

# A Cultural Policy for Maharashtra

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If Mumbai is to see, as predicted, unprecedented inflow of wealth in the 21st century then the question that arises is whether the city's make over only in terms of the spatial and skyline changes and infra-structural amenities is sufficient to prepare the metropolis for the role it is expected to play in near future. There will be many around us who feel that Mumbai has lost its position of intellectual, and therefore, cultural leadership which it provided in the 19th and the early 20th century to the country. Even compared to the 1970s which saw in Mumbai a period of cultural flourish in theatre, music, literature et al. there is a definite cultural slide down in the first decade of 21st century. Gone are the days of SurSingar Sansad organized by Brij Narayan, Sanskrit Drama Festivals (16 Sanskrit plays were staged in 1970) or plays put up by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Even trade unionism and the intellectual debates of their leaders are no more to be heard. Of course there are many cultural activities conducted even today, Mumbai Festival, Kala Ghoda Festival. Art scene is rich, more films are produced, and through them the civil society is gaining vibrancy but many of the debates and discussions are sterile and tend to be repetitive. They do not excite the powers that be to translate ideas into actions. They do not even promote Private-Public partnership (PPP as it is called) to the extent it was seen in the 19th century. Are we creating new ideas, are we enriching the intellectual culture of our city are the questions that are to be addressed. Mumbai today appears to be in a de-intellectualized state. A case in point is that the University campus is devoid of any renowned intellectual who has made

it big in the international or national world of social sciences or humanities whereas till a few years ago there were a number of such scholars. The de-intellectualized Mumbai poses yet another problem vis-à-vis the efforts taken for the city's make over at a great expense. An important lesson of history is that a society that does not contemplate and encourage cultural development along with material growth goes down in all walks of life. And, for sure, intellectual development precedes cultural development. It is said that when culture declines, art flourishes. Writers and artists silently revolt against the corrupt system through the medium of their art and attempt to bring about cultural change. In the case of Mumbai, culture has declined, but the second part of the theory is yet to take off. The reasons for this are far too many, but not difficult to fathom. The chief among them is the city's continuous cultural erosion due to its distaste for intellectual pursuits.

I must explain what I mean by intellectualization of a society. The concept of intellectualization refers to the inculcation, assimilation and adherence to reason, rationality and progressive ideas including the scientific development. For any intellectualized society varied and enriched social and cultural activity is an essential condition. This, in other words, means not only giving preference to the societal intellectual achievement rather than the individual intellectual attainment, but also denoting an acceptance and admittance of plurality of ideas. Intellectualizing a society means the willing participation in various debates and discussions in an attempt to assess and evaluate the veracity and efficacy of traditionally held opinions and beliefs.

This still further means the evaluation and revaluation of a living tradition from time to time. Intellectualizing a society also means the acceptance of the belief that social change is desired and that such a change is possible to achieve through human endeavour. It means increasing socio-cultural and political awareness by creating a public space for everyone in the society with a view to making one ultimately a responsible and concerned citizen of the society. Even philanthropy for the public cause is part of that intellectualizing process. Such awareness in the end results in creating and strengthening a civil society through previously established as well as newly created associations and organizations and thus, leading the society into becoming a civil society with a civic culture. A civil society with a civic culture generally results in the blossoming of public life in all its aspects.

Let us glance over what Mumbai was like in the 19th century. Many new ideas took birth in Mumbai in the 19th century. In addition to setting up institutions such as the Asiatic Society, the Bombay Geographical Society, the Bombay Anthropological Society the Agri-Horticulture Society, the Bombay Natural History Society etc. for the spread of scientific knowledge, collection and collation of scientific data. Although most of these were started by the British, these Societies of learning had a cascading effect on the local community. Societies and organizations on parallel lines were mooted and run. Many reform movements too were started that served as beacon lights to the people of the country in general and Western India in particular, who hoped to achieve social change

based on equality and justice. The city proudly possessed many 'firsts' to its credit. The first anti-caste movement was started in Mumbai, the rejection of infallibility of the scriptures was seen first in Mumbai, the first open letters of protest against the colonial exploitation were published in a Mumbai newspaper, the first widow re-marriage took place in Mumbai, the first Hindu-Muslim marriage took place here.... The list can go on. The Arya Samaj too was founded here, though it struck roots else where. The Prarthana Samaj which had its ideal in 'Love of God in the service of Man' and which since its beginning rejected idolatry as "an aberration, it is an insult to God, it debases man and leads him to evil practices" and also propagated breaking of caste barriers too was started here. Theosophy also found many takers here. Thus the Mumbai society then was vibrant and could be termed as progressive.

