CHAPTER: II

“TUKARAM IN HEAVEN, CHITRE IN HELL”:

MODERNISM IN THE POETRY OF DILIP CHITRE

Like AK Ramanujan (1929-1993), and Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), Dilip Chitre (1938-2009) had a lifelong passionate engagement with native literary traditions and the western ones. All three of them were bilinguals and translators of great repute and played vital role in establishing modernism in India. This creative attachment with the dual heritage is a notable feature of the post-colonial writing in the India. Apart from being a very influential poet, translator, fiction writer, critic, playwright, columnist and editor, Dilip Chitre was also a painter, filmmaker and very knowledgeable connoisseur of classical Indian music.

He was born in Baroda on 17 September 1938. His father Purushottam Chitre used to publish a periodical named Abhiruchi. His family moved to Mumbai in 1951. He was one of the earliest and the most important persons behind the famous "little magazine movement" of the sixties in Marathi. He also started a cyclostyled little magazine named ‘Shabda’ with Arun Kolatkar and Ramesh Samarth in 1954. In 1975, he was awarded a visiting fellowship by the International Writing Programme of the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa in the United States. He has also worked as a director of the Indian Poetry Library, archive, and translation centre at Bharat Bhavan, a multi arts foundation, Bhopal. He worked as an honorary editor of the quarterly New Quest, a journal of participative inquiry, Mumbai.

Chitre directed a film Godam (1983) and scored the music too. Later, he also made about 20 video documentaries. He had a lion's share in the construction of the famous Bharat Bhavan' in Bhopal and learnt to paint.

Among Chitre’s honours and awards are several Maharashtra State Awards, the Prix Special du Jury for his film Godam at the Festival des Trois Continents at Nantes in France in
1984, the Ministry of Human Resource Development’s Emerita Fellowship, the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program Fellowship, the Indira Gandhi Fellowship, the Villa Waldberta Fellowship for residence given by the city of Munich, Bavaria, Germany and so forth. He was D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange) Fellow and Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of Heidelberg and Bamberg in Germany in 1991–92. He was Director of Vagarth, Bharat Bhavan Bhopal and the convener-director of Valmiki World Poetry Festival (New Delhi, 1985) and International Symposium of Poets (Bhopal, 1985), a Keynote Speaker at the World Poetry Congress in Maebashi, Japan (1996) and at the Ninth International Conference on Maharashtra at Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA in 2001 and Member of the International Jury at the recent Literature festival Berlin, 2001. Chitre is perhaps the only writer to have received two awards from the Sahitya Akademi, one for his writing and the other for his translations. After a long bout with cancer, Dilip Chitre died at his residence in Pune on 10 December, 2009.


Considering the fascinating narrative of Chitre’s biographical and artistic trajectory, he emerges as an upper class, upper caste cosmopolitan elite, widely read, and widely travelled post-colonial intellectual who is deeply rooted in his native cultural traditions and the international ones at the same time. His works embody all the distinctive features of an international modernist poet. The rest of the chapter explores these features in a greater detail.

In many ways, Chitre’s oeuvre is representative of his period. The impact of the western modernist avant-garde movements like surrealism, existentialism, expressionism, and the post-Eliotian American poetic movements like ‘confessional’ poetry, the Beats and so on are discernable on Chitre’s poetic idiom. This aspect of his sensibility is also seen in his translation of major international modernist poets like Eliot, Stevens, Yeats, Auden, and Caesar Vallejo into Marathi. The interliterary relationships with the western poetic and intellectual avant-garde movements like Imagism, surrealism, Dadaism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and phenomenology is commonplace in a good number of the Indian literatures after Independence. By considering these relationships as ‘influences’ hardly helps us to analyze the specifics and the concrete manifestations of the hybrid and heterogeneous poetics and politics of the period. His poem which is a typical expression of the modernist avant-garde sensibility is ‘I walk, ’ in which the speaker says:

