

Prakash Deshpande-Kejkar's *Bardana*: A Study in Indian Bhakti Tradition

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Abstract

The principal theme of the novel, namely the spiritual quest, is justly and inherently connected to the theme of journey. A sense of journey dominates the entire novel. This theme is worked out by means of a logical development of events and situations. In the novel Prakash Deshpande aims to convey his perception of the transcendental nature of the ultimate Reality. At the same time, he points out the immanent aspect, and stresses the essential oneness of Man and God. In the novel the author seems to convey us that it is in fact through our interaction with Nature and men around, especially the enlightened ones, that we get wiser about God and His ways. Through apt images and symbols, he tries to convey man's place in this physical world and his spiritual quest.

KEYWORDS: spiritual quest, journey, the ultimate Reality, the five elements, etc

The relationship between Man and Nature has been the subject of contemplation for mankind since the pre-historic times. Scientists have their scientific ways to explore the principles of nature and poets, philosophers and sages also have been in the pursuit of the knowledge of the underlined reality of the universe. Intuitive spiritual glimpses have played a very significant role in the spiritual quest of human beings and its manifestations are seen in the sacred books of all faiths in the World. The theme of spiritual quest has been a sort of challenge to the great literary minds of the World. The present study is a humble attempt to have certain perspective in this context.

Prakash Deshpande- Kejkar is a noted novelist and critic in Marathi. *Bardana* published in 2004, is his third novel. It was very well welcomed all over Maharashtra as a consequence it received six prizes including Anna Bhau Sathe award by Maharashtra Government. The principal theme here is the theme of spiritual quest. The principal theme of the novel, namely the spiritual quest, is justly and inherently connected to the theme of journey. A sense of journey dominates the entire novel. This theme is worked out by means of a logical development of events and situations. The theme of spiritual quest is stated at the very outset of the novel. The protagonist Raosaheb's dream symbolically conveys this theme. In a dream, Raosaheb is lead by a dot of light; he hears a divine call of *Alakha Niranjan*, he is transformed into a Faqir, he walks to the hill, sees a river and a boat and lastly his attempt to reach the other side of the river and his restless feeling that if once he reaches the other side of the river, he will be cut off forever from his world, so he jumps into the water to come back into his own world. Thus the dream is full of spiritual implications. It instructs Raosaheb to pursue the spiritual journey to realize the self. His soul's craving for communion with the supreme soul is effectively conveyed through the images like a dot of light, a hill, a river, a boat, and his craving to reach the other side of the river. The imagery involved

in the dream suggests release from allurements that the sensory world holds for the seeker. Moreover, the concept represented by the metaphor “crossing the river” is linked with that of “divine call”. It suggests that God’s will is the supreme factor in the seeker’s spiritual accomplishment. It asks him to undertake the path of *Nirvana*, leaving behind the allurements of *sansara*. Deshpande’s perceptions of oriental philosophy, his preoccupations with the English, American and essentially his study of Eliot, his close contacts with the Muslim saints (he was brought up in Aurangabad, a bi-lingual city) and his perceptions of the Muslim and Sufi Philosophy, his perceptions of *Gita*, Vedanta and Upanishadas are presented symbolically in *Bardana*.

In the novel Prakash Deshpande aims to convey his perception of the transcendental nature of the ultimate Reality. At the same time, he points out the immanent aspect, and stresses the essential oneness of Man and God. In the novel the author seems to convey us that it is in fact through our interaction with Nature and men around, especially the enlightened ones, that we get wiser about God and His ways. Through apt images and symbols, he tries to convey man’s place in this physical world and his spiritual quest. His approach to the subject and the method he employs reflect a classical mind at work equipped with sound scholarship and a through grasp of the essentials of the major ‘faiths’ in the world.

