



***Shramsanskriti* in the Postcolonial World (Art and Literature): A Reality Check**

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Abstract

Physical work/labour is one of the fundamental activities responsible for the existence of human beings throughout history of human civilization. Both, in the physical and psychological paradigms of culture, this is a fact in evidence. Moreover, it is quite well estimated by now that the absence or lack of physical work in the personal and social life has posed a great danger to the civilization in manifold countenance. Indian society has had a very long tradition of agriculture which is crucially work-culture. Every member of an agrarian family was involved in some kind of work. In the post-independence/postcolonial period and more rapidly in the recent decades after industrial revolution and urbanization, this work-culture named agriculture has witnessed drastic change. Many of us have already divorced from the routine of physical labour. May be, this was not deliberate on the part of individuals, but somehow, they got into a job which needed no physical labour. But, the relative association of this fundamental factor by the mainstream new culture in the process of natural growth and development of an individual with poverty and shame, both in the urban as well as in rural areas has created a disorder. This article uncommonly attempts to ruminate over the issues of agriculture or physical work-culture in reality and its representation in the works of art in the light of its need and real situation around.

Key words: agriculture, labour, civilization, literature, cinema

While probing into this all inclusive and insidious factor about individuals and their lives, the question was how to define *shrama* in our time? Whether *shrama* means only physical work or something else we keep doing now days and mostly we earn our livelihood doing that. Or, does it have any relationship with the philosophical ideas like values and ethics? That needs to be elaborated over. People work for their own survival and to make the survival of their near and dear ones easier during their lives. Sometimes, this *shrama* becomes an essential part of the nature of an individual and the person becomes one with it. Perhaps, such practices resulting in survival of the self and that of others gets transformed into culture in due course of time is one such belief of scholars.

If we talk about the agriculture in Maharashtra (being the target area), which has a long tradition taking back into the ancient times and even before perhaps. Traditionally, members in an agrarian family worked together for generations. This is in no way an individual's culture. There was work for each one, right from small kids to the elderly and old people as well in the family. The magic in this culture was, all these people use to work as if it was their nature by birth. Mostly, nobody would complain; neither would have any feeling of doing favour to others. Work in short, was their religion making life of individuals' rich both physically and mentally. But, the situation in our time has changed. Of course, this has not happened overnight and as a result of one particular thing. The

change prevalent both in beliefs, in traditions and in exercise began with changes in life in the postcolonial times and that was very much evident.

Literature, cinema and other arts in all times have shown interest in taking work-culture as a subject of discussion directly or indirectly. Among these arts, literature has a very strong bond visible with this culture. This may be because of the availability and affordability of literature around easily. The tradition that started from the oral times has become stronger in written tradition. Moreover, when we deal with 'literature of workers', it suggests one another branch. Here, no such difference in *shrama* is intended, because, a worker is a worker whether from rural or urban area. Even his/her working (field or factory) makes no difference. The purpose behind this enquiry is to keep ruminating over the advancement, gains, losses and its effects on life in terms of ethics and values in the backdrop of agriculture in the postcolonial time.

People in Maharashtra or for that matter in any state of India are born in a work-culture. Around them were people working days in and days out. They were all experienced, always ready to face situations and circumstances, experts in their work, satisfied and were known to the worldly mean-medians useful for being in life. Perhaps, because of this inborn instinct in them, of being ready for any kind of situation in life, they survived and not only survived but set models before future generations in different fields of life. Their needs were fewer and means to fulfil their own needs were very calculated in economic terms. In short, they were thankful to God for whatever they were blessed with in life. Something that they could not have, they never longed for. This unique practice of being happy and satisfied in life could set an ideal forever in this culture.