These are the extracted entrails of my eyes, these the kidneys of my brain
These streets, these pavements, this weather of life,
This world of ladders and ropes, these tanks,
These iron cages.
This is the tobacco my gums hold,
The typewriter, the breasts, the piano, the switchboard,
Mineral forests, screams, pools of blood,
And streets, again and again streets,
Highways wide open and kaput, broke
I walk, I walk, I walk, (Shesha:51)

The metaphors comparing the streets and the pavements with the ‘extracted entrails of
my eyes’ and the ‘kidneys of my brain’ are distinctly surreal The speaker compares ‘the
typewriter, the breasts, the piano, the switchboard, the mineral forests, screams, pools of
blood’ with ‘the tobacco my gums hold’. The juxtaposition of widely disparate things is
startling. However, it hints at the function of the speaker’s memory and how it haunts his
present. The speaker goes on to say:

   Fast, fast, the streets empty fast…
   Only one dumb bird in the rib cage,
   Tens of millions of nights, just one zillion-fold night,
   Darkness toppling the throat in its way…
   Words, words, words
   The bottom of my heart hurled
   Eyes crashing down
   Dude, your collar that I clutch
   As I drown… (Shesha: 51)

   The startling images crowd ceaselessly and the poem ends with the speaker crashing
and clutching at the imaginary addressee’s collar. The startling surrealistic imagery is also
found in Chitre’s poems about Mumbai. The imagery of dislocation seems to be correlated
with the actual dislocations. For instance, in ‘Mumbai: A Song’, the poet calls Mumbai

   chapatti of a subcontinent
filling our plate

how can I count

the teeth in your mouth

hungry goddess of the island

or measure

your tongue red as Kali’s own

unsuckled

for forty years in the shadow

of your gross breasts

East of Suez

the English had such marvelous

concubines and such clubs (As Is Where Is: 84).

Such complex interweaving of history of the city, mythology and surreal imagery is also found in Kolatkar’s Kala Ghoda Poems. This is significant aspect of the modernist poetry of the sixties.

Mumbai is an extremely powerful presence in both Chitre’s and Kolatkar’s poetry. This metropolitan context is one of the most remarkable features of their works. Apart from the entire sequence ‘From Mumbai’ in ‘As Is Where Is’, Bombay or Mumbai pervades the landscape, the imagery, the sensibility, his poetic vision as well as his craft. The epigraph in the beginning of ‘From Bombay’ sequence says it all when it quotes the noted behaviorist psychologist B.F. Skinner as saying ‘A small part of the universe is contained within the skin of each of us’. The epigraph suggests that the dichotomy between the metropolis and non-metropolitan universe has become integral to the being of the people who have lived in these places.
‘The View From Chinchpokli’ describes the overwhelming and even traumatic effect of the sordid and grand city on the speaker. The speaker describes the city in detail starting from the nearby textile mills and ‘unprivileged’ compatriots of Parel Road Cross Lane ‘defecating along the stone walls of Byculla Goods Depots’ to the ‘Manhattan like unreality of Nariman Point’. When the speaker returns to Chinchpokli in the evening:

At Chinchpokli, once I return in the evening,
I plot seductions and rapes, plan masterpieces
Of evasion. The loudspeakers blare at me
Bedbugs bite me. Cockroaches hover about my soul
Mice scurry around my metaphysics, mosquitoes sing among my lyrics.
Lizards crawl over my religion, spiders infest my politics
I itch. I become horny. I booze. I want to get smashed.
And I do. It comes easy at Chinchpokli, (As Is Where Is:81-82)

The poem ‘Ode To Bombay’ begins with the speaker saying, ‘I had promised you a poem before I died….’ And ends with ‘Once I promised you an epic/ And now you have robbed me/ You have reduced me to rubble/ This concerto ends’ (As Is Where Is, 87). The awareness that the city which both seduces and destroys utterly is inescapable pervades Chitre’s work. In the poem titled ‘I Laugh. I cry’, the speaker who is sitting in a speakeasy in Bombay is discussing the fate of the subcontinent:

One said Asia was on fire. Another said India would rise.
Outside Bombay lay like vomit. Phosphorescence in the night.
Pardon us our ignorance and our jammed traffic O Lord
The stale aroma of fucking behind florid curtains.
Forgive us our collective noise and our voicelessness.
For such visions we fall out into muddy lanes.
We walk narrowly escaping life at one o’clock in the
Morning just when our day ends. (As Is Where Is: 89)

The sense of helplessness of an individual who is an intellectual and creative writer in
the face of contemporary happenings is made all the more acute by the sense of being trapped
by Bombay.

