

ANNA BHAU SATHE'S PLAY 'SHETJI'S ELECTION' AS A POLITICAL SATIRE

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Abstract:

Anna Bhau Sathe is a great name in Marathi literary world. He was a staunch follower of Marxist ideology. He has written large material in Marathi to entertain and educate the poor and exploited people of his times. He was an illiterate labourer but a wise writer. He realized that labourers are being fooled and greatly exploited by the upper class people. He felt that only political awareness can bring a phenomenal change in their life. Hence, he started working for the upliftment of the workers, he joined Communist Party during his time to bring the political change. And at the same time he started writing novels, short stories and poems. He also wrote for the folk theaters as he thought the theaters can also be a great medium of communication along with the novels, short stories and poems. In this folk theater 'Shetji's Election' he has sketched the contemporary political reality. He saw that the dominant political party is not sending the genuine representatives of the farmers and the workers but the landlords and the rich businessmen who are least bothered with the problems of the farmers as well as the workers. These landlords and rich businessmen donate huge amount of money to the political party in the name of election fund and get elected on their tickets. Anna Bhau has ridiculed such hypocrite political practices and conspiracies in his own unique style. He has given a message through this folk theater that in democracy people can send their genuine representatives in parliament and make their own government if they unite. The scene created by Anna Bhau in 'Shetji's Election' is also very relevant even in today's times.

Keywords: Folk theater, Loknatya, exploitation, poor, dalits, farmers, labourers, backwards, education, entertainment, election, Marxism, democracy.

Introduction:

The scene is of 1946 and the country was on the verge on independence. It's country's first election. All parties wanted to send their maximum representatives in the parliament. This play *Shetji's Election* is a review of the contemporary political situation. *Shetji's Election* is originally written in Marathi by Anna Bhau Sathe in 1946 as '*Shetjiche Election*'. In Maharashtra this genre of the play is termed as **Loknatya** which also means a *Tamasha*. These *Tamashas* are very short plays and are often written to be performed in open public touring theatres mostly during fairs or some festivals celebrated in rural Maharashtra. *Tamasha* is the most favourite and dominant folk art of all the Marathi folks because it's the mixture of Marathi poems like *Lavni*, *Powada*, and rustic dialogues in the native dialect. *Tamashas* are used by the artists as a tool to ridicule someone or something, more often the political personalities or their policies. Sometimes politicians are exposed for their deeds or corruption or dirty politics.



Tamashas were used so much to make fun of the political parties that they were banned in Maharashtra. But, this multi-talented Anna Bhau Sathe Christianised *Tamasha* as *Loknatya* and continued to make fun of the politicians and their policies with the same zeal. The play *Shetji's Election* is a depiction of a fight against the tyranny of oppression and exploitation of the farmers and labourers by the capitalists and the upper class landlords by means of politics.

The Author:

Anna Bhau Sathe (1920-1969) is a very famous Marathi writer. He was born at Wategaon a village in Sangli district of Maharashtra and was an illiterate man. He had been to school only for a one and half day. On his first day being a son of an untouchable he was asked to broom the school for the whole day and on the second day his teacher beaten him so hard that he never dared to attend the school again. But what he has contributed in the Marathi literature is equal to none. He is the highest contributor in Marathi literature. He has written thirty-two novels, thirteen books of almost two hundred short stories, fourteen *Tamasha* Christianized by himself as *Loknatya* (meaning folk-theatre), eleven ballads, three plays, and one travelogue. His life is a tragic biography. He could have made huge money out of these voluminous productions, but the compassionate and generous Anna Bhau was born poor and died poor.

Tukaram Bhaurao Sathe is his real name but being a man of full wisdom always ready to guide people, his fellow colleagues used to call him by the nick name *Anna Bhau* which means an elder brother. He guided them all throughout his life in their work and united and motivated them to fight for their own civil and political rights. In order to awake the common illiterate folk, he wrote many small as well as long plays in language of these folks so that they can enjoy as well as bring their own progress. In his whole life he had been an activist of Communist Party of India, and he was active member of its cultural wing known as '*Lal Bavta*'. He was a labourer but fully aware of the vote politics in Maharashtra. He wrote all his literature to awake the people of Maharashtra and let them know the politics going on during current times. He solidified the Marxist principle in his own words that "*This earth is not balanced on head of any mythical massive snake but on the toils of dalits and labourers*". (Transl.) In this present context the playwright wants to say that the developed world is the result of the labour and toils of the workers. Dalits, farmers and workers are the real means of change. The workers and dalits are not aware of the fact that unity is very powerful. Capitalists, money lenders, landlords take advantage of illiteracy and ignorance of the workers and they make the false claim that they have developed this world.

