

Comparative Method and the Study of Early Modernity in Bangla and Marathi Poetry

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The object of this paper is to retrospectively examine the different dimensions of what was understood as the literary modern in the first half of the twentieth century in the Indian subcontinent through Bangla and Marathi poetry. Simultaneously, it explores the ways in which the modern got negotiated and enhanced in the larger context of Indian literary culture by the use of comparative strategies and perspectives. Selected ideational aspects of modernity in the early period of both the languages have been discussed here. The idea is to indicate the immense possibilities of comparative methods in the study of constitutive elements such as modernity in Indian literatures and their historiography in the larger national context. The arrival of the modern 'in most Indian literatures caused an upheaval of a tremendous order. As Herbert Read in *Art Now* (1933) pointed out, the modernist upheaval was not so much a revolution, in the sense of a turning over or even turning back, but rather a break-up, a devolution, some would say a dissolution. It was catastrophic. This crisis-centred change affected poetry signalling dislocations in belief and assumptions, and disintegration of earlier forms and structures. It indicated a pluralization of multiple worldviews emerging from a proliferation of polyphonic voices, classes, and narratives that emerged in the early decades of the last century. There is an abundance of accounts, both literary and critical, that variously interpret this modernist shift. Tracing such a history, rather histories, requires developing critical methods which would examine the complex interlocking of cultural traditions and literary practices that modernity confronts rather than overarching descriptions and interpretative strategies to arrive at easy generalizations. Another startling feature of modernity in the Indian context which was discernible from the beginning was the rich layering of its signifiers and abundance of meanings and palimpsests this created. This led to further complications for interpretative and critical texts tracing its trajectories. Initially the 'modern' in Indian poetry got associated with the 'current', the contemporaneous and the immediate. Therefore, words like *adhunik* (from *adhuna* meaning the present or/and the immediate) in Bangla and *navin* (meaning new) in Marathi got associated with the innovative poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century. Gradually, the idea of the modern got complexly associated with aesthetic forms and styles which suggested, as succinctly expressed by Peter Childs in the context of Western modernism, "increased sophistication, studied mannerism, profound introversion, technical display, self-scepticism and general anti-representationalism" (Childs 392). Such a rich tapestry requires nuanced estimation of its aesthetics and themes, which poses a challenge for historians and analysts of the modern even today.

It is important to note here that though modernity was located differently within each Indian language-literature at different timeframes, some overwhelming commonalities of its dissemination across the Indian subcontinent are pronounced. This asks for a study of the specifics of its presence in the targeted individual literature as well as its involvement in the modern historiography of Indian literatures in a manner which could enfold both perspectives in pertinent ways. By the 1980s, the impulse and need for authentic narratives of Indian modernity, both within its practises and theoretical formulations, emerged. A comparative mode was thought to be most effective for an authentic accounting of the reach of modernity in the pan-Indian context. It would be able to attend to the ramifications of modernist articulations and underline its import as one of the defining principles in Indian literary history, without dislodging the significance of its contextual moorings. By then, the effectiveness of the comparative method as a powerful tool to discover correspondences between *bhasha* literatures had been abundantly stressed by major historians of Indian literature. This was especially so after several studies along comparative lines had broadened the possibilities of our understanding of different literary and cultural phenomena at the regional, national, and global context. These studies included histories as well as accounts of movements, genres, themes, influences, critical frames, etc. Given these ventures, a comparative analysis and engagement of the modernist experience in Bangla and Marathi poetry appeared potentially most fruitful.

