

Shataprashnakal palatika

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Literally, Sataprasnakal palatika means 'The Divine Creeper of One Hundred Questions'.

By the 17th century, the 'Sahyadrikhand' had become an authoritative account of the origin of the Brahman castes in western India, as becomes evident in 'Sataprasnakal palatika', which drew heavily from the 'Sahyadrikhand'. Though, at places it departs from it on various counts.

'Sataprasnakal palatika' became the second most cited text (after the 'Sahyadrikhand') in the 19th-century debates between the Sarasvats and the Maharashtrian Brahmins - that is the Chitpavans, the Karhades, and the Deshasths.

Unlike the 'Sahyadrikhand', which attracted much attention and discussion in the 18th century itself, 'Sataprasnakal palatika' became controversial long after its composition, that is, in the 19th-century debates.

The debate that first brought out the 'Sataprasnakal palatika' into the public arena occurred in 1870. It revolved around the issue of whether or not the Sarasvat Brahmins could perform the 'satakarma' that define bramanhood. The Maharashtrian Brahmins asserted that the Sarasvats could perform only three karma: giving alms, having sacrifices performed for them, and learning the Veda; they were incompetent to do the other three: accept alms, officiate at sacrifices, and teach the Veda; therefore, they were only 'trikarmi Brahmins'. The matter was discussed in a meeting between the Sarasvat Brahmins of Bombay and the Chitpavan Brahmins of Pune. The Chitpavans of Pune brought forth a copy of the 'Latika' and quoted it as an authoritative text in support of their argument. Subsequently, the treatise attracted significant attention and discussion from both groups, who leveraged the text to suit their respective benefit.

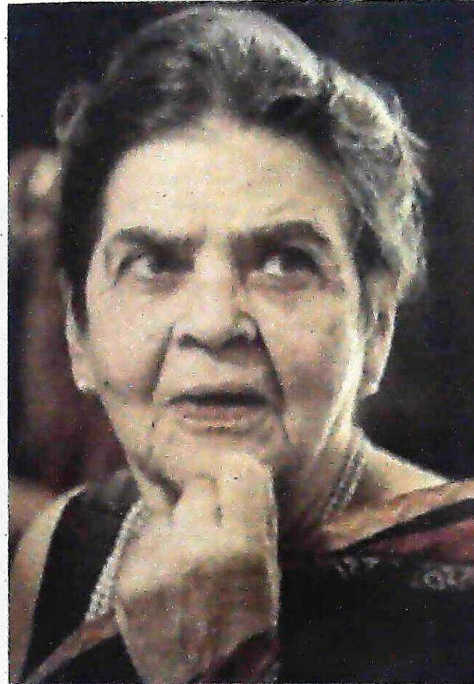
Sarasvat Brahmins defended themselves by pointing out passages in the 'Latika' that seemed to undermine the Chitpavans and Karhades. A Sarasvat named Bhavanishankar Kanvinde published a few portions from the text regarding the descriptions of the Sarasvats as well as those of the Maharashtrian Brahmins.

A few years later, prominent Sarasvat scholar Ramchandra Bhikaji Gunjikar again published the same portions in his book on the history of Maharashtrian Brahman communities. Both Gunjikar and Kanvinde had access to a common manuscript which mentioned that the 'Latika' was composed around Saka 1612 i.e. 1690 CE.

The remaining manuscript never saw the light of day; the two authors published only some portions of the manuscript. However, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that a second manuscript was extant. This second manuscript, collected



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from Satara, was penned by a scribe named Ravaji Bhatta Dhandarphalkar in 1856. A comparison between portions of the 'Latika' that were published and the 'Satara' manuscript reveal slight differences in the contents; the most important difference being however, the dating of the text: according to the 'Satara' manuscript the 'Latika' was composed in Saka 1499 (1577 CE). Both manuscripts unanimously mention the name of the author as Madhava. In the 'Satara' manuscript, after beginning the text with the customary salutation to the gods, the author says, "Madhava salutes his guru and composes this auspicious text called 'Sataprasnakal palatika'. I composed this treatise on 1499 Shalivahana saka." (In Gunjikar's book the date is Shalivahana saka 1612 that is 1690 CE).

Although the 'Latika' claims to have been composed in Saka 1499/1577 CE, there is no independent source to confirm this. The text finds no reference in the 'Sahyadrikhand' or 'Konkanakhyan'. That the author was familiar with the 'Sahyadrikhand' and its depiction of the Chitpavans, Karhades, and Sarasvats, as well as with the controversies regarding the status of the Sarasvat Brahmins is clear from its repeated allusions to the

'Sahyadrikhand'.

In fact, some portions of the 'Latika' do seem to be written in response to the 'Sahyadrikhand'. This indicates that the text was certainly composed after the 'Sahyadrikhand'.

The 'Sahyadrikhand' has an obvious regional orientation; so does the 'Latika'; naturally. The text shows familiarity with the regions in Maharashtra as the stories identify certain castes with specific geographic regions such as the Sahyadri Mountains, the Konkan coast, Varhad, Madhyadesh, and Bardesh.

However, the most compelling indication of its regional focus comes from the inclusion of a number of Marathi caste-designations. Words of Marathi origin such as 'kamsar' (iron-smith), 'tambata' (coppersmith), 'bhoi' (palanquin-bearer), 'chabukashvara' (horse-trainer), mali (gardener), bhorapi (bahurupi/actor) are generously used throughout the text. This indicates that the author was based in Maharashtra. Given the focus of the text on Maharashtra, it is no surprise that the author was also familiar with the 'Sahyadrikhand'. It is the 'Sahyadrikhand' which he uses as the chief authoritative scripture to describe places and communities in Maharashtra. This is confirmed by the first two chapters pertaining to the myth of Parashurama.

It has an interesting anecdote; that we find in 'Legends of Konkan' as well: "The reason for the Curse given to Brahmins by Parashuram: Brahmins sought to acquire a kingdom during the Treta age. They performed harsh penance to please Parashurama and he blessed them with a boon. He also promised them that if they happened to remember him in any calamity by ringing a bell, he would immediately come to their rescue.

Having obtained a kingdom, the Brahmins became arrogant and corrupt. With the intention of testing Parashurama's promise, they rang a bell and summoned him without any occasion to do so. When Parashurama appeared and asked them why he was summoned, they only looked at one another's faces. The angry sage cursed them so that these crooked Brahmins would never trust each other, would forever remain poor, and never be worthy of ruling the earth; they would always be fit only to beg. With the exception of a few minor details, the story is strikingly similar to the account of Chitpavan Brahmins in the 'Sahyadrikhand'.

Another anecdote 'The Cause for the Creation of Land of Parshuram', narrates another familiar story of Parshuram from Sahyadrikhand. Here, the sage requests the ocean to retreat to the point where his arrow would fall in order to create reclaimed land. The ocean begins to worry as it would have no place to go if the arrow fell too far. Just then, a termite approaches the ocean and asks the reason for his worry. When it comes to know the ocean's predicament, it promises to help: the ocean had protected the termite in the past. Along with its family, it approaches Parashurama's bow in the night and weakens the bowstring. The next morning, Parashuram returns to the ocean and releases the arrow; the bowstring falls apart and the arrow manages to go only a short distance. The ocean retreats only up to that point and the region thus created comes to be known as Parashuramakshetra, i.e. Konkan.