The same society in the recent past has seen only The same society in the recent past has seen only jingoistic debates over some non-issues. Remember the controversy over Deepa Mehta's film Fire? On the other hand at present there are no serious debates on any socio-cultural, literary issues or public morality issues. Some years ago one of the contentious issues was about the celebration of the birth anniversary of Chhatrapati Shivaji, founder of the Maratha Empire: whether it should be celebrated according to the Hindu almanac or according to the Gregorian calendar. At present the State Government celebrates it on one day and others celebrate the same on another day, thus celebrating the same anniversary twice in a year. Is this a solution to the

problem or is it the postponement of a decision? A simple solution could be that since 1818 was the watershed in the history of modern Maharashtra when the Marathas ceded power to the British, events before that year could be celebrated publicly by the Hindu almanac and events after that year be celebrated according to the Gregorian Calendar.

To quote another instance, Hon'ble Home Minister R. R. Patil as well as the Shiv Sena Chief Balasaheb Thackeray both embroiled themselves in an unnecessary polemic that has gone down in history as the James Laine controversy. All historians including Jadunath Sarkar's worthy disciple S.N.Sen have discussed the hollowness of the obscure Portuguese chronicle's claim about the parentage of Shivaji. But our Government still thinks it fit to ban the small book. Banning a book should be the last resort in any democracy. Thus, the non-issues or less important issues are assuming huge proportions because the Government has dillydallied in finding permanent solutions. Intolerance is on the increase, insecurity is on the increase, and so is violence. There were other cases too when Salman Rushdie's book was banned, M F Hussain's paintings were vandalized.

All such problems could have been taken care of if an integrated and comprehensive cultural policy document was available.

It is high time an integrated and comprehensive cultural policy is drafted and implemented. All political parties should be brought across a table to decide upon a common minimum agenda

on cultural issues. Otherwise Mumbai will see further cultural slide down in the years to come. Only a consensus on basic issues will save the situation. The comprehensive cultural policy should include the following: Language and Literature Policy, Books and Public Libraries Policy, Heritage Policy, Culture Policy, Performing Arts Policy and so on. Not that presently there are no policies of the Government. Each department of the Government has a policy of sorts but its promulgation and implementation is according to the whims of the Minister or the Secretary and when either is changed or transferred the policy too receives a setback such as either a total reversal or a change of direction.

Here are some salient features of the recommended comprehensive and integrated cultural policy:

#### **The Language & Literature Policy**

Four years after the Linguistic States were created and after a valiant struggle with the Central Government, the formation of the Maharashtra State was celebrated with great fanfare, the State has not been able to decide its language policy, particularly towards the English language as well as other languages such as Gujarati. It has not found ways and means of strengthening the study and teaching of Marathi which is the official language of the State. Obviously, cosmopolitan nature of Mumbai paves impediments. Marathi the State language, Hindi the national language and English the World language ... these cannot be avoided.

If an option is to be given to non-Marathi citizens, their mother tongue

also will have to be given a preference. Thus a four-language formula will have to be implemented in Mumbai. If one Minister thinks in one direction, the other, holds a diametrically opposite view. Should we not decide once and for all the Language Policy of the State? Why should this be left to individual ministers or secretaries? Despite the tall talk, precious little is done by the Government to improve teaching and learning of Marathi as well as of English.

Why do our Ministers speak in 'Marathi-English' when foreign dignitaries visit them? Could they not speak in Marathi even if they do know a smattering of English? By doing this they will set examples before others, increase employment by creating positions for interpreters and also show their pride for their mother tongue.

If Hindi officers could be appointed at All India Radio, Doordarshan as well as banks and government offices, why cant Marathi officers not be appointed? Surprising part is that Government Marathi is unintelligible to commoners. Since three sets of grammar rules prevail in Marathi concurrently, its grammar has become chaotic.

There is no standard Marathi, as the original standard Marathi was challenged due to its use by the high castes that constituted only three and a haft per cent of the total Marathi speaking people. The need for a language policy is felt all the more when one sees so many different keyboards for the Devnagari script. Should the Government not come forward to give its imprimatur to one standard Devnagari keyboard?

