

The Peshwa Response to Sahyadrikhand

TENSING RODRIGUES

KONKANAPURANA



Tensing Rodrigues is engaged in research on Konkani language and people

The Chitpavan are a community that cannot be dealt with entirely in terms of 'myths'; though there are many stories about them, within 'Sahyadrikhand' and outside it. Therefore, we take a broader view. Chitpavan are also called 'konkannastha bramhan' because the community is found largely in Konkani; originally, mainly in and around Chiplun. If we still remember, the 'old bhutt' from Crawford's 'Legends of Konkani', a Chitpavan, was from Chiplun.

Few historians and anthropologists are of the view that the Chitpavan came to India from Egypt, while others say they came from Greece. A typical Chitpavan has usually a fair complexion, a sharp nose, and steel-grey eyes. It is difficult to ignore the possibility of their unique genetic makeup; but let us leave out all the stories of their genetic mix-up that the myths contain.

Let us get real. As Gaikwad et al point out, Marathi-speaking ancient Desasth-brahmins show substantial admixture from Central Asian males but Paleolithic maternal component supports their Scytho-Dravidian origin. Chitpavan Brahmin demonstrate younger maternal component and substantial paternal gene flow from West Asia, thus giving credence to their recent Irano-Scythian ancestry from Mediterranean or Turkey, which correlates well with European-looking features of this community. This also explains their untraceable ethno-history before 1,000 years, brahmanisation event and later amalgamation by Maratha.

The widespread Palaeolithic mtDNA haplogroups in Maratha and Dhangar highlight their shared Proto-Asian ancestries. Maratha males harboured Anatolian derived J2 lineage corroborating the blending of farming communities. Dhangar heterogeneity is ascribable to predominantly South-Asian males and West-Eurasian females. [Gaikwad et al, 2005: Molecular Insight Into The Genesis Of Ranked Caste Populations Of Western India Based Upon Polymorphisms Across Non-Recombinant And Recombinant Regions, in Genome Biology]

The story of immigrant ethnic infusion into Chitpavan could have some



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truth in it. Some historians conjecture that they could have been West Asian traders from Sopara who moved southwards, for greener pastures; and settled in Chiplun. It (Chiplurulana) was itself a port during the Chalukya rule in the eighth century with the Vaishishti River connecting it to the hinterland.

The first written reference mentioning the community's name as Chitpavan is found in the statement of a Brahmin named Raghunath in his book on astrology titled 'Muhurtmala' written in 1661. He stated that he was a Shandilya Gotri Chitpavan Bramhan from Palshet in Konkani and his grandfather Nrusimha, a well-known astrologer, was conferred the title of 'Jyotirvitsaras' by the Moghul Emperor Akbar in 1599. After 1700, many documents can be found where the word Chitpavan is used. Before that Chitpavans were practically unknown to the world outside.

Around 1690 one Chitpavan named Balaji Bhat left Konkani and went to Pune city in search of a job. Being a hardworking and an intelligent per-

son, in spite of starting as a clerk in the Maratha establishment he rose to the post of Peshwa ('foremost' in Persian) in 1713.

It was no wonder therefore that Peshwa, after assuming power, reacted vehemently to 'Sahyadrikhand' which showed the Chitpavan in bad light; if we are to believe James Grant Duff, the best-known historian of the Maratha period, the Peshwa "suppressed and destroyed all copies of the 'Sahyadrikhand' [Duff 1826 :11]. The etymology of the name Chitpavan had become so controversial by the time of the first Bajirao Peshwa (c. 1730) that the Chitpavan started referring to themselves as Konkannasthas (residents of Konkani). Varde Valaulikar, a later Sarasvat scholar, claimed that by the time of the reign of the second Bajirao (1775-1851) this new designation had nearly replaced the old one; he also alleged that the name 'Komkane' originally belonged to the Sarasvats before the Chitpavans usurped it [Valaulikar, 1945: 113]. There may be some truth in this: Konkannastha is the more common

and well-known designation today. In 1884, Gunjkar remarked that Chitpavan youngsters did not even know the name Chitpavan - they referred to themselves as simply Konkannasthas.

An official nivadapatra (a letter of decision) issued by the office of Shivaji's grandson Shahu, the Raja of Satara (1708-1749), records an important verdict given during Shahu's reign. In 1749, an assembly was convened at Shahu's court, attended by eminent authorities and learned Bramhans from all over to discuss 'Sahyadrikhand'. This demonstrates that in the 18th century, the 'Sahyadrikhand' did function as an important text in the Maratha judicial setting; just like the Jatipuranas. It was deployed to adjudicate the ritual status of certain communities - particularly that of the Sarasvats. It points to the politically significant audience of the 'Sahyadrikhand', explaining why there was a proliferation of similar narratives in this period. Moreover it indicates that the narratives in the 'Sahyadrikhand' were being reinterpreted and reinvented.

Why were all these experts summoned? Members of a community of writers and clerks - known as Prabhus - requested Shahu to bestow upon them the right to be initiated by chanting the Gayatri mantra; they also asked for the right to perform the six actions of yajana (performing the sacrifices), yajana (officiating sacrifices for others), adhyayana (learning the Veda), adhyapana (teaching the Veda to others), dana (giving alms), and pratigraha (accepting alms). Of these, yajana, adhyapana, and pratigraha were the exclusive rights of Brahmins; Kshatriyas and Vaisyas along with Brahmins were entitled to the remaining rights.

Previously, the Prabhus had considered themselves to be Kshatriyas: now, they wanted to be treated as Bramhans. The Prabhus who demanded these privileges (yajana, adhyapana, and pratigraha) had a strong influence in the Satara court, forcing Shahu to take their demand seriously. To determine whether the Prabhus were eligible for these rights, the Raja sought the counsel of the aforementioned learned authorities and held their assembly in his court. The Prabhus raised a question to the

assembly: why were the shennavis allowed to perform the six actions while the Prabhus weren't? The term shennavi was an honorific title referencing the skilled literati of the Sarasvats - the scribes, clerks, and administrators for various governments.

However, other communities (particularly those in Maharashtra) often used the name shennavi to refer to the entire Sarasvat community. If the shennavis/Sarasvats - like the Prabhus - were engaged in scribal duties, why were they able to perform the six Brahmanical actions, when the Prabhus were forbidden to do so?

In order to investigate this, the assembly ordered a copy of the 'Sahyadrikhand' from the Shringeri matha; the results were as follows: The authorities first underscored the copy of the 'Sahyadrikhand's' description of the panchagauda/panchadravida Brahmins and decided that among the five Gaudas were the Gaudas, the Kanyakunjas, Maithilas, Sarasvats, and Utkalas; the five Dravidas included the Dravidas, Maharatas, Tailangas, Karnatas, and Gurjaras. (This description nearly matches the 'Sahyadrikhand's' version with one exception: the term Madhyadesa in the 'Sahyadrikhand' is replaced here with the term Maharatas.

Clearly, the purpose of the verdict as presented by the authors from Ramagiri is to project a hierarchy between the Karhadas and the Sarasvats on the basis of purity. While the noble Brahmins from the bank of the River Krishna were able to protect their Brahmanical dharma, those who consumed hawk-flesh deviated from the dharma and were therefore named shennavi.

The verdict not only implies the degradation of the Sarasvats, but also makes the name shennavi 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, and were thereby relegated to the practice of non-priestly, non-religious mundane careers in agriculture, scribal duties, and royal services.