This sense of helplessness and the overwhelming presence of the city are found again
in Chitre’s elegiac Marathi poem ‘Gurudutt is Found Dead’ where the phrase ‘Gurudutt is
Found Dead’ is a kind of refrain. The poem records the Mumbaikar’s responses to the tragic
death of the filmmaker who excelled in tragedies.

Seashores find Gurudutt dead
Fruit-laden branches find Gurudutt dead
The box office opens
In the face of a trunkless crowd of unending bodies
To find Gurudutt dead
Uncontrollable celluloid eyes wander
In a vortex of convoluted sets and locations
Like raging cataracts of cardinal sins
Floods of light fall from the tallest lighthouse
On his viscera
Cut open in his body
Gurudutt is found dead
And people look down from the balconies
Even the bus conductor takes part in the discussion
An ill-bred crowd becomes reflective
Where a queue has long since formed
Right there

Gurudutt is found dead (Shesha:64)

The speaker goes to the cinema hall to take refuge from the news of Gurudutt’s death being discussed everywhere and

And extended panoramic arms

A stretched out cinemascope screen

All gushing and rushing streams of light return

Back again to the pale layers revealed by chemicals on the film

In that microscopic noise of light

Like a bursting wave, one’s own death

Makes all known streets of Mumbai black and white

Tilt and totter

(Shesha:66-67)

The association of Hindi film industry and Mumbai is well known. However, the speaker notes that Gurudutt’s death actually makes all known streets of Mumbai black and white. It is important to note that in Chitre poetry often becomes a sort of record or chronicle of contemporary cultural history of Mumbai and the poem discussed above bear testimony to this fact. The poem ‘Mumbai: A Song’ brings out the ironies and contradiction of the post colonial city of Mumbai in a poignant way:

times have changed

the empire reversed

wogs have the Asian menace

has become universal

invaded England
only in Bombay
some English dignity still remains
Victoria Terminus
that gothic foundation of our modernity
still stands majestically
in the midst of native squalor
filled by the voices of coolies and poets

and now the followers
of Mahatma Gandhi
speak of prohibition
smugglers have become religious
(As Is Where Is: 85-86)

This metropolitan experience is extremely important for the development of Chitre’s poetry and modernist Marathi and Indian poetry in English. The modernist avant-garde poetry in both the languages emerged in such metropolitan contexts. The poetry of BS Mardhekar and Nissim Ezekial is deeply rooted in the urban environment. However, it should be noted that the urban experience of uprootedness, dehumanization, alienation and existential angst against industrialized, commercial and consumerist culture is a regular presence in the modernist poetry the world over. In his sociological analysis of modernism, Raymond Williams focuses on the relationship between Modernism and metropolis between the second half of the nineteenth century and of the first half of the twentieth century. He notes that Modernism has been seen in “the new and specific location of the artists and intellectuals... within the changing cultural milieu of the metropolis” (164-170). He notes that the key cultural factor of the modernist shift is the character of metropolis. He points out
that immigration to the great cities had direct influence on technical and formal innovations of this period. It also influenced the themes of alienation, strangeness and distance so common in the modernist writings. Chitre and Kolatkar’s poetry is no exception to this sociological dimension. In an interview for the website Rediff.com, Chitre himself notes, “I am condemned to the same existential crises and complexities that my counterparts face in other big cities of the world. My origins are Hindu and my instinct cosmopolitan. My upbringing is a strange mixture of ancient traditions and a modern secular education. I write in two languages, English and Marathi. I am well read in European literature and world classics in translation. I have lived for many years in Bombay—on (or under) a bridge that joins two civilizations.” (Chitre: Portrait of an artist)