The study of the modern in the context of just Bangla or Marathi, though plentiful, was constricted by being bound in an isolated literary culture which prevented proliferations and configurations of meanings to emerge. Several other reasons could also be attributed for this situation. However, it is important to note what Sisir Kumar Das has pointed out in the Prologue to *A History of Indian Literature*:

Despite all diversities—linguistic and non-linguistic—the literatures produced in different languages tend to converge, as do various language families at several points. Any literary history that ignores these facts or fails to take account of them will present only a fragmented view of Indian literary activities. (Das 9)

This is particularly true of modernity which comprises so many layers of importations and assimilations across literary cultures and sensibilities, Western and Indian—inscribed in the initial stages in the colonial and later in the postcolonial. Thus, singular readings of modernity in isolated literatures could be incomplete and/or misleading, its import unclear. This gets amply illustrated when we examine the reception and reading of the significance of Dalit poetry in Marathi in the 1960s. Viewed from within the Marathi literary perspective, it appeared to both its adherents and critics as a break-away movement opposing not only the earlier decadent literary traditions but making a clean break from the preceding *navin* sensibility and Mardhekarian modernity. Dalit sahitya seemed an isolated literary

phenomenon of a group of socially marginalised people. Thus, in early literary and critical histories, Dalit was either an upstart movement or an alternative nativist articulation in contrast to the elitist modern. The description depended upon the affinities of the critic. However, when measured from a pan-Indian perspective and in comparison with similar movements in other *bhasha* literatures, several subtexts emerge. Among several other Indian language-literatures, Gujarati, Kannada, and Tamil literature had a strong Dalit literature emerging in and around the same time as in Marathi though not as strongly visible then as in Maharashtra. What is common to all or most of them was the emergence of a common platform where articulation of marginalised or unrepresented voices which had scant or little space in the mainstream literary discourses found legitimacy and value. Caste, as a regulating factor governing the socio-political as much the cultural, is what the Dalit movement brought into the national literary discourse forever changing worldviews, aesthetics, and literary practices. This democratic impulse was the result of the larger effects of modern thoughts across the nation and in continuity with the literary perspectives that flourished in the name of the *adhunik/modern*. Thus, their opposition and condemnation were not of the *navin* but against those aspects/elements of the traditional masquerading as the modern. As a matter of fact, several of the manifestos and literary declarations of the Dalit movements are deeply rooted in the intellectual and cultural values of committed modernity. Thus, when seen from a comparative angle, the emanation of Dalit literatures transformed our perceptions of *bhasha* literatures from the inside and simultaneously shaped the contours of the modernist poetic discourse in India in a radical manner. It unsettled the class and caste profiles of poets and readers. The idea of the silenced 'other' on the basis of caste, the realisation of the inhuman exclusions in the social and political worlds, the degradations and indignities of whole communities, the force of Dalit aesthetics and poetics, and the strength and significance of their radicalism was most illuminating at the national and global context. Several orthodoxies of the social and the literary got exposed, and complacencies challenged. It heralded the need for fresh and more layered accounting of literary modernity. Compared to the frontality of the Dalit experience in Marathi poetry, its absence in Bangla is a telling connotation. The implications of this absence of caste voices in Bangla poetry and literature are being keenly investigated today. Other absences and exclusions from within the definition of modernity like gender, religion, marginalised communities, popular culture and many more, got flagged in the process. Gender as a crucial operative element is the most unvoiced. Though women are central as subject matter of modernist poetry, very little articulation of women's subjective voices as poets, as agents of resistance, or as critics of the patriarchal is found in early modernist poetry in Bangla or Marathi. Such narratives made apparent several faultlines within modernity that complicated the modernist discourse then and continues to do so even today. Feminist historians and comparatists need to fashion strategies, probably in the interdisciplinary mode, to deal with these absent presences.

Early Bangla and Marathi modernism show a conservative strain in not including popular forms or themes. Of course, there were individual poets like Narayan Surve and Namdeo Dhasal in Marathi or Subhas Mukhopadhyay and Bishnu Dey in Bangla who made several efforts to include forms and themes closer to the common people, drawing from the folk and the ubiquitous. Narayan Surve could draw thousands of industrial labourers and peasants to his public recitations, while Subhas Mukhopadhyay's early work is characterised by an unabashed declaration of his committed politics in a simple and lucid language. Comparative analysis clearly shows that Indian modernist poetry, like its global counterparts, had very little to do with the popular as an independent concept.

