

The Red Turned Black

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Abstract

G.P. Deshpande is a renowned Marxist playwright. Deshpande's gender perception is essentially political. He does not view reality either from the modernist perspective of Tendulkar or from the absurdist point of view of Alekar. For him reality is political and it represents a complex interlocking of social, political and cultural forces. All his plays define politics explicitly in terms of the power structures in the society, in terms of class, caste and gender of relations. The view of politics is not from above or outside, but from inside.

Deshpande's *A Man in Dark Times* (1973) deals with the soul-shattering defeat of Sridhar Viswanath Kulkarni in search of a new horizon despite his struggle through politics and arts to root out the unworthy rule in the society. Through Kulkarni's polemic against the committee during the inquiry it is quite evident that the writer has drawn out the Marxist ideology inherent in his protagonist.



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Introduction

Contemporary Marathi theatre represents tremendous changes in the concerns of playwrights spanning the traditional and the experimental theatres. The experimental theatre represents creative impulses observed in the modern playwrights. The emergence of playwrights such as Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and G. P. Deshpande has paved the way for a discussion on the existential problems faced by individuals in the traditional feudal society.

G.P. Deshpande gives the political ideas a dramatic experience. His plays are political plays primarily because they are about politics and people in politics. The characters in his plays are intense individuals with a forceful personality of their own. One such play is **A Man in Dark Times**. The present paper attempts to present the soul-shattering defeat of a revolutionary thinker Sridhar Vishwanath Kulkarni, in the process of ruling out the unworthy rule in the society.

Sridhar Vishwanath Kulkarni, a leftist, encounters severe discouragement from his wife along with the society he lives in, in implementing his ideology. His family itself becomes a discouraging element. At the outset, Sridhar reveals his resentment over his father Viswanath Hari Kulkarni's stance in politics. This is made evident from a formal inquiry that has been set up for Sridhar by a committee comprising Jambhekar, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Velankar, the Registrar, Prof. P.H. Kshirsagar and Prof. P.Y., a member of the legislative council.

Sridhar is subjected to an intense formal inquiry as he is considered the root cause of certain dangerous ideas that have been gaining ground on the University campus. According to the inquiry committee Sridhar, a professor of Chemistry and the Head of the Department, is not supposed to get involved in political matters. But Sridhar has imbibed politics in his blood His father Vishwanath Hari Kulkarni used to be a

political leader during his lifetime. He was a member of the Bombay Legislative Council. Sridhar's stance in politics is different from that of his father:

P.Y: Don't be dense, Kulkarni. Is it or isn't it true that you had sharp political differences with your father? (pp. 15-16)

He: The words PY used earlier are more correct. We had 'sharp differences. I don't agree that our relationship 'had soured. I always respected him. And still do (p. 17).

The entire inquiry is a polemic that results in the stepping out of their bounds by P.Y and Kulkarni.

He: I'm being asked senseless questions once again. Now here is professor P.Y., the MLC who believes in Democratic Socialism. Or so he claims. Would you start an inquiry about that?

P.Y.: I'd rather you didn't discuss my ideological beliefs.

He:I'm not doing that I'd rather require a really powerful magnifying glass to see your ideological beliefs (pp.25-26).

At one point, Kulkarni Verbally demands an explanation from P.Y. how he gained his present status as M.L.C.

He: We didn't meet Shankarrao. Of course, P.Y. continued working for some movement or the other for a few years. Then he quit. At the right time. His position today is the result of that sacrifice (pp. 14-15).

The solidarity in his convictions made Kulkarni trigger the bullet-like words against the committee that would make them self-introspect now, and, then during inquiry.

VC: Besides teaching Chemistry you are involved in many other activities on the campus. It's beyond me how people doing science find the time. Rebellion doesn't depend on having or not having time. It has to be in the blood (p. 15).

In the inquiry personal life of Kulkarni is also questioned and he is forced to recall some episodes such as conversation between Kulkarni and his uncles, between Kulkarni and his wife Saraswathi, and between Kulkarni and his one time fascination Madhavi, a stage artist who enacted in some of Kulkarni's plays. It is shown that Kulkarni had political differences with his father, as a consequence of which he had to endure contemptuous treatment from his uncles Madhukaka and Sadukaka:

Madhukaka: Oh? And where was this sense of gratitude in the last elections? What need was there for that outrageous public performance of the son opposing the candidature of the father?... (pp. 18-20).