The multiple artistic and literary traditions with which Chitre works become all the more apparent in his poems like the sequence ‘Breakfasts and Deaths’ in As Is, Where Is. The blending of these multiple artistic and literary traditions can be viewed as ‘interliterary processes’ as discussed in the introduction of the dissertation. The sequence parodies the convention of ‘Saki’ and ‘Maikhana’ in Urdu and Persian poetry by addressing the waiter in the restaurant in eloquent ironical tones. In this sequence, one finds all the important themes in Chitre’s poetry like memory, intimation of mortality, the coexistence of the Eros and the Thanatos, and the coexistence of cosmopolitan and native artistic cultures in Chitre’s psyche. In this sequence one finds a poem like ‘The Fifth Breakfast: To the Music of Johann Sebastian Bach’ on the one hand and a poem like ‘The Sixteenth Breakfast: Remembering Kalidasa’ on the other.

Leave me alone, Johann Sebastian Bach. You are great.

But I have my own breakfast to eat. Don’t terrorize me

Into accepting God. I am the Lord of my own breakfast.

I am the flavour that makes it appetizing, stimulating, and nourishing.
Be less heavenly, please, I beg you.

Please be a good boy, Johann. Don’t be so fiercely religious

About yourself... (As Is, Where Is:22)

The ironic and wry dialogue with Bach is counterpoised with equally ironic or rather sarcastic apostrophe to Kalidasa in The Sixteenth Breakfast: Remembering Kalidasa:

My ancestor, Kalidasa, was after all a poet

Basking in his own classical libido,

His body breathing language as the flute breathes music,

While I am condemned to read,

On walking, about the latest American bombing in Viet Nam,

Or about the slow deaths of the malnourished near home.

Bring me a raw steak with my whiskey

For only food and drink humanize us,

And Dear Pimp, get me a buxom lass to be with me,

For sex turns us into angels,

And, Wise Companion, get me some poetry to read:

For the reading of poetry turns us into the Lord Himself.

(As Is, Where Is:37-38)

Contrasting the contemporary reality of the latest American bombing in Viet Nam and starvation deaths in one’s own country with Kalidasa who ‘basked in his classical libido’ with his body ‘breathing language as the flute breathes music’, the speaker in the poem satirically shows the unbridgeable gap between the elite cultural tradition of Sanskrit poetry and the contemporary reality of terror and exploitation. The following stanza where the speaker addresses the waiter as ‘Dear Pimp’ and asks him to get buxom lass is an oblique allusion to Fitzgerald’s Omar Khayyam. The ironic use of multiple literary traditions combined with the
acute sense of contemporary social and cultural reality is an important characteristic of Chitre’s writings.

Commenting on the Breakfast sequence, Hemang Desai notes that the poet “evolves as an iconoclast, a liberal-humanist, a staunch individualist and a hard-core modernist dismantling the mutually exclusive pairs of opposites underpinning human civilization. Like a true modernist, Chitre obliquely dissolves the binaries of black and white, dark and light, colourful and colorless, the killer and the killed, male and female, Shiva and Shakti, permanent and ephemeral, life and death into a singular “tasteless, colourless and odorless” identity, thus diffusing all implications of power and weakness, presence and absence that underlie these opposites.” (72)

In the introduction to An Anthology of Marathi Poetry (1945-165), Chitre points out that the avant-garde poets like BS Mardhekar, Arun Kolatkar and Bhalchandra Nemade were products of “cross-pollination between the deeper, larger native tradition and contemporary world culture.” This generation, according to Chitre, “began to approach the seven-century-old tradition and to see in it a gestalt of its own choice. At the same time its organic links with contemporary pan-literature were confirmed. Thus the authentic quest for identity in the contemporary world began.” (2)