As is evident by the above illustrations, comparative literary analysis is able to add consequential facets to modernist movements and texts what would otherwise be relegated to the local, in single literature studies, thus minimizing its effect and significance. When the same analysis is played out on a larger scale and in a comparative manner, different configurations emerge. The external, larger connotations enhance and energise the movements giving it dimensions not realised in its local and regional avatars. The difficulty lies not in the conviction that the comparative approach is an ideal for a meaningful study of Indian literature in the present context. Several literary critics and historians in a wide variety of studies have effectively convinced us of its pertinence and perspicacity. The issue is to examine and continually critique the terms and strategies of negotiations that a comparative study requires. Simultaneously required is an overhauling of the habitual methods of criticism that a long-term engagement with single literature has inadvertently brought into the critical dealings. Several studies in the 1980s and 90s of the last century have shown the inadequacy of earlier models of analysis used by literary historians to study the complexities and affinities of *bhasha* literatures. Those studies have applied either the aggregate or the nationalistic argument or treated the literatures as discrete entities in their narration and evaluation of comparative historiography. The 'arithmetical' approach, taking stock of the growth of each language-literature, was able to list the similarities and differences of literatures, but was unable to take care of the relationships and the interactions between languages, socio-political and geo-political issues, patterns of literary innovations and their multiple sources and differential receptions. Implicit in the nationalistic model, on the other hand, is a desire to reflect a sense of oneness of people and culture, a unity in diversity orthodoxy that threatens to perceive existing geographical, linguistic, and religious fluidities and pluralities in political homogenous moulds. Such centrist tendencies can always turn authoritarian and ignore or minimise deviations and diversities. The third approach that Indian comparatists are cautioned against is that of treating modern Indian language-literatures as discrete and markedly differentiated entities as that exists in language-literatures of Europe. In such approaches, minimal importance is given to the affinities of thoughts and practices which vitally connect and relate the *bhasha* literatures,

and is crucial to a nuanced understanding of Indian literary histories and game-changing movements like modernism.

Given the irregularities of these models, comparatists studying Indian modernity fashioned methodologies which could be effective without forcing systems and ideologies from the above. Such strategies would require a continual reformulation, reappraisal, and reevaluation of whatever frame is chosen for comparison. Aijaz Ahmad suggests adopting the methodology of Marxist historians like D.D. Kosambi. For Ahmad, “even more than the search for more text and more coherent narratives of their production, we need far greater clarity about the theoretical methods and political purposes of our reading” (Ahmad 249) He is pointing towards a very different kind of literary study which would foreground “acquiring a deep understanding of the people because no usable knowledge of India is possible without actually looking at the people who inhabit this land and then working across the boundaries of the constituted academic disciplines.” (ibid.)

Douwe Fokkema, the eminent Dutch literary historian and a comparatist analyst of the modern, feels that readings of the modern must take into account, along with the main areas of study, the wider cultural and critical histories, thematic and formal conventions, history of receptions, production and dissemination mechanisms, aesthetic effect, etc. for effective historical descriptions. Sisir Kumar Das recommends a perspective on literary history, which, like the Saussurean division of the history of language, recognises two aspects, internal and external. Both the external, dealing with facts and materials of general history, and internal aspects, comprising texts and relationships between texts which are purely literary, are so closely and tightly interrelated that ignorance of one or the other invalidates comparative studies. Sisir Kumar Das’s own analysis in *The History of Indian Literature* volumes relates largely to the external aspects, but he stresses throughout his study the importance of internal history and a need to develop a critical perspective to understand the complexities of such histories. Amiya Dev cautions comparatists against the pitfalls of neat and forced comparisons in chronicling literary accounts. To quote him:

What I mean by literary history from below is a centripetal historiography where the emphasis is not on the neatness of design, but on the inclusiveness of the material. This inclusiveness is reflected in the accommodation at a given point in time of all varieties of texts as legitimate semiotic areas. It is also reflected in the acceptance of the possibility of interpretation of these areas or of a variety of semiotic behaviour on the part of the reader. It rules out all tendencies towards closure and fosters utmost openness. (Dev and Das 326)

What is underwritten in the suggestions of these scholars is a continual need to critique all methods and standpoints to prevent atrophy and a slippage towards essentialisms.

