


Well-known writer B. M. Purandare (also known as Babasaheb Purandare) was recently given the *Maharashtra Bhushan* award by the government of Maharashtra for his work in popularising the life and times of Shivaji Bhosale, the Maratha king. Purandare's writings on Shivaji are widely circulated in Maharashtra and elsewhere but many scholars have criticised his work for lacking academic rigour and objectivity. He is often charged with appropriating Shivaji as a saffron messiah to suit a pro-Hindutva narrative and fostering hatred against Muslims in Maharashtra.

Purandare portrays Shivaji as *Go-Brahman Pratipalak* (Guardian of Cows and Brahmins) and perpetuates the myth that Shivaji was an avatar of Lord Shiva who was meant to save the Hindu religion from the tyrannical rule of Muslims. There have been alternate narratives on Shivaji which challenge this such as "*A Ballad of Raja Chatrapati Shivaji Bhosale*", written by Jyotiba Phule. Phule's ballad presents Shivaji as the leader of the lower castes and attributes his achievements to the strength and skill of his shudra and ati-shudra armies. More recently, Rajkumar Tangade and Sambhaji Bhagat revived Phule's lineage of thoughts through their play *Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar Mohalla* in which they present Shivaji as a leader who did not discriminate among his subjects on the basis of caste and religion while debunking several myths created in process of Shivaji's appropriation by Marathas and Brahmins.

Purandare's work does come across as an almost fictionalised account of Shivaji's life, rather than a rational way of reimagining the historical past. For instance, he writes that while being pregnant with Shivaji, Jijabai's cravings during pregnancy were to scale the walls of forts, wear armour and go to war (*Raja Shiva Chatrapati*, p. 81-82). Purandare's followers defend such stories by arguing that these are literary devices employed by the writer to heighten the readers' experience. This may well be the case, but what it also does is to turn Shivaji into a mythical character; in turn, this denies the reader's ability to connect with Shivaji on a human level. Also, using literary tropes to heighten the reading experience is fine, but it becomes a problem when the readers start believing these versions as "history".

Purandare's project of mythologizing Shivaji continued through the staging of the play *Janata*<sub>1</sub>

 *Raja*, a magnum opus based on Shivaji's life. The script for the performance was derived from Purandare's writings and hence retained his problematic approaches to narrating history. Shivaji and Subaltern Identities  
*Janata Raja* was performed in Goa too by Ponda-based collective *Vijayadurga Sanskrutik Mandal* in 2002. It is important to note that this performance was not an ordinary proscenium stage play but a spectacle that employed huge sets, stage gimmicks, and mobs as theatrical devices to create an overwhelming impact on the audience. Spectacle performance was a genre that was greatly used by Fascist regimes in inter-war Europe. A number of scholarly works have pointed out that the effect of the spectacular is that it creates conditions that make reason subservient to passion.

The issue here isn't just that of honouring Purandare with a state award, but the larger concerns of history writing in post-colonial spaces such as India. History, in such spaces, shares a curious relationship with the nation-building process as it favours monolithic narratives of pre-colonial pasts. Historical narratives that conform to this nationalist agenda are given preference through state apparatuses, such as school textbooks and state-sponsored events – (*Shiv Jayanti* ceremonies in this case). The act of conferring Purandare with the state award is a move to further legitimise his pro-Hindutva portrayal of Shivaji while systematically blurring the visibility for narratives that challenge the underlying brahminical hegemony in history- writing.

In India, this kind of privileging of particular historical discourses is not a new phenomenon. To sustain India's image as a "Hindu" nation, discourses that talk about Islamicate, European or Graeco-Buddhist influences on the subcontinent are often pushed into oblivion or perceived as threats to the "idea of India". Purandare's writing reeks of Hindutva pride and contempt for Muslims, often taking readers' attention away from the relatively egalitarian principles by which Shivaji ruled his subjects. Purandare's *Go-Brahman Pratipalak* image of Shivaji has been favoured by political outfits such as Shiv Sena and BJP to spew hatred against minorities. For a long time, Brahmins and Marathas of Maharashtra have appropriated Shivaji to suit their politics, often maintaining silence over his shudra roots.

Shivaji is a key figure to understand subaltern identity politics, not just in Maharashtra but also in Goa as he enjoys immense popularity among Goan Hindu bahunas. Hence a nuanced understanding of Shivaji's life is needed instead of such uncritical celebrations of Purandare's work which give a skewed understanding of Shivaji. One should be suspicious such histories

as they are often just a tiny part of the whole story. These selectively written and propagated histories are the foundations on which the edifices of the nation are built which need to be shaken so that alternate histories oppressed by those serving nationalist interests can claim space and gain visibility. People like Purandare are but the guardians of this fragile edifice and their masquerading as “historians” need to be critically questioned instead of being taken at face value.

(First published in *The Goan Everyday*, dt: 1 September, 2015)



Share this...



Facebook



Whatsapp



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit