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A Marathi Saga: Witness of a New Era

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to trace the journey of an upper-class, upper-caste Brahmin woman from Maharashtra during the late 19th and 20th century India. Married as a child bride, an uneducated girl is pained to witness the pitiable and constricted life of women at her parental and then at her marital home. Supported by her husband, she gets an opportunity to see and understand the outside world and the socio-political challenges being faced by the country at that time. Going against the social norms, her husband teaches her how to read and write, and later on makes arrangements for her to learn English. With the unflinching support and inspiration of her husband, Yashodabai decides to work for the cause of women, supports women in need and establishes Vanita Samaj. All her four daughter become well-educated and the eldest one becomes one of the first women doctors of India. This story is a tale of evolution of a demure, uneducated and timid girl to a woman with sagacity and grit, who utilized the opportunity provided by her husband to uplift herself and women of her era at large for the betterment of overall social-cultural environment.

Keywords: Social Caste and Class, Indian -women, socio-cultural norms, religious practices, social reforms, women education, transition

Introduction

Originally meant only for the close family circle, this memoir of Lady Yashodabai Joshi was published by her daughter Manikbai Bhide in Marathi Aamchi Jeevan Pravas in 1965 and later retold and published by her grandson, V.V.Bhide in English as A Marathi Saga: The Story of Sir Moropant and Lady Yashodabai Joshi in 2003. On the insistence of her family, Yashodabai agreed to narrate her story to be jotted down by her daughter as she herself was bed-ridden and couldn't write. She declares "I do not think I have done anything great. Anyone can pursue higher aims and work on them according to his or her ability... I am no writer, but my memories are clear and vivid ^[1]." Her ambivalence and reluctance get reflected when she feels perplexed and thinks "What should I set down and leave out? What I feel important may not seem so to a reader. Occasionally I wonder why I write at all and whether Annashaeb (her husband) will like it ^[2]." Persuaded by her daughters, Yashodabai did dictate her personal narrative, which Namita Gokhale acknowledges in the Introduction of the book "...Akka's spontaneous and heartfelt story brings alive the domestic and national realities of her life and time. The images and memories in this book are like pressed flowers, still carrying the breath of life in them ^[3]."

Narratives provide structures for dividing the unremitting flow of lived experience into meaningful chunks that define human units of action ^[4]. Narrative time may quite be complicated and may even be culturally variable, narratives are universally concerned with connections and causal and coherent linkages among events, often favoring psychological over physical causes ^[5]. Yashodabai's narrative spans almost over eighty years at the time period when the country was reeling under the colonial rule and efforts were being made to achieve the avowed goal of national freedom through different quarters and finally the achievement of Independence. Parallel to the national freedom movement, Indian woman was also trying to have a little breathing space for herself and she, too, succeeded to some extent. Born in the year 1868 at Satara, married at the age of six to a boy of thirteen, a well-born girl of an orthodox Chitpavan Brahmin family of Maharashtra, Yashodabai stood the test of time along with her husband and worked assiduously for the upliftment of women. A Marathi Saga is the saga of a woman who lived her life with full vigor and grace, and fulfilled all her duties of a dutiful daughter, daughter-in-law, wife and mother.

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The journey of her life has been challenging, yet gratifying and she wants to leave the traces of her foot-steps for the next generation women with the message that woman's life can also be significantly rewarding if she keeps moving on her path with morality, truth and courage. She is highly appreciative of her husband's efforts in bringing about a radical change in her life and his contribution in the cause of women's emancipation.

Sharing her childhood experiences, Yashodabai states how her joint family had separate spaces for men and women where "women were like parrots in a cage...Of the world beyond, we knew nothing..."^[6] She also mentions her aunt's twenty-first child birth and in the same breath talks about the strict work-routine of women of the household and mothers-in-law as 'ringmasters'. Married in the year 1874, she equates her post-marriage experience with that of the calf who used to be forcibly separated from its mother. Her initial stay and experience in the house of her husband's uncle, Gopaldas Joshi, an eccentric and hot-tempered man, motivated her to amend the pitiable condition of women and as far her husband was concerned "it was his mother's suffering that generated in him the desire to improve the lot of Indian women."^[7] It speaks volumes about the dismal condition of Indian women even at the turn of the 19th century. Deep-rooted caste consciousness, discriminatory and restrictive practices against women; and religious orthodoxy ruled the society. Yashodabai talks about the eccentricities of her father-in-law and how access to the outside world was denied to the women of his own family. Women were expected only to perform the household duties and look after the needs of menfolk of the family. She herself was getting accustomed to the role of a dutiful daughter-in-law and wife, when in 1881 at the age of 17, she got an opportunity to accompany her husband Moropant Joshi popularly called Annasaheb, to Bombay. He was to study law in Bombay.

It was in Bombay that she gets the "first glorious view of the outside world and what went on it."^[8] She shares how remarkable an opportunity it has been for a woman at that time to get an exposure to the intellectual and socio-political world. Her husband did not command her to stay indoors while the reputed guests visited their home and debated on various issues of national importance. Hesitantly she expressed her desire to get education in front of her husband as she was completely illiterate at the time. Women were systematically kept out of the business of outside world and education for women was not considered at all desirable. Yashodabai was taught all the skills of household management by her mother-in-law yet she was never asked to learn to read and write. Women education was the need of the time and her husband was a man with modern and progressive outlook, so he started giving her lessons at home.

With education on her side, Yashodabai could understand her duties and responsibilities towards other women and her family better. She shares "We decided that I should work for the uplift of women and he should work for national and social reform."^[9] She watches from close quarters the challenges faced by women relatives at her parental home in Satara during her stay for the birth of her first child. Indoctrinated in the philosophy of Sita and Savitri's complete surrender and self-sacrifice, these women felt throttled and wanted a little freedom which they could not hope to get during their life-time. They would whisper

among themselves "Let us not be born again as women... They lived in the joint family at a level little better than that of slaves."^[10] The plight of widows, especially child-widows, was all the more appalling. The only recourse to endure for these women was their unwavering faith in God that sustained them on the path of virtue and duty towards their families. Yashodabai's insistence on change in their outlook did not fructify. She realizes that it was lack of education and centuries of internalization of their lesser status which keeps women tied to their roles and subjugation. They did not have the courage even to talk about their miseries openly.

Yashodabai fondly recalls the support of her husband's parents when caste-restrictions were being discounted by Annasaheb. With their unflinching support, he was able to face and overcome the social and religious pressure generated because of his decision not to get the Prayaschitta (Purification ceremony) done after he returned from England. The social boycott, humiliation at social and religious functions did not deter the family to alter their decision nor did it lessen their faith in their religion. Yashodabai narrates a number of incidents when even the well-meaning friends of their family could not come to their rescue when the family was being insulted for not getting the purification ceremony done. Once Raja of Miraj, a close friend of Annasaheb sadly spoke "What a pity we shall not be able to come to you for dinner now!"^[11] Annasaheb told him to treat him as he would treat a friend from other religion. She shares that the Raja could understand the futility of such ceremonies only after many years.

Through the reading of reformist papers like Kesari, Kal and Sudharak by Dadasaheb, a family friend, she gained insight regarding urgent need of reforms in the Indian society. In 1889, Annasaheb and Yashodabai moved in a house outside the congested city of Amravati along with her children as decided by her father-in-law since Annasaheb and his father had developed a serious discord and decided not to stay in the same house. In addition to this, Annasaheb was not keeping good health. Here in this house began Yashodabai's formal education and she talks about the rude and anonymous letters that they would receive in abundance "with a common refrain: "women should never be educated."^[12] Undeterred by the social criticism, Annasaheb took Yashodabai to Holy Cross Convent near their home where she would learn English. He also encouraged his wife to adopt latest and active lifestyle, and to wear socks and shoes. He would take her on morning walks along with him. This change in their life invited all the more social criticism and it was also alleged that they were planning to convert to Christianity. With her husband on her side, an upper-class and upper-caste Hindu woman was all prepared to face the world and tread the untrodden path with courage.

Yashodabai speaks highly of Sister Suzanne, a French woman under whose influence she developed a sense of selfless service towards others. It was she who gave confidence to Yashodabai that she could take care of her family along with her social responsibilities. With the help of Dadabhai Chitnis, she started Vanita Samaj or Women's Society in 1892. To begin with, they started with religious discourses and elaborated upon women's duties towards their families and themselves. Skills like cooking, sewing, knitting, tailoring, embroidery and childcare were imparted to girls and women. Gradually they also started teaching them learning and writing. As expected, the task was

challenging and invited not only criticism but also ridicule from the people. The more they worked for the betterment of women, the more they realized that girls should be given proper education and exposure about the lives and achievements of women in other countries. Despite all the challenges and trials, more branches of Vanita Samaj were opened in Maharashtra. She was convinced that the redundant social practices could be removed from the social fabric only through awareness among the masses and that, too, gradually. Overnight or radical change is not only impossible, it can also affect the lives of women adversely.

