
**Marginalised Centre or Centralised Margin: a Study of Social Dialectics
in Anna Bhau Sathe's *Phakira***

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Abstract

The British Rule in India has brought tremendous transformation in the social system of India. The first and foremost, it destroyed the princely states in the country and brought it under single control. Second, the people divided by states became unified and started identifying themselves as Indians. Third, it challenged the social division of people in different castes based on their works and professions. The challenge to caste based division gave birth to many social reformers in India and their efforts diluted the boundaries between margins and the centre. The mitigated boundaries increased hopes of people which in turn produced many classic stories—some absolutely fictional and some realistic. *Phakira*(1959) is one of such stories where Anna Bhau Sathe presents his real hero in the casteless environment of the western Maharashtra. This paper attempts to analyse the social dialectic from the dichotomy between the centre and the margin.

Keywords: Margin, centre, social dialectic, caste,

Introduction

Last three centuries have altered human development process tremendously. People started understanding ideologies and strived to achieve their own place in the society around since the renaissance. The loan of those free thoughts was brought to India by the European rulers, particularly the British who had then won a new thought of freedom to culminate in their empire across the globe. Their treatment to people in India, who, in their caste dominated social set up, spent their lives in servitude gave a new hope to stratify their lost positions as human being. The servitude was imposed on them in the name of religion and god by a particular caste which ultimately functioned as authorities in the field without any opposition except in the 19th and 20th century Maharashtra.

It is obvious for the writers writing under influence of Jotiba Phule, Rajarshi Shahu and B. R. Ambedkar to present an idealistic classless, casteless society where everything is as per the predictions of Karl Marx. Anna Bhau Sathe (1920-1969) is not an exception to this. His novels address one or more social issues at a time. His *Phakira* (1959) is one of the novels which

presents a Robin Hood type hero in the caste dominated sociocultural set of western Maharashtra.

Sociocultural Setting of *Phakira*

In the preamble to *Phakira*, Annabhau Sathe states that the novel takes its story from a real character of Phakira who was once upon a time declared bandit by the British officers. The man was a living legend who fought initially for the glory of his village and later fought for the upliftment of his own community. He belonged to the *Mang* caste, one of the lowest castes in pre-Independence Maharashtra. Phakira surrendered before the British government when the author was merely in the cradle. This sets the novel before 1920s. Phakira lived a life of almost forty years which implies that the novel opens sometimes in 1880s.

The Indian society in the second half of 19th century Maharashtra was greatly disturbed by the social movement of Jotiba Phule and the movement was further augmented by Chh. Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj, the Prince of the Kolhapur State. However, for the society, which followed the servitude of more than 4000 years, it was very difficult to change drastically to the eradicate caste in a short span of 40 years. It is this social setting that presents certain contradictions which this paper attempts to discuss.

The Mang

‘Caste is still the foundation of the Indian social fabric and the record of caste is still the best guide to the changes in the social fabric.... Every Hindu is born into a caste and his caste determines his religious, social, economic and domestic life from the cradle to the grave’ (Ambdekar Vol.5 p.7). One of the four *Varna* is *shudra*. *Shudra* are the people who undertook the mean or lowest quality work mostly associated with carcass, dead bodies of animals, their skins, their blood and the related activities. The major *shudra* population in Maharashtra is constituted by *Mahar, Mang, Chambhar, Holar, Dhor, Bhangi* and almost seventy other castes. All of them are associated with dead bodies, flesh, carcass, the leather work, disposal of dead bodies and the allied work apart from cleaning dung and lavatories, and sweeping work.

