgrimage to Pancharpur started already during the reign of Yādavas, but significant is that it developed during the “dark period” as one can easily see from the poems of saint-poets. None of them wrote about anything “dark” in relation to their devotional services dedicated to the Pancharpur’s deity.³⁰ Curiously enough famous Maharashtrian hagiographer Brahmin Mahīpati, whose attitude towards Muslims was surely not enthusiastic, mentioned the story of Bhānūdās who brought the *murti* of Viṭṭhal back to Pancharpur ruled by Bahmanīs from Vijayanagar where Rāmarāja had taken it out of his devotion.³¹ Why Bhānūdās would do it if he did not feel Viṭṭhal being safe at Pancharpur? It is also worth to notice that this saint who lived exactly in the middle of the condemned period never mentioned the Muslims in any of his preserved works, though being an inhabitant of the ancient city of Paithan, he surely must have known about them.³² It might have been that the relation with the government was not that tragic. His grandson Sūryanārāyaṇ was most probably the same person as the *guru* of Dalpat Rāi, the famous legislator and *vazīr* of Ahmad Nizām Shāh.³³ Finally, considering that the Vārkarīs represent the biggest sect of the area and formerly mentioned Mahānubhāvas also enjoyed the religious freedom in the development of their literature as well as sectarian life, the presumption can be made that the situation of the remaining cults of the indigenous religious tradition was more or less similar, especially if those were in minority. What is the point of speaking about damage then?

The era, which is claimed to be “the dark”, seems exactly corresponding to the time when was laid the foundation of later religio-cultural symbiosis. The seed of the mentioned cultural process was sown just during the “dark age”. Therefore later in 16th century a converted Brahmin could become Nizām Shāh,³⁴ never ceasing to support the interests of his former kin; in the end of the same century sultan of Bijapur in the name of art worshiped Saraswatī and Ganēś and even wrote the treatise on classical nine sentiments of Hindus – *navarasa*.³⁵ references

²⁹ Abbot J.E., Godbole P.N.R., trans., *Stories of Indian saints – Translation of Mahipati’s Bhaktavijaya*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988, p. 110.

³⁰ see the works of all poets in *Śrīsakalasantagāthā*, op. cit.

³¹ Mahīpati, *Śrībhaktavijaya*, ed. V. K. Phadke, Poona: Yaśavanta Prakāśan, 1980, XLIII.

³² *Śrīsakalasantagāthā (Śrī Bhānūdāsānce abhnaga)*, op. cit.

³³ *Marāṭhī Vanmaykoś*, ed. Khānolkar G. D., Mumbai: Mahārāshtra rājya sāhitya sanskr̥ti mandal, 1977, p. 25, see also Katre, S. M., “Sanskrit and Prakrit”. In: *Maharashtra State Gazeteers: Language and Literature*, op. cit., p. 5.

³⁴ Briggs, J. trans., *Firishta, Mahomed Kasim – History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power in India, Till the year A.D. 1612.*, 4 vols., London, 1829, rpt. Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1966, Vol. 3, p. 130.

to Hindu mythology became a common trait of the Bijapur-school of poetry,³⁶ to one of the main Marāṭhā chieftains sons were born due to his wife's devotion to a Muslim saint;³⁷ according to the regional tradition ancient Hindu god appeared as an *avatār* (incarnation) in a form of Muslim Malanga Fakīr;³⁸ Muslim Marāṭhī commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* was written by Husain Ambar Khān, the associate of Nizām Shāhī court³⁹ and regional saints of Muslim origin were studying yoga under the Hindu gurus or writing the devotional songs to Rāma or Viṭṭhal.⁴⁰ Finally the multicultural approach in the general socio-political mood of the times brought on one hand the political fall of the Deccanese states, whose main characteristic lay in their ability to maintain the communal harmony, and on the other hand the rising of Marāṭhā power, often presented as the revival of national power of the Maharashtrian people.

State control cannot probably discourage someone to write, if he really wants to. During the medieval times the state control didn't reach to such strength and abilities as it did in the modern times. Therefore it was even less able to prevent writers from writing. It is a writer's decision whether to write or not. Obviously without the state support (and it would be not correct to expect the Muslim government, which had its capital out of the Marāṭhī speaking area (i.e. Gulbarga, Bidar) to support the sectarian literature in that language) it might have been difficult to preserve the prevalently brāhmanic written literary production. Yet it comes clear that if Muslims were not an obstacle in literary outburst of Maharashtrian saint poetry as well as other known works of literature in those times and particularly if the dominant Vārkarī cult of the region could spread exactly during the period of Muslim political dominance, all of which can be supported by the factual evidence, the search for the explanation of the decrease of valuable Marāṭhī works should be redirected. The answer of the whole problem surely cannot be given from the communalist point of view. One has to accept the historical facts that provide us the background for better understanding of social, political as well as religious situation during the medieval period in Maharashtra. They clearly show that Muslims participated in the cultural development of the area.

³⁵ Eaton. R. M., *Sufis of Bijapur*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 100.

³⁶ Khān, Mas'ūd Husain, "Language and literature – Dakhnī-Urdu". In: *History of Medieval Deccan*, Vol. II, ed. by Sherwani, H. K. and Joshi, P. M., Hyderabad: The Government of Andhrapradesh, 1975, p. 28.

³⁷ *Maharashtra State Gazetteers*, Bombay: Gazetteers department, Government of Maharashtra, first pub. 1884, revised edition 1976, p. 258, see also Kulkarni, A.R., *Medieval Maharashtra (Marathas and the Maratha's country)*, New Delhi: Books & Books, 1996, p. 123.

³⁸ Mahīpati, Śrībhaktavijaya, ed. V. K. Phadke, Poona: Yaśavanta Prakāśan, 1980, adhyāya 45, ovī n. 100, see also Dhare, R. C., *Datta Sampradāyācā Itihās*, Puṇe: Nīlakanṭha Prakāśan, ś. 1880, pp. 231-235.

³⁹ Dhare, R. C., *Muslimān Marāṭhī Santakavī*, Puṇe: Dnyānarāj Prakāśan, 1967, pp. 42-49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, see chapters on Ālamkhān, Śekh Mahammad, Śekh Sultān and Latīfshāh, see also Y. M. Paṭhān, *Muslim santakavī va Śrī Viṭṭhal*. In: Santasāhitya-cintan, Aurangabad: Almās Paṭhān, 1983.