Comrade Govind Pansare writes that "Anna Bhau was a Marxist and his understanding of social history was also Marxist. At the same time, he had noticed that eradication of caste system is a major challenge as castes are the reasons for conflicts in the Indian society. He also realized that fight against inequality has to be launched strategically considering the caste system, *varna* system and class system existing in the country". (Transl.)

Marxists propagate that there are two classes in the society. The rich capitalist's class and other class comprises the poor farmers and the labourers. The poor farmers and the labourers are often exploited by the capitalist landlords. This exploitation can be stopped if all the workers and farmers unite and take the political power in their hands. They can rule the country in the real democratic sense. Anna Bhau Sathe believed that political leaders are being



elected to make laws for the benefits of all the countrymen, bring equality and ensure true liberty. But, the leaders look after their own material gain. Politics is a means to bring equality in the society and growth and prosperity of all the social members. Anna Bhau Sathe expresses his anger towards such leaders. He makes fun of such leaders and their corrupt practices through all his works.

Summary of ‘Shetji’s Election’

In this small play *Shetji’s Election* there are six characters. Sakharam Bapu (party leader), Sabhasad (party member), Sattu (party worker), Tara (Sattu’s wife), Magarchand Gujar Shetji (landlord and money lender) and Dhondiba (servant of Magarchand Shetji). The entire story of the play is covered in four scenes and ten pages. The main aim of the play is to entertain and educate the rustic masses.

The play begins with the *lavani* which shows the audience that it’s election time and the corrupt landlord Magarchand Shetji expresses his wish to contest election. In the first scene, Sakharam Bapu and Sabhasad are discussing in the party office, about the applications received to contest elections on behalf of the party. Sakharam Bapu tells that though there are many applications but Sattu’s application is very impressive one. Sattu has stated that he is a very dedicated and devoted old party worker, he has worked very honestly and even had been to jail in 1942 for joining movement. But, Sakharam Bapu tells Sabhasad that Sattu cannot be given the party ticket and instead of him Magarchand Shetji will be the party’s face for this election. Because, Magarchand Shetji is a very rich man and after all party requires fund. At the same time Sattu comes there and learns that he is being deprived of the ticket and in his place Magarchand Shetji is given the opportunity to contest the election. Sattu warns them of the consequences and leaves the office disappointedly.

In the next scene II, Dhondiba has been to Sattu’s home to tell him to pay the interest for the loan he has borrowed from Magarchand Shetji. But, Sattu is not at home and Dhondiba meets there Sattu’s wife, Tara. In this encounter Tara is successful in convincing Dhondiba that Magarchand Shetji is not the true representative of the farmers as he knows nothing about farming but he only knows how to snatch lands of the poor farmers and enslave them. So, now during these election times it’s the opportunity to the farmers to stand united and send their true representatives to the parliament and save the farmers and stop their exploitation.

In scene III at *Shetji’s* home. Magarchand Shetji asks Dhondiba to start campaigning for him. They must approach people one by one to vote for him. Dhondiba suggests him to meet Sattu to grab lots of votes at one place with just one strike. As Sattu is the leader of the farmers.

In scene IV, Magarchand Gujar and Dhondiba go to Sattu’s home. There Sattu, his wife Tara and Dhondiba ask too many questions to Magarchand Shetji on genuine problems of the farmers and confuse him so much that frustrated Magarchand drops the idea of contesting election. The play ends in Sattu, Tara, Dhondiba and his fellow colleagues rejoicing the ensured victory of the farmers and the workers.

Scene wise Detailed Analyses of ‘Shetji’s Election’ as a Political Satire:

‘Shetji’s Election’ is a very great creation of Anna Bhau Sathe. In this play the



playwright has tried to expose and ridicule the well-established 'Congress' party. The playwright depicts that most often political parties deny tickets to their dedicated and devoted party workers who work on ground level. These party workers spend their time and money for the success of the party. They work for many years expecting that one day, may be as per the seniority or the loyalty, they will be offered the ticket and they will go to the legislative assembly or the parliament of the country. But, often tickets are given to family members of the established politicians or the capitalists landlords and what the genuine party workers get only the hollow assurances.

Bajrang Korde writes that "This Play *Shetji's Election* was written in 1946 with the India's pre-independence election background. At this time India was about to get independence. Being first general election it had become very important election. Every political party wanted to get maximum candidates elected. Communist party and its manifesto was favourable for the common man whereas the Congress was a party of rich established capitalists and landlords. So, the main motto of this play was to expose the Congress party, make it uneasy and defeat it in this election". (Transl.)