A comprehensive study of *Bardana* reveals the writers innate zeal to help ordinary people move towards some awareness of the depths of spiritual development which forms the central theme of the novel. In spite of living among adverse conditions and various kinds of temptations, the protagonist of the novel ultimately reaches his goal of spirituality. The novel under study renovates common man’s interest in spirituality and shows how it is relevant to our lives in the modern world with moral perplexity and uncertainty. The spiritual realization of the protagonist of the novel becomes possible only after intense spiritual conflicts and moral awareness. Many obstacles and distractions come in the way of his spiritual journey, which are dispelled finally. Like the chief characters of Eliot’s plays, the chief character of *Bardana* attains spiritual liberation only after self-scrutiny, self-exploration and heart-searching. With some spiritual guidance, he attains his ultimate goal. In the article “Quest for Self-Realization in T.S. Eliot’s plays”, Amukha Malyada and Sumitra Kukreti observe, “While achieving the final absolute of human perfection (self-realization), the East emphasizes the importance of inward contemplation whereas the West gives importance to the outward activity” (Malyada; Kukreti, 2004: 228). This observation is significant in the context of the present study. The analysis and interpretation of *Bardana*, a novel of the East, significantly brings out the importance of the above observation. At the same time the above mentioned writers observe, “Western suffering and confession are considered to be similar to concentration and renunciation of Patanjali in the Eastern Philosophy” (Ibid: 228). This comment significantly reveals that the philosophies of all the major faiths of the World have at their cores one and the same spirit only. In other words, all the faiths of the world emphasize the union of the soul with the Divine as the goal of spiritual life. The details in the process of this spiritual pursuit may vary, but a striking semblance emerges from the perspectives of the seven writers with regard to the course as well as the goal of these physical-cum-spiritual journeys.

At the core of the novel there is an idea of withdrawal from mundane materialistic life and going back to the purity of unspoiled nature in search of peace and some regenerative power. In this sense the novel is a novel of pilgrimage, of people's spiritual quest. The concept of journey, the concept of spiritual disciple and his spiritual mentor, the process of renunciation of material life and sensory pleasures, the process of self-purification, the process of earning the spiritual realization by hard work and continuous efforts, and finally merging the self into the Universal Soul constitutes the thematic and spiritual design of *Bardana*.

Prakash Deshpande has used symbols and imagery in order to convey his vision of spirituality. He has used the five elements: Earth, water, fire, wind and sky. The image of journey and the mountain are unanimously used. He has used the symbols and images essentially selected from the natural world around us. The analysis also shows that Prakash Deshpande has depicted his main character establishing a kind of communion with the Universal Soul, omnipresent in the nature. It is this communion with the universal spirit that is present in every object of nature that constitutes the affirmative spiritual vision of Prakash Deshpande. This communion with the Universal Soul, in other words, constitutes the concept of universal love. The present study reveals that the basic spiritual perception of the author is the process of losing the self or the ego in order to qualify oneself and then experience the spiritual bliss by merging the ego with the spirit of nature. Through the dreams and trances and through the symbolic passages the author has revealed at the symbolic journey of Raosaheb's soul to merge into the universal spirit. The symbol of 'journey' is essentially linked up with the 'quest' motif of the character. He seems to convey that spiritual realization cannot be achieved by wealth and possession, fake rites and rituals; it can only be gained and enjoyed by renouncing the wealth and possessions. If we are pure of heart and soul, we may unconsciously or inadvertently reach the doorsteps of the Divine. Further, he suggests that it requires a great devotion to attain the supreme bliss. In *Bardana* Raosaheb, under the spiritual influence of Hakimsaheb, loses his interest in the mundane world and qualifies himself to understand the universal soul.

There is the representation of the 'teacher-student' philosophy in Deshpande's *Bardana*. In this sense the novel is full expression to Indian philosophy of spirituality. In *Bardana*, the relationship between Raosaheb and Hakimsaheb is that of a spiritual disciple and a spiritual guide. Hakimsaheb leads Raosaheb on the path of spirituality through his spiritual teachings. He helps Raosaheb to get free from the mundane, materialistic world. Here, the divine sound *Alkha Niranjana* prevails throughout the novel. In fact, the novel begins with it and ends with it. The sound *Alkha Niranjana* represents the Hindu philosophy of life.