Normally, abilities and needs decided the amount of work done. As *Shrama* was the religion in this culture, it could never become a profession. If at all, professionalism is seen, that too amounted in proportion of their growing needs. Quite often, thinkers and experts on agriculture these days raise a question, "Whether, agriculture is a profession or a way of life"? When I dig an answer for myself of such questions, many other questions related pop-

up in crowd. How to decide the labour charges for harvesting groundnuts? Because, the basic difference between working on the field of groundnuts and on any other field is of opportunity for the women labourers. They would simply get an opportunity to enjoy groundnuts which was not that easily available. Hence, the women folk use to book their names in advance (orally) for such harvests and would remind the farmer and confirm again and again. The farmer also without fail would invite them all during harvest and they use to enjoy working. It was their need on both sides and work was the medium to fulfil that need. How can one name this routine of people as their profession? Hence, I would consider agriculture, a way of life and not a profession. Perhaps, because of the continuous attempts of us all making this way of life a profession resulted into creating turmoil these days.

As, there are reasons behind why different cultures originated in particular areas and in particular time, so are there reasons behind the instigation of agriculture. Survival among all odds was the need and for that they had to keep working. We know this origin of agriculture in the primordial times. Leo Tolstoy, a Russian writer refers to this origin through a mythical story, "Work, Death and Sickness". As per this story, we are not made for working but for being happy in life. God had given a healthy life of hundred years. Necessary things to eat were easily available around. One need not work for survival. But, how can an individual be happy such easily? They would keep quarrelling, teasing and troubling one another. God had to introduce 'work' so as to keep them busy narrates the story. Then, began sowing seeds during rainy season, taking care of the crop, harvesting the crop and again prepare the land for new crop during summer. This never ended busying the humans forever. God then could discover that, those who are strong, forcibly getting their work done from comparatively weaker people and doing nothing on their own. He experimented by adding 'death' in their lives. Now, He made it clear for them that, there won't be a life of hundred long years as earlier. Anyone can die at any point of time. By doing this, God intended that people will be good to one another but, in vain. They started enjoying their life caring nothing. It was

chaotic. God then did final thing for the betterment of humans by adding diseases in their lives. Earlier, life of humans was free from all diseases. He thought, seeing their fellow men in trouble, they will have sympathy/empathy for the sufferer and they will have sentiments for one another. Slowly, they understood that some diseases are contagious. This resulted in avoiding the victims for fear of infection. God was helpless in making his favourite creature a true human being. He left it to their fate and the present human beings are made. Meaning by that, *Shrama* has been the fundamental *samskara* in the life of people. No one can exist on this planet earth without it.

These days, we often listen about broken relations, people having problems within the families. Problem of adjustment, support, and understanding we see growing equally. All of us witness this every day but, we are in such difficulty that, often we avoid talking on this topic. Earlier, people were woven into a very strong bond of relations, mutual respect and love for one another. With that, *Shrama* also was one another medium to keep them united. In fact, it was their need. There were no tractors, harvesters and other machines useful in getting agricultural works the way it is done now days. Without the help of others, it was impossible to finish work in time in those days. Routine works like, ploughing, digging-transporting-spreading the organic manure on field, sowing seeds and other works getting done at proper time was impossible on one's own. Hence, a strongly motivated group of family members, relatives and close friends out of natural love, respect and commitment use to be ready always for helping one another. Thus, their sowing, maintaining crops, harvesting them use to be a joint responsibility. While performing these duties, how can they be away in celebrations? In marriages, festivals, and on every occasion small or big; of happiness and of sorrow they use to be one. Even death was not an exception for this rule of being one. In short, oneness of this culture had been a unique incarnation. Perhaps, because of this, not having communication within the family members on very small issues, using harsh words with one another, creating divide on issues and working with selfish

interest was not the new normal we see in the recent years. Respect for elderly people was very much a part of this culture. No decision was taken in the family of any kind in absence or without having consent of the elderly people. The number of things responsible for making them behave such nicely included the crucial mutual dependence of these people for work. Four generations of a family would live happily helping one-another. Their food habits were very simple. Mostly, they would use their agricultural produce. Very little they needed to buy from outside world. Their give and take and trade activities also were limited. Hybridity of no kind in thoughts and in action did exist and ethics and values were central in their routine.

