

Y D Phadke (1931-2008): Scholar and Public Intellectual

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Noted historian, intellectual and activist Y D Phadke who passed away on January 11, wrote in Marathi to make his work accessible to Marathi readers though he was fluent in English. Sadly, the vast body of his acclaimed research and writings has not received critical examination in the Marathi public sphere.

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YD Phadke left behind a rich legacy – not only over 70 books and innumerable writings in newspaper columns, but also the tradition of exactitude and social relevance in research.

Phadke will be remembered for his painstaking research on the political history of 20th century Maharashtra. Last year, he brought out three volumes of his series on this theme bringing the work up to 1960. Rarely does one find the commitment and perseverance that Phadke personified as a scholar. Most of his research took place without any institutional support or funding. Today when even the writing of a proposal cannot begin without funding, Phadke's manner of working seems unbelievable. Beginning his research career with his own doctoral thesis on the history of the samyukta Maharashtra movement, Phadke soon planned an ambitious and lifetime project of working on the political history of 20th century Maharashtra. This he continued all through his life. In the course of his research Phadke managed to get access to many private collections of letters and papers relating to the history of

modern Maharashtra. These he used in his writings with discretion and care. But more than that, the sheer collection is a treasure for any student of modern Maharashtra.

History Writing

As a scholar and historian, modern Maharashtra was Phadke's forte. He believed that a plain and reliable narrative of the socio-political developments of modern Maharashtra needed to be presented. He steadfastly refused to be attracted to mega-theorisations about the period that he so painstakingly studied. Instead, he produced first-rate accounts of detail and reliability. For a student of 20th century Maharashtra, Phadke's work provides an excellent resource that is a goldmine of information.

However, Phadke remained a loner in the field of history writing mostly because the kind of writing he did was fast becoming outdated in his own lifetime. He belonged to a school that relied exclusively on evidentiary history. His genre of history would often engage with facts and details rather than interpretations and theoretical formulations. Phadke's defence of his way of history writing was twofold. He would argue that unless an honest and accurate account is made available, it is neither possible nor advisable, to let loose the imagination. Secondly, he would agree that interpretations can vary; but it was beyond him to understand how facts can

vary or how one can sideline facts to suit one's interpretation.

It is indeed a little intriguing that in spite of this large body of work, one does not come across anything that can summarise Phadke's "statement" on the period he studied. Perhaps he left this task of making an interpretative statement to future scholars, who might inevitably rely on his work, but will be better situated to concentrate more on the interpretative exercise. This begs a larger question. In the business of history writing, is the task of collecting and collating data so consuming that the scholar has to give up any ambition of moving into the field of interpretation? Phadke definitely believed that preconceived theoretical and interpretative frameworks do not allow a free rendering of the facts. Yet, Phadke had the sensitivity of a true social historian to appreciate that much of the modern political history of Maharashtra hinged on the caste question.

This author never had the privilege of an insight into Phadke's intellectual autobiography; but my gut feeling is that Phadke the scholar produced Phadke the progressive intellectual. Having begun his research into late 19th and early 20th century Maharashtra, and looking at the tumultuous Lokmanya Tilak phase, Phadke quickly grasped the real significance of the moment – rather than the popularity of Tilak and the authority commanded by Tilakite nationalism, he was attracted to the brahman – non-brahman controversy as the core of this period of history. This indicates his understanding of what constitutes history. He realised that the caste issue was central to the unfolding of the socio-political drama in the first two or three decades of the 20th century. Most of his writings other than the volumes on the political history of Maharashtra are biographies of leaders from the non-brahman movement or histories of events from that movement. He also focused on the Ambedkar movement in Maharashtra. It was in the fitness of things that Phadke was the first recipient of the Indian Council of Social Science Research's B R Ambedkar fellowship in 1993. He happily associated with Jabbar Patel's film on Ambedkar as chief of the research division.

Even in his detailed history of 20th century Maharashtra, Phadke chose to

focus on processes, on social and economic context, on the minutiae of the interactions among actors, social forces and political organisations. This strategy allowed a fine blend of detail and processes at the ground level. In this, Phadke most certainly distanced himself from the idea that history constitutes the story of great leaders. He did write biographies, and in doing so he raised the level of biography writing in Marathi. He was never tired of reiterating that leaders and the great giants of the past were only human in their greatness and in their limitations, and that they too had ambitions and failings. A historian and a biographer needed to take these failings and limitations into account and contextualise the role and actions of the so-called icons and heroes of the past. Unfortunately, though he earned much acclaim, Phadke the scholar did not receive much serious attention and the hidden and implicit arguments contained in his writings were not scrutinised. The Marathi intelligentsia was contented to find and certify the progressive element in Phadke's writings.