Translation is a significant cultural phenomenon for a multilingual creative writer working with multiple artistic traditions. Like Kolatkar, Chitre is a renowned translator who has translated and theorized extensively from the Bhakti tradition, especially the Marathi Bhakti tradition as embodied in the heritage of the Varkari cult. Ketkar commenting on the postcolonial context of the English translation of the Bhakti literature notes, “The bilingual poet-translators deploy translation as a strategy to de-colonize their souls by translating what is considered as ‘truly Indian’. However, what is meant by ‘truly Indian’ changes with history. In case of the older generations of translators of Indian literature into English like Sri
Aurobindo or P.Lal, Indianness meant pan-Indian Sanskritic heritage and in case of modernists like Dilip Chitre or AK Ramanujan, Indianness means pre-colonial heritage in modern Indian languages. Translation becomes one of the inevitable and creative contrivances of giving oneself the sense of belonging and a nationality. Importance of pre-colonial Indian literatures in modern language as well as the activity of translation itself is growing in postcolonial cultural context. This is so because of the growing realization of the fact that both these things are intimately intertwined with the crucial issue of identity in the postcolonial period. Besides, as the bhakti literature, in contrast to Sanskritic-Brahminical literature, embodies a far more radical and democratic vision it has been a great attraction to the intellectuals with modernist leanings.”(Trans) Migrating Words: Refractions on Indian Translation Studies. 98).

In a poem called ‘The Translator’ Chitre looks at the profession which is based on lies in an ironic way:

Dreaming in four different languages
And of continent of silence
A man is fucked up by the nagging problem of meaning
And cannot rest.
Translations are possible only when is fully awake.

……...
On waking, he soothes himself by asking difficult questions.
But once he goes to sleep,
His own ambivalence disturbs him,
Producing nightmares
Out of the savage silence of four languages.( As Is Where Is:129)

Chitre, apart from being a renowned translator of the Bhakti literature, has also
prolifically translated contemporary Marathi poetry. The *Anthology of Marathi Poetry (1945-65)* which he edited comprises of many translations of his contemporaries like B.S. Mardhekar, Arun Kolatkar, Aarti Prabhu, Vinda Karandikar, Sadanand Rege, PS Rege, Manohar Oak among others. He has also translated a collection of younger contemporary Hemant Divate titled *Virus Alert*. His translation of the renowned Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal published as *Namdeo Dhasal: Poet of the Underworld Poems (1972-2006)* is a significant contribution to Indian poetry in translation. Chitre has also translated major international poets like Eliot, Stevens, Rimbaud, Caesar Vallejo among others into Marathi.

It is in context of this postcolonial predicament of alienation and bilingualism can one understand Chitre’s lifelong preoccupation with Bhakti poetry and indigenous traditions. One can also understand this preoccupation using Susan Stanford Friedman’s view of modernity as “inventing tradition” (434) and that modernity and tradition are relational concepts produced by modernity. In this context, even the views of Clement Greenberg are worth recalling: ‘it consists in the continuing endeavour to stem the decline of aesthetic standards threatened by the relative democratization of culture under industrialism; ......the overriding and innermost logic of Modernism is to maintain the levels of the past in the face of an opposition that hadn't been present in the past. Thus the whole enterprise of Modernism, for all its outward aspects, can be seen as backward-looking.” (Greenberg, “Modern and the Postmodern”)

Dilip Chitre's remarks, ‘Why I felt compelled to translate his (Tukaram’s) poetry: as a bilingual poet, I had little choice, if any. There were two parts of me, like two linguistic and cultural hemispheres, and, as per theory, they were not destined to cohere...( Says Tuka-I: *Selected poems of Tukaram*:307)’ and ‘ I have been working in a haunted workshop rattled and shaken by the spirits of other literatures unknown to my ancestors....I have to build a bridge within myself between India or Europe or else I become a fragmented person (Says
The way to build bridge within oneself was by translating from the Bhakti literature.