### The Books & Public Libraries Policy

With the UNESCO directive that there cannot be a tax on knowledge, it is absolutely clear that there cannot be any tax levied on books including octroi which falls within the preview of the Municipal jurisdiction. Thane Municipal Corporation had levied octroi on books, so had the Kolhapur Municipal Corporation. Taxing books in such a way was considered a source of revenue, however, meagre. When this was brought to the notice of Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, he promptly “abolished” octroi on books. But the bureaucracy, not too happy with the Chief Minister’s ruling, issued a Government Resolution (GR) which stated “No tax of any kind, including the octroi, on essential books including octroi” (Emphasis mine!) This created more confusion as the term ‘essential books’ can mean differently to different people. It again required another representation before a corrigendum to the earlier GR regarding the octroi on books could be issued to the said effect “No tax of any kind on any book in any language and in any subject.”! Should a city of this size and with so many languages not have a uniform Policy for Books? An attempt in this direction was made when Rajiv Gandhi was the Prime Minister. What happened to the National Book Policy is anybody’s guess. Antiquarian Books: There appears to be a total absence of an official policy towards buying and selling of rare and antiquarian books. The State Government is unaware of the fact that there is a need to formulate a policy towards book collections, official or private, of rare and antiquarian books. The Report of the Working Group on Libraries of the National Knowledge Commission has recommended the

formation of a National Committee on Private Collections. We have in the city some really old libraries stocking extremely rare material. Those libraries in the city that have celebrated centenaries or post-centennial silver or golden jubilees are in a sizeable number. At one point of time the city took pride in its antiquarian book dealers. Today antiquarian book-dealer in Mumbai has become a thing of the past. Old colleges such as the Government owned Elphinstone College (est. 1824) and the Free Church Society of Scotland which runs the Wilson College (est. 1825) have discarded most of the antiquarian books. The predicament of their Principals or Librarians can be understood that they have to create room for new books, but their method of discarding antiquarian books cannot be forgiven. The State Government should have thought of setting up a repository of discarded collections. A Committee set up by law should supervise sales and purchases of antiquarian books just as it was done in case of philately. It would have been quite a logical step for a progressive State like Maharashtra. But in the absence of any such restrictions, antiquarian books have found their way out of the country and none in the enlightened land of Maharashtra ever objected. The situation is so precarious that in near future any researcher who would want to do research in any subject related to the erstwhile Bombay Presidency, they will have to visit the seven countries that are taking away books at regular intervals, namely U.K., U.S.A. France, Germany, Japan, Italy and Australia. In cities of advanced countries a lot of money is spent by the governments and government encouraged industrial conglomerates on libraries,

museums and heritage buildings. In fact, collections of antiquarian books in a country are an indication of its cultural richness and in their preservation for the benefit of scholars and laymen is seen as the progressive urge of the State government. Only researchers of the 19th century Western India know how difficult it is to procure books of the period. Resultantly, researches on Western India lack comprehensiveness. Those who write in English rarely consult books in Marathi and Gujarati and those who write in Marathi and Gujarati cannot afford the English language books, as they have become expensive due to the demand by foreign scholars. Some kind of a sectarian research is in the offing. Such a situation was avoidable if the State Governments would have stepped in time to stop the drain of antiquarian books out of the country. All over Maharashtra there are over 125 public libraries that have celebrated centenaries or even post-centennial silver or golden jubilees. Each one of them has in its holdings some antiquarian books. Would it be difficult for the Director of Public Libraries to arrange preparation of a complete catalogue of antique books in possession of these libraries and make them available to researchers? It will be a very useful research tool in their hands. A rare book whose whereabouts are not known is like a book unknown or lost.

The successive regimes in Maharashtra have thought that in the absence of the royalty, it is the responsibility of the government to patronize writers and artistes. But awards | The successive regimes in Maharashtra have thought that in the absence of the royalty, it is the responsibility of the