Given the plenitude of directions offered to the comparatist historian, the critical frames employed in the comparative study of early modernity have evolved in fascinating ways. Beginning with the formalist new critical approach that had a great deal of popularity in single-literature studies, comparative literature, perforce by the very nature of its inquiry, had to adopt a wide range of perspectives and standpoints from the aesthetic to the historical. As will be evident from the gleanings given below, modernity studies impelled comparatist critics and historians to take from a wide spectrum of critical frames—from structural and poststructural to psychoanalytical, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and interdisciplinary studies. It also interacted with seminal arguments which were foregrounded by Dalit critics as well as by the nativists and the *uttaradhunik*s. Lately, it is alert to the valuable insights that come into the study with interdisciplinary approaches, especially those from the fine and performative arts.

It is time to look at how such an informed and evolving methodology as the comparative delves into the study of early modernity and the resultant proliferation of interpretations that emerges. Only a few selected aspects have been chosen for delineation here, particularly the seminal and the contentious as regards to the content and ideological positions of the modernist texts. Though the impact of the innovations in form and language has also been tremendous they have not been included in this paper. The aim is not so much to provide a detailed analysis of the selected aspects, but more to indicate/signal the possibilities of the expansion of meanings and suggestion that a comparative approach can bring into the complex field of modernity studies at the national and global level. This widening of horizons, as in the case related to Dalit literature given above illustrates, augurs well for the study of poetry and literature. It helps to counter skewered politics of interpretations that the global south continues to practice in the name of the international and the cosmopolitan. Just as it assists to challenge the straitjacketing of literary modernities within India in the name of identity and nationalism. Even as the aim in the study is to examine some core constituents of modernism across two literary cultures, no conclusive definitions or generalisations are being suggested. Rather, the study clearly shows the difficulty of generalisations about modernity in the context of even two *bhasha* literatures in India. The aim is to explore ways to understand the modernist process 'as laid out' in the early decades of the twentieth century in Bangla and Marathi literary cultures. The attempt is not to hunt for commonalities but seek a deeper understanding of the Indian experience of modernity in its plural avatars, its experiential realities, pervasive practices, and ideological dimensions. Such a layered understanding and comparative analysis of the emergence, conditions of being, impact, and effectiveness of modernism in the specific literary universe it flourished along with its shared and different profiles in other *bhasha* literatures will help us to understand the experience of the modern in Indian poetry. That will enhance our understanding of plural modernity across the subcontinent, Asia, and the global south, thereby mitigating the myth of its alien identity and fully acknowledge the effect of its

creative and critical manifestations. Such a study encompassing all the areas indicated is impossible for this study to attempt. What is being attempted is an articulation of the need and possibility of venturing into such critical reconnaissance of Indian literatures and a few select modernist issues and concerns as they played out in the respective literary cultures of Bangla and Marathi as well as their enhanced dimensions and value when looked at over a larger canvas and scale.

Modernity, a complex phenomenon in the countries of its origin, developed an even sharper complexity in its avatar on the Indian subcontinent from the very start. Its reach was more than merely the cultural and the literary. It changed the contours of intellectual and political cultures and sharpened Indian civil society. An effort to understand its literary influence and presence requires us to unload the whole baggage of its social and cultural meanings from the 1930s and 40s in the affected language culture. Only an interrelated study at the level of history and critical analysis can vitally show the dialectics of literary modernisms. This requires a look at some of the constituting elements and factors of general, cultural, and literary histories in Bangla and Marathi, from the middle of the third decade of the last century, when modernity as we understand it today was discernible.