As I did mention about the riches of this culture from the food habits and basic needs point of view; milk, curd, curd-milk, ghee, seasonal vegetables, fruits, Jawar/Bajra-roti, rice was their staple food. People were very healthy and strong. Every family had members; able to carry the fully loaded sacks of grains on their back easily. Readiness to help others was a very important principle of this culture. It never created a divide on the basis of rich-poor, caste-creed and even on the basis of blood ties. Alas...we are talking about things in past that highlights the changed reality around in our time. Demands by the concern class and decision by the organizations like that of "*Krishi Utpanna Bazar Samitis*" of using fifty kg. bags for agricultural produce to bring in market. This is a very small example of showing our declining strength when it comes to doing some hard work.

This does not mean that the work-culture is totally ruined, neither it is desired and affordable to any human society. But, the ideas and process of life has gone under radical change in the last few decades. Even for people living in remote villages need money for daily needs like T.V., Mobile and Internet recharge. In terms of needs, there is no difference among people in urban and rural areas. Hence, all are in a race to earn money so as to meet their needs and make life easier. To fulfil needs has become the only agenda of people. Perhaps, because of this, many young people are migrating in cities in search of fortune. This unnatural shift of importance from self-sufficient villages to over-

crowded cities in the postcolonial time has posed severe threat to the life of people in the urban areas everywhere.

Thus, the new ideals of life have decided the norms wherein definition of riches in personal, family and social life has changed. Everything in life keeps revolving around money. How can agriculture be away from this tidal change? Earlier, everything needed, was produced on the field. So life of people though, was not rich as per new norms of being rich, but for sure self-sufficient and peaceful. Now in a run of gaining profit through cash crops all have started growing just one crop which systematically finished the self-sufficiency principle of agriculture in this society. Now we hardly see a farmer having mixed crops of all kinds on his field. Mostly, these people buy things of daily use from the market. Due to urbanisation, labours are not available in rural areas that affected the process of agriculture throughout. Cattle have become a burden on the farmers; so no milk and milk maids forming a part of daily platter in most of the families. Lack of organic manure resulted in growing use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides harming the health of soil which ultimately resulted in destroying health of all its dependants. This all very systematically could prove that, agriculture is no longer a productive business in these days. Neither does it have any respect in the society. So everybody is eagerly waiting to join their urban counterparts and get-rid-of this unproductive hard-work as early as possible.

Literature always exhibits culture in the language it speaks. There is a long tradition of literature that speaks of *Shramsanskriti* from various perspectives. The people in this culture, their lives, hardships, faiths, beliefs, customs, their exploitation and loot by the urban counterparts have been the core issues in this literature. But, this same literature and even cinema somehow appears to have been failed in discussing and convincing the piety, purity and necessity of this culture in the postcolonial period. Much of what has come through works of art is one sided. One sided in the sense; mostly agriculture appears on scene seeking sympathy of its reader/spectator. Insecurity, backwardness, ignorance, gloominess and lack of up-to-dateness colours the picture of this culture on

paper and screen. An ignored entity of this culture, which is natural, lively, real, welcoming and kind needs more attention for positive discussion. To change the approach of people towards hard-work/physical labour we have to work hard with literature and cinema. The society has seen and believed that physical labour is always inferior to intellectual work. So naturally, the misconception is deeply rooted about agriculture and its inferiority. There are authors who keep raising the voice and speak loudly about the fundamentals of life and its relationship with agriculture. Divorcing with this culture has caused harms irreparable we see around in plenty.

Bhalchandra Nemade is one such name who keeps discussing agriculture through his literary contributions. While talking about importance of sowing season in an agrarian family through the lines below opens the book of priorities.