Mang is one of the major *shudra* castes in antiquity having the status of untouchables. The major works assigned to them were disposing dead animals, take out their skin and use for

preparing different musical instruments often used in different festivals and ceremonies. They are more famous for their traditional musical skills and offered special privilege in different village festivals such as *yatra* or *jatra*. They often accompanied the people from *Holar* caste. They often spent life in poverty as they were never assigned with any landholding or property. Most of them, even today, work in someone else's field to earn their livelihood. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, they undertook different works assigned by the landlords, Patils, or the village authorities for their livelihood. They also produced ropes out of the agave plants and distributed to different household in their village. When there was no work available for them, they became thieves and robbers. However, they dared never to kill people without a very strong reason. Many historical records prove them to be the people of strong mantle and warrior attitude due to their strong built statures (Wankhede 2007, p.31). They celebrated even the small prizes even in the form of words and recalled them again and again to cheer up their pathetic life. In the British government in India, many men from the caste were absorbed in the military and police departments. This improved their economic conditions to some extent but their social status remained the same.

Untouchables and Untouchability in India

In the fourth chapter of his book *Untouchables or The Children of India's Ghetto*, B. R. Ambedkar lists out the treatment given to the untouchables in the Indian villages. According to him, every Indian village is divided into two sections—(i) Touchables and (ii) Untouchables. The touchables form the major community who lived inside the village, were strong and powerful community, economically sound, occupied power positions. On the contrary, the Untouchables a minor community, small in number, lived outside the village in separate quarters as per their castes, and functioned as hereditary bondsmen. They had no access to temples, forbidden from making wealth and property or possessing cattle but were supposed to look after them for the touchables. Their entries in the public places like temples, the village gathering places, water sources like streams and wells, etc. were strictly forbidden as was believed that their presence polluted these places. To wear clean or new clothes, to put on watch and precious ornaments, to ride on horse, to use palanquin, to sit in the chair of a touchable, to eat with a

touchable, to speak cultured language, to name children like touchables, etc. were offences and the untouchables were punished severely for these offences.

The untouchables were assigned duties specific to different occasions in the houses of the touchables that included carrying messages of death or marriage in the house, breaking fuels and going on errands, accompanying a girl or woman from the touchable house when she goes to other village or her husband's house, performing all the menial acts on the occasions of festivals. The epitome of all these were offering their women to members of the village community to be made the subject of indecent fun (Ambdedkar Vol.5 p.20-22).

The Centre and the Margin

The universe is structured and all its constituent elements are governed by certain set of laws meant specifically for them. Likewise, even civilizations and societies are also structured. It is obvious for every structure to have a centre. 'The function of this center was only to orient, balance, and organize—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what might call the *play* of the structure' (Derrida 1988, p. 109). The idea of a structure without centre is unimaginable. The centre has dual function—it creates and balances the structure on one hand, and while doing so it escapes the structurality on the other. It finds an escape route for itself so that it is 'within the structure and outside it' (Derrida 1988, p. 109). The centre when it follows the laws of the structure is a part of the structure and gives no scope for 'play' in the structure. Contrarily, when the centre does not follow the laws of structure, it escapes the structurality, and is superior to the structure.

Existence of structure implies existence of 'margins'. The centre is the focal point while margins are secondary elements of the structure. They have a set of rules for their behaviour in the structure. They should not break or escape the rule else the total function of the structure would collapse. When the centre escapes structurality, the marginal elements cannot occupy its place as centre even if outside the structure has complete hold of the structure. Marginal elements of a structure are assigned their physical, ethical, ethnic values according to their closeness to the centre.

Thus, in the present discourse, Touchables are the centre and all the lower caste people are at the margins. The Indian caste system has, since antiquity, placed the Brahmin at the centre as they hold all the rights related religion and god by birth. They decided the purity, sanctity, adequacy and need of a particular social act in the periphery around. Equally powerful centres were the Marathas who acquired their social position due to their physical prowess besides wealth and property. The free play in the centre allows the Brahmin and the Maratha to occupy each other's places as and when required. All other castes are at their mercy for certification of validity or rejection of a particular action.

Analysis

Hierarchy among the shudra castes was a very common practice all over India even in the second half of 20th century. There were margins even among the marginal. Contradictorily, Anna Bhau Sathe presents an alleviated Indian society found sometimes in the 1980s Maharashtra contrasting the time of action of the novel.