government to patronize writers and artistes. But awards and grants are not the only way of encouraging them, although it is the easiest form. The State Book Policy should have been innovative enough to encourage a literary culture. Buying books centrally by the government has generated corruption of all kinds, and the government by now has become insensitive to criticism and somehow manages to shield the corrupt. Why has not an innovative minister or a bureaucrat thought of a legal provision for setting up of a book-shop every kilometer? The print order of a new Marathi book rarely exceeds a thousand copies. Many a time a whole edition consists of only five hundred copies, of which the Government is the biggest buyer. This is the case in the progressive State with nearly a ten million people and with an increasing literacy percentage. Even the print runs of the reputed houses publishing serious English books have been cut down to 300 copies at a time. In Mumbai today literary awards for ‘significant’ literary creative works could be had for mere asking and yet there is no major award for intellectual pursuits. Does it also speak well for a progressive government if the writers and artistes can have the awards only on application? Awards for excellence in any field are an honour and an honour must come honorably and with deserving regard and respect. If the governments want writers and artists to send in applications for being considered for any award, other literary and other institutions too are seen following suit and want the writers to apply and that too with two copies of their publication. Would a writer whose self-respect is still intact stoop so low to apply and then to lobby for an award?

These days awards in reality are rewards. They are the compensation for the help rendered to the powers that be in retaining power. They are the prize for maintaining friendship with the high and the mighty in the government. They, for sure, were always that way perhaps from time immemorial. But then to bring credibility at least some of the awardees deserved them. A time has come to make it obligatory to register the awards as there are instances that an award given once to a friend is the first and the last time it is heard of. However while naming the award after some great son of the soil, no monetary provision is made and therefore the closure. An award once instated should be run at least for ten years. The Second condition should that must be adhered to is that no organization using the word 'Maharashtra' in the title be allowed to do so. For example, Maharashtra Ratna or Maharashtra Vaibhav or Maharashtra Gaurav, for that should be the prerogative of the State Government

In the last 50 years no major institution for advanced studies has come up in Mumbai, such as Institution for South Asian Studies, Institution for Cultural Studies etc. There are no think-tanks. The government too does not need their services.

### **Heritage Policy (Conserving and Displaying History)**

The pathetic condition of museums displays poverty of all kinds including that of ideas of the State government. First of all the Government as well as people at large do not have an idea of what impact museums have on the young minds. Even if they have

they do not want to spend money on informal ways of learning history. There are not many museums in the State, for their creation is not encouraged. We have refused to learn from other progressive countries as to how much money and efforts go in creating traditional all-purpose museums as well as innovative ones to preserve inherited legacy, how much money they spend on displaying their histories for the benefit of future generation as well as foreign visitors. The reason that is each time put forward is paucity of funds. But the reality is that it is not just paucity of funds, it is more the lack of will to bring about a change. We have forgotten the old adage that 'a will will find a way'. Various charitable trusts and industrial conglomerates could be roped in such efforts. The Maharashtra State Archives, by far the richest one in the country, is in neglect. Historical documents in its possession are crumbling to pieces, waiting for modern techniques of preservation and restoration. The Government cannot decide whether the building that houses it is actually meant for the college or for the State archives. The plan is sanctioned for a huge new building for keeping the archival records at a City Suburb, but there is no more progress in that direction.

### **Performing Arts Policy: Definitions are a necessity**

Obscenity, vulgarity, modernity et al. When in a recent case of confiscating 'obscene' material, a bench of Mumbai's higher court asked the concerned Police officers to define obscenity, they dithered, as they had never encountered a question of this nature. One of the judges is reported to have quipped that if no distinction is made between nudity

and obscenity and also between art and artlessness then the famous Khajuraho Temple will have to be fully cloaked. Nudity need not be taken as obscenity.

The police department of the Government of Maharashtra, ill-equipped as it is, to grapple with the changing values in modern times, has time and again displayed its tragic inadequacy to comprehend the changing environs and changing values suitable for modern times. Some social values are constant and unchanging, but there are some that do change with the changing lifestyles and life patterns. Therefore, a cross-section of enlightened members of the society wisely chosen has to take a lead in redefining and debating over the provisions of violation of Code of Criminal Justice. The State Government has never bothered to come to the rescue of law interpreting and enforcing authorities with clear cut definitions and

policy. Concepts such as vulgarity and obscenity are difficult to define but not impossible to do so. Many such definitions have already been adopted by other countries and are available for reference.

We have continuously been discussing whether there should be or should not be censor boards for performing arts, knowing full well that in a multi-cultural and multi-caste community no government can afford to abolish it for fear of jingoistic backlash resulting in social tensions and danger to communal harmony. It also fears a persistence of dominance by the high castes over the depressed castes. In the continuous debate however about 'censor or no censor' what is lost sight of is the fact that the government must choose its censors to represent the real cross-section of the society. They must be really enlightened persons and not those who are near and dear to the government in power.