Prakash Deshpande seems to suggest that the acceptance of higher values, like love, charity, compassion, selfless service, and the concurrent negation or rejection of vices like hatred, anger, selfishness, envy, revenge naturally pave the way for the attainment of the highest 'joy' or 'bliss'. Prakash Deshpande encapsulates the wisdom of Oriental Philosophy in the novel. Prakash Deshpande's protagonist is full of love for his farm and his pet animals. His love for the elements of nature is essentially his

spiritual love. In the last phase of his Journey he feels love for the wind, the trees, all the cows in the flock, the sheep and lastly he sees the immanence of God in every stone that he encounters on his way towards the ultimate union with the universal spirit. Prakash Deshpande lays stress on 'cleansing the spirit or heart' as a means to inward transformation. For him 'water' is a means of purification. Raosaheb takes the bath in the water of a stream and thus he purifies himself for the meeting with the Divine.

In novel the symbol of 'mountain' is used as a zenith of spirituality. This symbol helps the writer to convey his perception of spirituality. The 'Mountain' is a symbol that has been employed by Prakash Deshpande to convey his perception of spirituality. The mountains symbolize spiritual height. Like the symbol of water, the symbol of 'mountain' has same implications in the East and in the West. Raosaheb, in *Bardana*, receives his enlightenment in a temple on the mountain top. Another common symbol used by Prakash Deshpande is that of a 'fire'. The 'fire' signifies the pain and penance the mortal must undergo to achieve 'deification'. In *Bardana*, Deshpande, too, has used the symbol of 'fire' as a means of purification. The fire purifies Raosaheb and leaves him pure and joyous as the new-born, fit to meet with the Divine.

In the pursuit of spiritual quest Raosaheb holds the communication with the elements of nature. In Prakash Deshpande's *Bardana*, the hero of the novel holds communication with the wind, the water, the trees, the animals, and lastly with the sky. What Deshpande tries to convey by this is that at the time of highest enlightenment the man becomes one with the elements of Nature. He sees no difference between his soul and the elements. In everything of the nature he senses the presence of the almighty spirit. Deshpande lays stress on purification and contemplation (Raosaheb's dream is but the projection or contemplation of his own thoughts) as indispensable to the 'illumination' of the soul and as the only reliable means to realization of the universal soul. This very vision reflects Deshpande's close study of the *Upanishadas* and Sufi mysticism. Moreover, Deshpande shows us that in his eagerness for direct and personal contact with the Divine, the true seeker chooses to be unfettered from the narrow dogma and institutionalism. For the spiritual seeker 'freedom' is really essential. The whole novel is a narration of how Raosaheb gets his 'freedom' from his 'Bardana'. Like *Upanishadas* and Sufi spiritualism, Christian spiritualism also lays stress on hard self-discipline and inward purity as the essential prerequisites for 'illumination', which is followed by the soul's abiding contact with the Divine. Prakash Deshpande, being a professor of English literature, has a good acquaintance with this principal of Christian spirituality. All the faiths over the World emphasize man's innate divinity and see the union of the soul with the Divine as the goal of spiritual life. This is exactly Prakash Deshpande's perception in terms of spiritual quest. In the novel we find the fusion of Hindu and Islamic philosophy. In *Bardana* Hakimsaheb represents Islamic faith, while Raosaheb represents Hindu faith.

Thus, the comprehensive study of the novel reveals that the basic spiritual perception of Deshpande is the process of loosing the self or the ego in order to qualify oneself and then experience the spiritual bliss by merging the ego with the spirit of

nature. Spiritual quest necessarily requires the basic quality of personal goodness. It is this quality of personal goodness that has been explored and reasserted in the novel under discussion. The personal goodness becomes the first and essential criterion for the spiritual enlightenment. The dictum that all great minds think alike holds true especially in the case of the writer discussed in the present study. Deshpande's perception reveals that, although Heaven and Nirvana are slightly different notions, the notion of reaching perfection through suffering and the shedding off of all earthly impediments such as desire, ambition and the demands of the senses is common to Christian, Islam and Hindu thought.

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