Annasaheb and Yashodabai paid special attention towards the education of their daughters and their eldest daughter became one of the first women doctors of India and later a great social reformer. All her four daughters were well-educated and well-married, though her eldest daughter Nagoo married a widower Gen Rajwade when she was considered well past her marriageable age. She was allowed to go to England to study medicine. Back in India, she practiced in Bombay and had her own clinic, away from the family home. Surviving all the social and religious mockery and castigation, both Annasaheb and Yashodabai supported their daughter and allowed her to lead life on her own terms. Yashodabai was fortunate enough to have a man of substance in her life as her husband who was open-minded and had the courage to assimilate and welcome desirable changes in his life even when he was considered to be a man much inspired and influenced by the Western ideology and life-style by others. A leading barrister, a rationalist, a social reformer and politician from the Central Provinces and Berar, he was also offered a position of Executive Councillor by the British Government in 1920. Yashodabai mentions that it was a matter of great surprise for them as Annasaheb had never refrained from denouncing the British policies that were exploitative and unjust. Keeping the interest of his countrymen supreme and policies just, he fulfilled the responsibilities assigned to him so well that his work and contribution was recognized by the British Government and he was conferred Knighthood in 1923. He was also given K.C.I.E (Knight Commander of the order of the Indian Empire)- a second Knighthood in 1925, which he accepted reluctantly. He faced the caustic criticism of his own people with equanimity and always laid emphasis on his selfless duties towards his country. Yashodabai stood by the side of her husband through thick and thin. He was her mentor and her guide. With him she felt complete and contented.

Yashodabai's journey from that of a child-bride, a victim of the high-caste, orthodox Hindu society to an educated and enlightened woman who took the cudgels to reform the situation and status of Indian woman is a remarkable one. Facing all the setbacks and criticism from society, she never stopped on the path of progress. Annasaheb trespassed caste restrictions and still could uphold his religion. He followed prescriptive religious injunctions, yet could locate and stand against social malpractices. He was a strong votary of women education and widow-remarriage. In 1928, the Government banned child marriage and brought about Age of Consent Act which decided the age of marriage for girls to be 16 years. Annasaheb was named chairman of the committee that would tour the whole of country and would explain the necessity and provisions of the Act. Yashodabai mentions that even highly educated men were hesitant to accept this change as it could invite social rejection and

criticism while living and punishment after death as prescribed in religious scriptures. Somebody categorically asked Annasaheb in Madras "Our scriptures say that if a girl's marriage is delayed beyond her eighth birthday, her father will be cast into hell. So, by this Act, is it not your intention that we should all be cast into hell?"^[13] Annasaheb had to be very clever and convincing while addressing such queries as he himself had faced social castigation most of his life. Karl Liberman rightly avers that "Change is often perceived as threatening. It may disturb existing relationships between particular persons and groups, require alterations in behavior, and necessitate substantial personal sacrifice."^[14]

Weighed and troubled by the oppression and exploitation faced by the women in their own families, both Annasaheb and Yashodabai worked untiring for the cause of Indian women. By 1931, they had established the Berar branch of the All India Women's Conference in Amravati. Her widowed daughter Manik had also started actively participating in these activities. The transition from a submissive, uneducated woman whose voice was hardly heard to a vocal and courageous woman who not only understood the socio-political issues of national import but also participated in the political meetings with her husband, is an exemplary one. It was her husband who opened the 'cage' doors for her and instead of a 'ring-master' she became a sympathetic counsellor and guide for her daughters-in-law.

The journey had been arduous, full of social rejection and emotional turmoil, yet both Annasaheb and Yashodabai assimilated the constructive and positive influences of the western world without ever losing their own religious and cultural moorings. Their educated, balanced and unbiased attitude enabled them to appreciate and adopt the best out of both the cultures and carve out a new path of self-fulfilment. Fulfilling all her responsibilities towards her husband, family, children and society, Yashodabai left the world walking on the path of spirituality under the guidance of her spiritual Guru, Sant Sawan Singh Ji of Radhaswamy sect with the realization that "I will now be freed forever from being born again and again in the world. All my karma would be worked out in this birth."^[15]

Such a life story of self-fulfillment and contentment definitely needs be penned down time and again and in different languages. It is an inspirational saga, especially for women for all times to come. Yashodabai became instrumental in releasing many a parrots from their cages and taught women their roles different from that of 'ring-masters'. This shift in attitude was brought through education which freed her from the centuries old hostile practices and she became harbinger of much desired social change for women.

Conclusion

Ambivalent and reluctant to relate her life story, Yashodabai gives in to the persuasion of her daughters to get it recorded for the next generations of her family. This memoir is an inspirational saga for the women of all generations to come. Emerging out of stringent socio-cultural norms and religious taboos, an uneducated woman not only became educated and awakened herself, but also worked assiduously for the women around. Social castigation and ridicule could not hamper her spirits. She lived a contented life, fulfilled all her responsibilities towards her family and society. She

ascended the ladder of awareness and showed path to her counterparts at the time when women's only acceptable and respectable role was to serve her family within the secure space of her home keeping all the limits of social modesty and invisibility. The decision to pen down this saga and further publish it in English was a judicious one on the part of her family as we draw inspiration from our past, courage from the hardships of our ancestors and pride out of their achievements.

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