The notion of modernity as a derivative discourse with alien origins and imitative nature is one of the fundamental assumptions lying at the heart of both literary and cultural modernity. A careful reading of the foundational texts of modern poetry in Bangla and Marathi disperses the blatant notion and shows the tenuous nature of such arguments. However, tomes have been produced within each language-literature which either dispute or reinforce the idea. The accusation persists in different ways even today. Modernity is unquestionably a Western concept, which colonial educators introduced through English education in India, and there is no denying the deep impact of its intellectual and cultural influence on the Indian sensibility from the middle of the nineteenth century. Several material factors, especially in and around the two world wars, further impacted and speeded up the spread and reach of English in Bangla and Marathi public spheres. The most momentous being the “paperback revolution” in the publishing industry as pointed out by Dilip Chitre in his introduction to *An Anthology of Marathi Poetry*. Until then, educated Indians had limited access to foreign books. Those available were extremely expensive and were largely by English authors. The paperback revolution changed all this. Books from all over the western world were available to the middle-class readers and institutional and public libraries. This, in the words of Dilip Chitre, “unleashed a tremendous variety of cross-influences almost all of a sudden” (Chitre 8). Besides, the heightened exposure to Anglo-European poetry also resulted in a period of feverish translations. Several critics believe that this period of cross-pollination and engagement with diverse tastes to be the creative space which allowed the early modernist sensibility to flourish. As is evident, several compounded factors were at work in the establishment of the Western influence in India, and a whole set of contested positions

can be derived and has been derived in several studies in Bangla and Marathi literary histories. But what we have to keep in mind is that the impact/influence pattern is a very complicated process, which has to be studied in specific contexts and in comparable modes, if we are not to make serious errors about cultural change and growth. Besides, we also need to be critically alert to the literary maturity of a receiving culture. Both the ideas need to be kept in mind while examining the intensity and reach of Western influence on the poets and other stakeholders of the discourse. When we look at the patterns of influence in Bangla and Marathi literatures, we find that most modernist poets whether B.S. Mardhekar in Marathi or Jibanananda Das in Bangla were influenced by the major English and European poets, writers, and especially movements associated with modernity across the European continent. They internalised the radical ideas of the individual poets and movements, and this shaped their own creative productions. However, a continuous effort to relate the borrowed material to indigenous conditions is also discernible. And it is equally true that they were well grounded in their own literary traditions and were active participants in cultural and intellectual debates of their time. Most of them were familiar with the rich heritage of both the *margi* and the *loka* traditions. These too had an equal if not more powerful effect in shaping the imagination of these poets. Surveys of influence studies in the context of Bangla and Marathi show a complex pattern of borrowing which are highly context sensitive. This is clear in the selective manner of borrowing of T.S. Eliot's aesthetics by B.S. Mardhekar and of his poetics by Sudhindranath Datta and Bishnu Dey. Poets and critics of both the *bhasa* literatures were deeply influenced by Eliot, but the manner and content of the borrowings reveal the control and proficiency of the receiving subjects. We see a similar pattern in the reformulation of Marxist aesthetics and literary praxis in the 1940s to suit local sensibilities of time and place. These and other instances convey the heightened sense of history and reflexivity in the poets, besides their dexterity to balance and integrate fresh ideas into the existing tradition to "make it new." In the context of all these, the issue of blind adherence to Western ideas seems alarmist and exaggerated. In an active comparative frame, the spectre of Western influence becomes less threatening, and patterns of assimilation and resistance well negotiated.