“ are bhagyawantachi bail marate

an abhagyacha bail, ho ss rama re s gee gee gee gee sire, hau s pavlya hau s-” (listen, he is fortunate whose wife dies during the sowing season/ and he is unfortunate whose bullock dies...(translation from original Marathi)). (Nemade, “Hindu”, 219)

Through the lines above, the author very aptly gives an account of priorities in any family. When Kundalik's wife is dead, he is lost mentally. Shows no interest in works; his neighbour and a farmer sings these lines while preparing his land for sowing seeds. The lines have a message; in the life of a farmer what is it of prime importance is the season of sowing. Even if there is death in the family, they will either keep the dead body until the sowing work is done or get it cremated as early as possible without losing time in grieving. Meaning by that, certain works are done with such commitment in this culture that, no other thing is important comparatively.

This culture has well been projected in a Hollywood movie *Gladiator* (2000) directed by Ridley Scott. This movie brings its hero named Maximus Decimus Meridius who is General of the Roman Army in 180 AD. This character is been shown such closely connected with his culture, which is *Shramsanskriti* in this context beyond the physical borders of countries, cultures and times.

Right from the beginning, when he addresses his army before the war with Germania till when he is victorious and celebrating victory with his master Emperor, Marcus Aurelius he is shown consistent in his approach towards his roots and the culture. His response to the Emperor when questioned-

“Emperor Marcus Aurelius: Where is your home?

Maximus: My home is at a distant hill. It is a very ordinary place. There is small garden full of pink stones; where there is a slow fragrance spread with the rising sun and an evening is filled with aroma of blossomed flowers. If you go ahead, there are full grown trees of Apples, Figs and Pears. The soil there is black. Exactly like my wife’s hair. In the south, there is my farm; some kittens are playing with my son.” (*Gladiator-2000*)
(Translated from Hindi)

This is just an ordinary scene but the symbols and images through dialogue and scenes create a very rich message about culture of the speaker which is agriculture. In these western countries, agriculture is very limited. Still this movie creates a fantastic image of work culture/agriculture. Exactly opposite we see in most of the Marathi movies. With a few exceptions like “*Mother India*” and “*Do Bigha Jameen*” we don’t have much symbolizing values of agriculture back at home.

One another author, Rajan Gavas, in his very successful novel in Marathi named “*Ba, Balicha*” (2012) discusses some very important issues about agriculture. There are letters written in this novel by a character named Kantaramji. The letters speak about the ethics in agriculture. “*Farmer never calculates his hard-work in terms of money. For him Shrama is an act of happiness. Shrama is an agrarian ethical value for him.*” (*Ba, Balicha*, P. 82). Further, it also ruminates over the problems posed before agriculture these days. It says, “Agriculture is a way of life. It is not a profession.” (82)

Mahesh Elkunchwar in his very famous drama, *Old Stone Mansion*, though not directly but through agonies of his character of Aai says, “*Arrey, Chandu. Did we earn it? Wasn’t all the Deshpande splendour based on the sweat of someone or the other? It’s good that it is lost. It’s gone back to where*

it came from” (Page. 52). This validation of the fact by the character of being grown on the *Shrama* of others ruins the family of Deshpande is highlighted by the playwright in the postcolonial times. It is symbolic to understand that only those, who will keep working, will survive and the rest dependent will get perished is the simple message we get from this play.

Shrama is a very important *samskara* in the life of individuals irrespective of cultures. Riches of any kinds can never be gifted by others but earned always with persistent efforts and hard-work. Not only urban people alone, but also the rural folks as well in very large number have either lost or forgotten their *shramasamskara*. They have turned dependent on others for everything in life. The ages old saying, “One should earn one’s own happiness through hard-work” is almost out-of-date for them. There is new standard in the society and as per that standard, a rich person never works. So everybody is dreaming of being rich so as to get rid of hard-work.

Though, this is true in majority; there is always hope for the survival of *Shramasanskriti* and that is through *Shrama* only. This is our shared responsibility to keep this spirit of work-culture up, wherever we are and in whatever position. Because, if we need to eat and drink something vital, we need to work for it in the easiest possible way is the mantra behind. So we need to spare time and think of this “way of life”. It may not be possible to adopt the same as it is from traditions, but for sure we will find a way out through honest responses.

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