He: I wasn't responsible for that. I wasn't even in the district on that day. We were campaigning in Mann taluq. Don't blame us for other people's (pp. 18-20).

Another lamentable aspect is that Kulkarni is forced to present before the committee a detailed account of his private life also..

He: Is it not enough to state that I was once connected with a certain political Party? No, it isn't. Because the system of which you, Jambhekar, have become a part, would not be satisfied with that. It wants a public audit of my personal life. And I have no choice but to give it (p. 28).

In bureaucracy one needs smartness to rise in the hierarchy. It has its peculiar logistics which it expects others to follow. Those who don't, have to pay the price. But those who tackle them sagaciously succeed in the conventional sense. One such person is Saraswati. As Lakshmi Subramanyam remarks:

Saraswati is sharp, intelligent and ambitious political party worker. Named after the mythological Hindu goddess of wisdom, she is the symbol of political acumen and intelligence.¹

She operates in the political organisation of which she is a member. She marries Sridhar because he shares her ideas and commitment with him. But in their ideologies they are two poles apart. She is first and foremost a Party activist. She takes him to task for delivering a speech on Stalin without getting clearance from her first:

Saraswathi (highly displeased): Look-listen to me - oh, what's the point of telling you what you already know? We are a political party. The foundation of all our strategies is discipline. Forget it. Belonging to a Party is not like belonging to a club It is not politics to say whatever you want to say whenever it pleases you. And when you do it intentionally...

He: What you're saying, in short, is that I should have kept my mouth shut. What kind of discipline is that? Who decides about it? Are you aiming to raise armies? (p.31)

No doubt, she loves him, yet she is not the one to worship him as a god. She occupies a seat in the ruling party and Sridhar is a leftist running the movement. Thus, the family atmosphere itself becomes a discouraging element for Kulkarni to move on with his ideology. At some point of time his father did the same thing and now his wife does it. Their continuous conflicts in understanding each other result in Saraswati deserting Kulkarni for ever and living with Prayag. As Lakshmi Subramanyam opines:

Saraswati is capable of exploiting the attraction Prayag, the senior political leader, feels for her, in order to achieve her political ambitions. She wants success and doesn't stop till she gets it. A higher rank in the party, a position of power with in the party hierarchy is what she wants and manages to get."²

He: People run away from memories. Today memories are running away from me. Two years earlier she left me to live with Prayag. She is now a member of the State Committee. And I'm Head of the Dept. She has won. In her way. Her idea of success was always basically narrow. She has found her success and I have become the victim of your monstrous inquiry (p. 34).

Further, Kulkarni is forced to recollect an episode revealing his onetime extra-marital relationship with a stage artist named Madhavi Bhawe. In Lakshmi Subramanyam's words:

She is an actress who brings alive the revolutionary words that the dreamer-poet-playwright writes on the stage. If Saraswati represents the spirit of explicitly political power, she incarnates the spirit of political creativity that represents politics of a different kind. Like Kalidasa's love-lorn 'Yakshi' in Meghaduta, she is extremely beautiful."

Sridhar's overwhelming love for Madhavi is evident from his words of praise in Sanskrit:

He: Madhye Kshama Shikharidashna Pakkabimbadharoshthi

sa me priya - yakshi Madhavi shyamalangi. Madhavi: Venerable master, your memory is slipping to the waist. The first words aren't madhye Kshama. They are tanvi shyama, slim and youthful. Enough of poetry, though. Pay more attention to the spirit (p. 44).

but the love she offers Sridhar demands a price of its own because she wants to kill the revolutionary spirit in Sridhar's words. She loves his fiery poetic words but does not want their political content to dominate them. The effect of this is quite evident from the following:

He: Madhavi you forget too often that you have deceived me. You make my ideas your scape goat then. Do you remember the night after the twenty-fifth show of the Tender-blooded Dawn? You knew that this soaring heart of mine was hovering around you. As I yet you spurned it that night. You mocked at my ideas, my beliefs (p. 45).