The anxiety over influence is most pronounced in early modern poetry when a distinct indigenous identity of modernity within the Indian context was yet to develop. But even at this early stage, Indian poets and critics forged for themselves a distinct path by choosing to disregard and differ from what was one of the ground rules of Western modernism. Anglo-European modernity had a robust formalist approach which believed in the relative autonomy of the poet and the segregation of the poetic world from contingent history. But the Indian poets alert to the fact that the time and place to which they belonged did not separate the social from the aesthetic. Instead, they incorporated their vision and understanding of the political and ideological into the modern. This disruption of the hegemony of the aesthetic within modernist thought at a very early stage prevented a homogenous kind of modernism to

prevail in Bangla and Marathi poetry. The combination of the socially committed with the aesthetic modern created tensions in both poetic cultures in different ways, but this dualistic approach shaped the profile of their modernist poetics and became a recognisable feature of Indian modernism.

All over the world, modernist writing is rooted in the urban experience, and it is no different in India. In the early phase of modernism, this is even more pronounced. One of the primary themes in Bangla modernist poetry of the 1930s and 40s is the subjective and realist rendering of Calcutta (now Kolkata). So much so it is generally believed that the litmus test of being modernist in the early phase depended on the poet's ability to delineate in image, metaphor, and themes the vignettes of urban experience. The same pattern is discernible in Marathi poetry. The inspiration behind the city-centeredness was probably the strong portrayal of Paris by Charles Baudelaire or of London by T.S. Eliot. This was what got assumed in early critical studies in Bangla and Marathi. However, a broader study across the *bhasha* literatures will uncover a different pattern and another understanding of the modernist poet's endeavour. No doubt the impulse behind the obsession with the city as characteristic of the modern came from Western influences, but the actual depictions and at times the perspectives were totally different. Jibanananda Das's or Samar Sen's Kolkata centred poems or Mardhekar's and Namdeo Dhasal's Mumbai poems, whether as actual representations or in metaphoric renditions, are strongly located in the turbulent colonial 'about-to-be-postcolonial' space, not to be mistaken as mirroring city representations of the European kind. This is evident in poems like "Ratri" by Jibanananda Das or Narayan Surve's long poem "Mumbai." Another important way in which the city depictions differed from their Anglo-European counterparts is related to what comprised the subject matter of this city-based poetry. The image of the rootless individual as flaneur in Anglo-European city poetry is vastly different from the desolate individuals as restless wanderers, hawkers, the homeless, and the migrant in the chaotic metropolises of Mumbai and Kolkata in Bangla and Marathi poetry. The modernists' portrayal of the atomistic, angst-ridden subjectivities of the Bengali and Marathi middle class is as powerful as their empathetic depiction of the working-class realities and desolation of the cities. Both run parallel in the work of the poets, adding to their tonalities. This unique combination expressive of a complex sensibility and a strong sense of the political, the courage of conviction to combine the subjective with the social and the ideological is a unique experience available in the works of the Bangla and

Marathi poets of the period just before and after Independence. Namdeo Dhasal's poems in *Golpitha* (1971) make brilliant use of this fusion of contesting sensibilities as subtext in his powerful verse. The Baudelairean world that Dhasal depicts in *Golpitha* has many features of modern urban poetry, but it is also different. Unlike the defeatism in middle-class poets, Dhasal's poems reflect the modernist spirit of the sub-continent. Such poetry as his is truly representative of the innovations, aesthetics, and politics that the early modernists pioneered. Today, it is being flagged as one of the distinctive identity markers of Indian literary modernity.

There are innumerable other elements and issues in the context of modernity studies which need careful reviewing through comparative lenses. They relate to the immense alterations brought in by modernity not just in the form and subject matter of poetry but also in modes of dissemination, critical strategies, reception patterns and others, all of which need thorough explorations. This and other kinds of comparative approach and analysis should ideally be extended to other languages and literatures wherever it has not been initiated. Such appraisals, drawing from the evolving repertoire of comparative critical resources, will broaden and enhance our understanding of the universal modern in the national context and add to our distinctive particularities at the global.

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