It is not surprising for Shankarrao Patil to express his desire to bring *Jogani*, the symbolic holy coconut kernel, to his village so as to extend its glory across all the known and unknown villages near and distant, and simultaneously earn special respect among people. He wanted to make his life interesting and full of adventures. Ranoji, a *mang*, on the other hand decided to undertake the herculean task to win respect for himself and his family among the upper caste authorities so that, when in life-threatening trouble, he can use his good deeds as a bail. Ranoji was quite aware of the risk but he wanted to have glory even if the price was death. The two had completely opposite intentions—glory and survival.

Anna Bhau Sathe has presented the centre and margin dichotomy in a way that it would not hurt the touchables or insults the untouchables. His overall description contrasts with the social setting in which the action in the novel takes place and the period in which he writes. The *Mangwada* is a residential quarter of *Mang* adjoining *Mahar* and *Ramoshi* quarters outside the Wategaon village. *Mangwada*, the quarter of the *mangas*, is surrounded by cactus. The entrance of the quarter, there is an arch made by two cactuses coming together. The houses stand somehow as they are made up of the leaves of sugarcane. The people there were always afraid of the rain and storm as these dilapidated huts may collapse anytime to make them shelter less.

Nobody in the village knows how many people live in that quarter. What they eat no one cares about. Only thing the villagers know is all these are legitimate guards of their village and their responsibility is to protect the village. (*Phakira*, p. 4).

The Untouchability approach of the village authorities like Shankarrao Patil and Vishnupant Kulkarni suddenly changes when Ranoji sacrifices himself for bringing glory to the village by winning *Jogani* for his village. Patil and Pant take care of Ranoji's family after his martyrdom. However, their approach remains as it is for all other members of the marginalised castes. Reasons are simple. It is Ranoji who brought glory and the honour of celebrating the biggest festival in Wategaon. His sacrifice brought fame to the village and importance and special privilege to the village authorities like Patil and Pant. They were ultimately awarded the honour and reward for the sacrifice of Ranoji. In the age of Untouchability, Ranoji's family became touchable due to his single deed.

The second contradiction appears when the second important event takes place. Phakira, the protagonist, secures *Jogani* from Bapu Khot and punishes him by cutting his hand. The honour was protected by Phakira. Immediately after this event, Phakira enquires about exile of Sawla who was banished by the British rulers for no reason for more than fifteen long years. Pant could have challenged the banishment in the beginning only but he does not. When Phakira takes word from him, Pant looks into the matter and cancels the unlawful banishment to bring back Sawla. Vishnu Pant delays the action apparently for no cause but performs it when it was proposed by the most powerful element of the margin. The centre moves. Phakira got recognition as a leader of the downtrodden and won a lot of respect for his gallantry and integrity. He was the new hero who worked for Shankar Patil and Vishnupant Kulkarni.

Phakira becomes a bandit when he realises that the attitude of Ravahe Patil, who became *Patil* after Shankarrao Patil, was prejudiced and all his activities are only to trouble Phakira and his companions. In the due course of time, Phakira challenges the authority of the Patil and kills him with Bapu Khot. Each of his attempts at acquiring the centre position are hindered by a particular group of people.

This is an idealistic picture of the society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Anna Bhau Sathe, being a Marxist by ideology, often ignores the ills of the society and visualizes it to be ideal. His ideal views contrast with the stark social realities of the period.

Conclusion

The novel *Phakira* presents oscillations of power norms between the centre and the margin. The margin takes position of centre at one point of time and at the other, centres throws it back to its original state. Patil and Pant are assigned centre position because of their birth rights while Phakira and Ranoji attempt to achieve it by their valour, gallantry and abilities to control the power structure. The contradictions of setting organised by the author ultimately help us understand the power structure in a society governed by norms emphasizing dominance of caste. Anna Bhau Sathe simultaneously emphasizes the possibilities of the margin occupying the place of centre though the function of the centre remains intact.

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