Lakshmi Subramanyam relates Madhavi to Saraswati and says:

In this respect she is quite like Saraswati. Self-willed and fiercely individual; she refuses to call his politics her own. If Saraswati is directly political, she is indirectly so. She is like the force of establishment which tries to suppress the voice of revolt."³

The enquiry committee further questions Sridhar about the people who are involved with him. These are Vitthal, Abhinav, Samant and so on. The committee cleverly talks to Sridhar of his plays, how he wrote them and how they were produced; what is the link between the plays produced and the people mentioned above and through that they neatly drag the information they need. They make him oblivious of his stubbornness and the situation. He admits all his deeds in front of the committee.

He: small groups are as follows (as if reading charges) Item one - Prof. S.V.Kulkarni is a Marxist. Item two have sprung up in the University for the study of Marxism-Leninism. Kulkarni helps them. Translated in to official language; this means they have Kulkarni's support and inspiration. Item three: by the law of guilt by association, Kulkarni bears the responsibility, through his one-time connection with Samant, of Samant's extreme left politics. Is the list complete or have I left out something? (pp.46-47)

The committee skilfully drags Sridhar from his undaunted stubbornness and solidarity to the emotional depression. As a result Sridhar who is supposed to challenge is lost in confusion; insolence of the establishment naturally shoots up and Sridhar's stint is ended with a checkmate. P.Y. hits the nail on its head. He seizes this opportunity to take revenge on Sridhar.

P.Y: People who win battles are not the ones who understand what battles are all about. Only two kinds of people understand that. Those who suffer and those who run away. I know what a battle is. Those who strip us in this fashion must pay the price - you will have to pay it. You missed the chance to run away from the fight. You must face the burning. You cannot escape that. (p. 50)

Sridhar is left cleanly stumped. At last, the word-war ends. Sridhar in his conversation with his son, goes back to his past, reminiscences a dialogue with his friends in the jail.

Friend: How can you? Out of this darkness? This darkness that devours? I can't stop feeling that a dark and dense despair is going to reign forever in this world.

In this world? Of course it will. But this world is only this cell. Beyond it, I see light. A pinkish light like the skin of a new-born baby. An assuring light. (p. 53)

There is a degree of ambivalence in Sridhar's attitude. But that does not make him any the less intensely political. Nor is ambivalence confused with uncertainty. The ambivalence in Sridhar's attitude relates to the organised left in India, and not to left politics as a whole.

Personalities like Kulkarni, even as they contribute substantially to the world, live only a few intense moments, before they end up as losers. The outward defeat can be explained anyway by the inquiry, but the 'weakness' eventually becomes evident. Sridhar Kulkarni visualises this in his son's prospects. It is there that his role ends.

He:I will force the tender-blooded dawn to break. Yamini too will have to return. (He is exhausted. Collapses into the easy-chair). She will come. Son-she will come. Who? Yamini: Which? Yamini or that bright pink dawn? Yamini the dawn. (p. 55)

To put in a nutshell, this is the first time he confronts the truth with an open, clear mind. He realises, as his father had once told him, that once one understands the truth, 'death comes easier'?

This play is, generally, about the defeat of revolutionary politics in India, and particularly about the defeat of a man, Sridhar Viswanath Kulkarni, who dares to dream of revolution. He is defeated by a sense of frustration caused by the failure of the party to subvert the challenges of the established power structure of the repressive state apparatus.

Maya Pandit says:

G.P.Deshpande in his path breaking Uddhwasta Dharmashala (A Man in Dark Times), 'a play of ideas was engaged with a disturbingly critical analysis of the left politics from inside, and the play went on to firmly establish the tradition of political plays in Marathi.'⁴

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*Page Nos. in brackets refer to Govind Purushotham Deshpande's Political Plays, A Man in Dark Times, Trans. Shanta Gokhale, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998.

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2. Ibid., pp. 45-46.
3. Ibid., p. 46.
4. Maya Pandit, Theatre India, National School of Drama, ed. 1. May 1999, New Delhi: Bhawalpur House.