

The authenticity of Dharmanirnray

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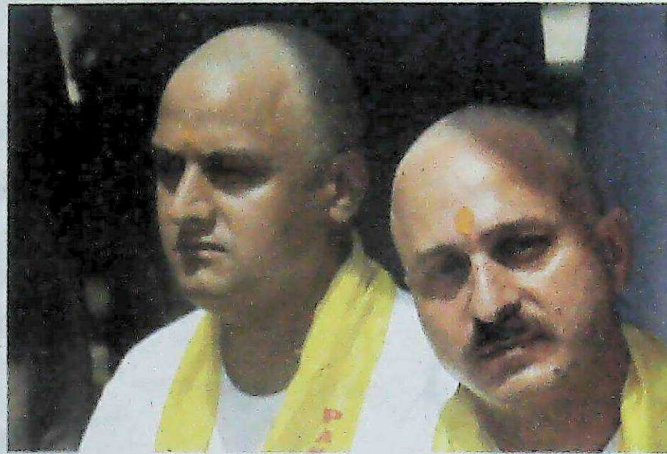
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Does Patwardhan's Shennvi Jati Dharmanirnray faithfully report the verdict issued by Shivaji's court pandits? It does not appear that Patwardhan was much concerned with the authenticity of the text or its faithfulness to the verdict issued by Shivaji's court pandits. Either he just assumed it to be true or had reasons to publicise his version of the verdict.

In 1945, a prominent Sarasvat scholar V.R. Valavalikar raised doubts over the authenticity of Shennvi Jati Dharmanirnray on various grounds. [Valavalikar, 1945: Kaim Marathi Lekh, Part I, 233]. He argued that the references to the *krodhisamvatsara* as well as Shivaji and Gagabhatta were misleading. Because this *samvatsara* appeared in 1664; this cannot be reconciled with the reference to Gagabhatta in the narrative. Gagabhatta was not present in Maharashtra until 1673, one year prior to Shivaji's coronation. He cited prominent historian Rajvade's observation that Gagabhatta came to Maharashtra in 1673 and returned to Banaras in the winter of 1674, after Shivaji's coronation. Based on this information he argued that the Dharmanirnray's assertion of Gagabhatta's presence in Shivaji's court in 1664 was grossly erroneous; which means the story could have been fabricated.

Similarly, he also rejected the narratives' claim that Shivaji was unaware of the shennvi community; Shivaji's incursions into South Konkani occurred frequently after 1659, and it was impossible that this great king was completely ignorant of the community that had a predominant presence in this region. He alleges that the authors of the text inserted the persona of Shivaji into their false story only to make it appear credible. Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that Konkani, which was written in 1721, describes a very similar encounter between Shivaji, Maharashtrian pandits, and the Sarasvats. Based on a mention by the Konkani author that the Karhada Brahmins of Rajapur were his informants, he argued that the *Nirnaya* was the work of these Karhadas who were contemporaries of the Konkani author. Thus, he concludes that the narrative was not composed in 1664.

Valavalikar's argument regarding the chronological incompatibility between references to the *krodhisamvatsara* and Gagabhatta's presence in Maharashtra needs further investigation. If Gagabhatta was indeed absent from Maharashtra until 1673, then Valavalikar's contention re-



garding the *Nirnaya*'s inauthentic date will be proven. However, his observation of the similarity between the Konkani story and the *Nirnaya* story is more significant. Konkani indeed describes an astonishingly similar incident, but its conclusion of this incident is rather different than that in the *Nirnaya*. This indicates that either of these two narratives might have been a source for the other. Moreover, we have no way to ascertain whether Dharmanirnray is indeed a summary of an official verdict given in Shivaji's court. Although the editor claims that it is a copy of a verdict given during Shivaji's times, such verdicts are in the form of *nirnayapatras* issued by a royal court or by *brahmasabhas*. The text itself does not claim to be a *nirnayapatra* or a copy of a *nirnayapatra*; it simply claims to recount the verdict given by Shivaji's court-pandits. It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of this claim without confirmation from an independent source. The lack of precision in the details of the said account only adds to the ambiguity regarding the authenticity of the text. Furthermore, the text lacks formal aspects such as any official seal or signatures, which would have indicated that it is a true *nirnayapatra* or a copy thereof.

Clearly, the purpose of the verdict as presented by the authors from Ratnagiri is to project a hier-

archy between the Karhades and the Sarasvats on the basis of purity; this, in turn, is considered to be contingent on the criterion of their diet. The story of a famine (a theme that recurs in the *Sahyadrikhand* and the *Sataprasnakalpalatika*) serves to indicate the moral superiority of the Karhades in as much as they are said to have protected their dharma even in a calamity by refusing to consume meat and subsisting on *karahataka* alone. The word *karahataka* also indicates this by deriving the caste-designation Karhada from *karahataka*; the reported verdict of the pandits subverts the previous derogatory etymologies of the term Karhada in the *Sahyadrikhand* and the *Sataprasnakalpalatika*.

It is very likely that the authors of the narrative were themselves Karhada Brahmins who constructed this entire narrative about Shivaji's encounter with the shennvis and the verdict of his court pandits. These presumably Karhada authors were acutely aware of the embarrassing etymology of the term propagated in the prior narratives. In order to elevate the status of their caste and restore the prestige associated with their caste-designation, they changed the story of famine and introduced a new etymology of the name Karhada.

The same story and the same etymological means are used contrastingly to construct a disparaging account of the past of the Sarasvat on

the basis of their diet. While the noble Brahmins from the bank of the River Krishna were able to protect their Brahmanical dharma, those who consumed *senā* (hawk-flesh) deviated from the dharma and were therefore named shennvi. The verdict not only implies the degradation of the Sarasvats, but also makes the name shennvi synonymous with the inferior status of the Sarasvats in the past. The designation serves as a reminder of the fact that the "immoral" and "impure" action of the Sarasvats regarding their diet came at a cost: they lost the right to perform the three privileged Brahmanical actions, especially the right to perform priestly duties for their communities and others, were thereby relegated to the practice of non-priestly, non-religious mundane careers in agriculture, scribal duties, and royal services. The name is thus presented as inseparable from the inferior status of the community and vice-versa. While the verdict reinforces the branding of the Sarasvats as the *trikarmi* Brahmins (Brahmins who are not allowed to perform three of the total six actions: officiating a sacrifice, teaching the Vedas, and accepting ritual gift), as found in the *Sataprasnakalpalatika*, it also replaces the anonymous sages in the *Sataprasnakalpalatika* with the Karhada Brahmins from the *Padmapurana* story as the authoritative body withholding the shennvi's right to perform the three actions and ordaining them to pursue non-priestly vocations. Moreover, the implicit logic in the narrative and the verdict it narrates is that just as the Karhada Brahmins from the story decide the fate of fallen shennvis in hoary antiquity, so too are the court-pandits of Shivaji and the (presumably) Karhada authors of Ratnagiri entitled to adjudicate over the shennvis' status. The entire narrative containing the verdict is thus a replay of the story it narrates: the account of the famine that occurred in the past is used in the narrative to justify the decision of the pandits and the (presumably) Karhada authors in the present. In other words, the story of famine and the two larger narratives in which it is embedded - the letter of (presumably) Karhada authors to their fellow caste-men and their account of the episode in Shivaji's court - both reveal a thematic similarity regarding the balance of power between the Karhadas and the Sarasvats.

Where the *Sahyadrikhand* and the *Sataprasnakalpalatika* define Brahman communities by means of "historical" accounts alone, the *Nirnaya* takes a further step to back it up with *shastra*.