In *Shetji's Election*, the playwright has whipped the double standards of the Congress party at the time of pre-independence of India. The dramatist shows that political party will often demand votes assuring that their party will make laws for the benefits of the workers and the farmers. But, they will not send the true representatives of the farmers and the workers. Tickets are not given on the merit of loyalty or devotion and dedication but the money power to the landlords and businessmen. These big shots can join the political party at any time as per their wish and get ticket on the basis of party fund they donate. One who gives fund to the party is given the ticket and offered the cabinet or higher designations in the legislative assembly or the parliament. The policies designed by them are not beneficial for the common man but the businessmen and the landlords.

In Scene I, Sakharam Babu tells Magarchand Gujar Shetji that he will be given the ticket to contest the election. Magarchand Gujar Shetji has to now remove his traditional turban and has to wear the Gandhi cap to attract the voters. Knowing this decision of the party, Magarchand Shetji leaves the office happily. Then, Sabhasad asks him the question that what this big bull i.e. Magarchand Gujar will be doing in the assembly. Sakharam Babu tells him that the party wants only such people who will not speak anything in the assembly. Party just want the number and not the speakers.

After Magarchand Shetji has left, Sattu comes and questions if Sakharam Babu remembers him. Initially, Sakharam Babu pretends that he doesn't recognise Sattu. But, Sattu reminds him that they were in the same Yerwada jail for participating in the 1942 protest. May be Sakharam Babu doesn't remember him as Sakharam Babu was in 'A' grade jail and was relieved on payroll immediately as his wife was not keeping well. Whereas, Sattu was in 'C' grade jail and had to remain in the jail till yesterday. But, anyways both of them have fought for the country together. Then Sakharam Babu says that yes he has the faint idea. Then, Sattu asks Sakharam Babu on party's decision on his application. Sakharam Babu tries to convince Sattu that participating in protests and movement is one thing and going to parliament is another thing. A farmer like Sattu should better work in farms instead of country's parliament. Sitting in parliament is not so easy as ploughing. He denies ticket to Sattu and on heated argument

Sakharam Babu asks Sattu to get out of the party's office immediately. In this scene its depicted that the politicians are very smart and they use and throw the poor party workers as per their choice.

In scene II. Dhondiba the servant of Magarchand Gujar has been to Sattu's home to collect interest of the loan borrowed by Sattu. But, Sattu is not at home and Tara, successfully convince to Dhondiba that he is working for his enemy doing treachery to his own community of farmers. Magarchand Shetji is the true culprit. Many villagers, Sattu's and Dhondiba's land is ceased by Magarchand Shetji and still Dhondiba is working very honestly for Magarchand this is very ironic. Tara further explains Dhondiba that Magarchand Shetji has never done ploughing in his own farm. All the farms confiscated by Magarchand Shetji are owned by the villagers and all the farming is done by the servants. Magarchand Shetji cannot be the true representative of the farmers. Tilling, ploughing, sowing, watering etc. all done by Dhondiba and other servants. Magarchand and his family members give loans to all the villagers on the very heavy interest rate and if the borrower is not able to pay the loans he ceases their land and make them landless labourer. So, if Dhondiba wants his land back Magarchand will never give it back free of cost. Dhondiba is very confused and he goes back in the confused state. Whether to be loyal to Magarchand who is his present boss and the only source of bread and butter or to stop supporting Magarchand, as he has snatched his land and made him landless. Following few dialogues between Dhondiba and Tara are beautiful description of their verbal war. Dhondiba has gone to Sattu's house to collect the interest of the loan borrowed by Sattu. There is heated argument between Tara and Dhondiba.

Tara: Are you a human being or what? Just for handful of grains you are harassing your own community members.

Dhondiba: So you want to say that I am not a human being.

Tara: What is your caste? We can't call you farmer as you are taking side of the landlord. We can't call you landlord either as you are a sweeper in landlord's palace!

Dhondiba: Sister Tara don't call me like that. What's wrong if I have lost my land to the landlord? Am I so mean?

Tara: That's what I am saying, the cunning landlord has grabbed your land by conspiracies and you are working very sincerely and honestly for him and barking like a dog on farmers?

Dhondiba: So you mean to say that I should not be loyal to the one who is feeding me?

Tara: O O O O wait. Who is feeding you? That Magarchand? Have his ancestors ever entered to the fields and done ploughing? He doesn't know how to tie a knot to the ropes of bulls and cows. The grabbed land is yours and you are only cultivating it. (Listening all these things Dhondiba remains speechless) Why are you so freezed now? Tell me who is feeding you? You are feeding yourself or that Magarchand? (Transl.)

These thought provoking questions of Tara makes Dhondiba think and revolt. She has made him aware that he is a mental slave it is only he who will free himself from the tyranny of the landlord.