The Marathi Spirit

Phadke chose to write almost exclusively in Marathi, with few exceptions like his doctoral thesis and a few other writings he did for the National Book Trust or the Maharashtra Information Centre. This insistence on writing almost exclusively in Marathi can only be compared to another noted Marathi historian, Itihasacharya V K Rajwade. Like Rajwade, Phadke must have believed that the scholar owes it to his community to make his writings accessible to the Marathi reader. The pride and deep rooted political sentiment that informs this view, could be sustained only with the price of being somewhat cut off from contemporaries and colleagues working in non-Marathi languages. It is uncertain if Phadke had any solution to this ticklish issue of scholarly interaction in a multilingual social context. For instance, he offers an excellent critical assessment of the philosophical foundations of Veer Savarkar's thought in his introduction to Savarkar's select writings, *Tatvdaya Savarkar* (1986). But this is out of bounds for non-Marathi readers; Phadke would have shrugged it off by saying that

those interested should learn Marathi! He believed in the primacy of the non-English language reader. One suspects that in this regard Phadke represented the peculiarity of Marathi public life: the Marathi public and intellectual universe is characterised by the constant need to assert itself and one form of assertion would be a stout refusal to write in English. Perhaps the idea of commitment of the scholar-intellectual also dictates the choice of writing in Marathi. A scholar who seeks to intervene in the public life through his or her writings would have to write in the local language rather than in English. Phadke represents this dilemma over the competing roles of a public intellectual and a metropolitan intellectual.

Perhaps somewhere deep within, Phadke represented the spirit of the movement that he studied for his doctoral thesis – the samyukta Maharashtra movement. This movement aggressively shaped the Marathi identity and Phadke imbibed that identity. So much so that when he became the president of the Marathi literary conference (sahitya sammelan) in 2000, Phadke devoted his speech mostly to the issue of the merger of the border areas of Belgaum with Maharashtra. So, it is a moot question whether the politics of Marathi identity constituted the basis of Phadke's research agenda.

Public Intellectual

Our regional linguistic cultures expect that scholars also double up as public intellectuals. This role often underplays scholarship and overemphasises the role of a publicist. Phadke was aware of the lures and pitfalls of this role of the scholar. Yet, he chose to don both these roles with austerity and commitment. Sensitive as he was to political issues, Phadke would not mind diverting his time and energy to debates in the public realm. Thus, he responded to Arun Shourie's almost defamatory work on Babasaheb Ambedkar

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by a painstakingly researched work and pointing out that Shourie did not know or did not care for the facts.

Phadke also chose to write regularly in a large number of Marathi dailies touching upon many contemporary issues. Before his health started deteriorating, Phadke would travel a lot and give speeches in big and small towns. In a sense, this was a diffusion of his energy. He would always defend this by saying that he would speak only on matters that he was studying and that this would take him to places and people where he could get source materials. But I have a suspicion that he gave lectures more out of a sense of commitment and as an interface with the public life of Maharashtra than anything else. He must have realised that a scholar in a regional linguistic culture (which has limited abilities to appreciate scholarship), was also required to be a public intellectual.

His sense of commitment to democracy and progressive politics led Phadke to divert his energy during the last years of his life to writings on the Indian Constitution. Following the golden jubilee of the republic Phadke took upon himself single-handedly, to popularise the different democratic aspects of the Constitution. He wanted at least 50 small-scale publications to mark this occasion.

Post-retirement (he taught at various places, including Mumbai and Pune Universities and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Phadke took up the chairmanship of the state-run Sahitya-Sanskriti (Literature and Culture) Mandal, which he resigned after the Congress lost the 1995 assembly elections. In this capacity, he is credited with the publication of the revised edition of Jotirao Phule's body of writings at a very affordable price.

Phadke lived most of his life in the neighbourhood of Bal Thackeray's house. But his courage in taking on the wrathful politician was legendary. Phadke would even quote from Prabodhankar Thakare (father of Bal Thackeray) in defence of his argument against the Shiv Sena chief. As a deeply political person, Phadke even came out to sit in a dharna by journalists protesting against the Shiv Sena's hooliganism directed at a journalist-editor of Mumbai.

Phadke the scholar won acclaim and many awards; Phadke the public intellectual won the respect of many a social activist; his fearlessness made him into an icon; he was recognised as an intellectual giant in the Marathi public sphere. Yet, it is a sad testimony to the shallowness of the Marathi public sphere that the vast body of his serious writings remain practically without critical examination. No wonder, one of his more refined and sharply contextualised

writings, the book *Shahu Chhatrapati ani Lokmanya* (1986), remains out of print and no publisher seems to be interested in bringing out a new edition. No guesses on whether Phadke's writings will be introduced to the non-Marathi public. Phadke probably knew the limitation of the strategy he had adopted for his scholarly writings and might not have regretted the fact. However, the Marathi public sphere should introspect about this aspect.



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JANUARY 14, 2008

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