In scene III, at Magarchand Shetji's palace the oriented Dhondiba tells Shetji that he will not work anymore. Magarchand Shetji requests Dhondiba to be his servant till the elections are over. Then Magarchand Gujar ask Dhondiba to accompany him and visit door to door for campaigning. Dhondiba tells Magarchand that instead of wandering door to door it is better to catch the farmers leader Sattu and get all the votes at a lot in one visit. Magarchand likes this idea and they go to Sattu.

In scene IV, at Sattu's home Magarchand Gujar promises that he will bring the farmers and labourers rule in the country. He will construct proper roads, bridges on rivers, schools, temples, guest house for the pilgrims, hospitals and keep diseases away. In opposite to that Sattu, Tara and Dhondiba ask him what about the disease of indebtedness and land confiscating. What about the punishments of jails, police and landlords' tortures to the loan borrowers? Will the landlord return the lands of the farmers? Will he burn the loan and land records? If not, then how can he bring the rule of the farmers and the workers? Will he cease the property of the black marketers or hoarders? Will he control and improve the bureaucracy? Will he unite and integrate the countrymen? These are the genuine problems of the countrymen and not the roads and temples or wells and bridges. The dialogues between them have been designed very interestingly in comic manner.

Dhondiba: It's all about the physical diseases. But, what about the indebtedness? Landlord's harassment of the farmers?

Magarchand: What else should be done along with the roads, schools, wells, hospital, temple and the guesthouse for the pilgrims?

Dhondiba: What shall be done about the jail, police stations and police tortures to the rural folks who borrow loans and fail to pay?

Magarchand: Getting freedom, hand over the rule to the farmers and labourers.

Sattu: Will you cease property of the people indulge in black marketing? Will you burn all the loan and land ceased records and hand over the lands to its original owners? (Transl.)

Above dialogues are excerpts from the play about the cross questioning to each-other. By putting such questions on the part of Sattu, his wife Tara and Dhondiba the playwright wants to enlighten the poor farmers, dalits and labourers. By means of this entertainment the author wants to educate them. Anna Bhau Sathe wants to make them courageous and bold and not be just a passive prey of such landlords and money lenders. The main attraction of the play is that the protagonist Sattu and Tara are the people of great courage. They also make Dhondiba courageous and bold. They are least scared of the political party leader Sakharam Bapu or the land lord Magarchand. Sattu is a rebel, he directly and boldly tells them that he is least bothered of them and is going to contest the election from the farmer's political party.

Use of Poetry and Proverbs:

In Maharashtra poetry is a vital part of *Loknatya*. The playwright has added poems very skilfully to give the additional effect and exciting entertainment. The play *Shetji's Election* begins with a *lavani* and ends with a ballad. The playwright has written five short length poems in this *lokmatya* allowing the characters to express their true feelings and emotions and communicate them to the audience. The first scene begins with the following *lavani*

One village named Rahimatpur. Lived there one money lender.
Magarchand Gujar was his name. Rich landlord.
Owned tremendous land. Had respect in village. Used to do business.
Took advantage of war. Earned a lot of profit.
Black marketed. Harassed the villagers.

Using the black money. Get prestigious political position. He thought. (Transl.)

In the second scene the character of Magarchand has been described very beautifully in the same poetic way again.

Use of proverbs, puns, wits, and idioms and phrases is the minimum requirement of a folk theatre and Sathe is master in this art form. The proverb addressed to Dhondiba is a precise example of treachery. *Kurhadicha danda gotas kal* – “The handle of an axe is a cause for the destruction of its own wood community” (Transl.) is very precise and hard hitting.

The setting of the play is in the rural area of Sangli district i.e. southern Maharashtra. Marathi is a rich language in terms of vocabulary and playwright has exploited the vocabulary dextrously through all his works to entertain the masses. *Shetji's Election* is not an exception to it. This play is full of Marathi proverbs and idioms. There is no scarcity of figures of speech as well as symbols and images. Use of proverbs and idioms make this comedy very engaging and interesting.

Conclusion:

In terms of entertaining and educating the masses Anna Bhau Sathe's folk theatre *Shetji's Election* is a very successful one. Though the play was written in 1946 it has the same appeal even today. It depicts that politicians use the party workers as per their convenience and throw them when not required. True workers are deprived of their political rights and tickets are given to the landlords and capitalist instead of the real representatives. False assurances are given to the people and laws are made that will benefit the capitalist instead of the farmers and the workers. This very important and serious message has delivered with the light comedy. All the scenes have been mixed with full humour and wit. The dialogues are truly comic and hilarious. This play is unique and universal in itself, rustic dialect, *lavanis* and *powadas* create a mesmerising effect. The charming environment makes the play and the playwright unforgettable.

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