Chitre in his very important article on historiography of Marathi poetry titled “The Practice of Marathi Poetry: A Survey of Seven Centuries of Interruptions” remarks,

Two religious cults that rebelled against Brahminical Hinduism and the scriptural authority of Sanskrit produced most of early Marathi literature: The Mahanubhavas and The Varkaris. The Mahanubhavas were an esoteric cult that worshipped living Avatars or god-men. The Varkaris worshipped the deity Vitthal or Vithoba or Pandurang whose principal temple is in the city of Pandharpur and their arch-mentor and preceptor is Jnandev (A.D. 1275-A.D.1296).

Whereas the deity Vitthal is perceived and depicted as an earthly form of the later Hindu god Vishnu, Jnandev was an ordained member of the Shaivite ascetic cult of The Natha, who were followers of the legendary Siddha Gorakhnath. He was born of Brahmin parents who were ostracized along with their four children who formed the nucleus of the non-Brahminical Bhakti cult of the pilgrim-devotees of Vithoba—The Varkaris. (116)

It is this iconoclastic and rebellious outlook of the Bhakti which appealed to most of the post-colonial intellectuals. The obsessive preoccupation with the ‘non-conformist’ native and folk traditions as embodied in the Bhakti poetry is also a prominent characteristic of the post-Independence Indian avant-garde modernism.

Besides, as the Bhakti literature, in contrast to Sanskrit-Brahminical literature, embodies a far more radical and democratic vision, it has been a great attraction to the intellectuals with modernist leanings. Commenting on the sociological and political context
of bhakti, the noted critic Aijaz Ahmed remarks, ‘Bhakti had been associated, on the whole, with an enormous democratization of literary language; had pressed the cultural forms of caste hegemony in favour of the artisanate and peasants ... was ideologically anti Brahminical; had deeply problematised the gender construction of all dialogic relations.’ (273). Bhakti was also distinctively a shift in terms of poetics and sociological context. A.K. Ramanujan observes, ‘A great many-sided shift occurred in the Hindu culture and sensibility between the sixth and ninth century. ... Bhakti is one name for that shift...’ (103) He has made an interesting use of the term ‘shift’ as he says ‘to suggest a linguistic analogy, for example, ‘the great consonantal shift ‘precisely described in Indo-European linguistics. The poetics of Bhakti is also significantly different from the classical Sanskrit aesthetics. The aesthetics of Bhakti involve the aesthetics of personal involvement unlike, as Ramanujan observes, the classical rasa aesthetics where the aesthetic experience is generalized, distanced and depersonalized by the means of poeisis, the bhakti poetry prizes ‘bhava, anubhava, the personal feeling, an intense involvement and intense identification. (161-162).

Chitre translated Jnandeva’s *Anubhavamrut* and huge bulk of Tukaram’s poetry. For Chitre, Tukaram is the first ‘modern’ poet in Marathi. Chitre’s reading of Tukaram is amazingly modernist. One suspects that Chitre is creating Tukaram so much in his own image, that his description Tukaram’s poetics and poetic practice may very well describe Chitre’s own poetics and practice.

“Bhakti poetry as a whole has so profoundly shaped the very world-image of Marathi speakers that even unsuspecting moderns cannot escape its pervasive mould. But Tukaram gave Bhakti itself new existential dimensions. In this he was anticipating the spiritual anguish of modern man two centuries ahead of his time. He was also anticipating a form of personal, confessional poetry that seeks and articulates liberation from the deepest traumas man experiences and
represses out of fear. Tukaram's poetry expresses pain and bewilderment, fear and anxiety, exasperation and desperateness, boredom and meaninglessness - in fact all the feelings that characterize modern self-awareness. Tukaram's poetry is always apparently easy to understand and simple in its structure. But it has many hidden traps. It has a deadpan irony that is not easy to detect. It has deadly paradoxes and a savage black humour. Tukaram himself is often paradoxical: he is an image-worshipping iconoclast; he is a sensuous ascetic; he is an intense Bhakta who would not hesitate to destroy his God out of sheer love. Tukaram's prolific output, by and large, consists of a single spiritual autobiography revealed in its myriad facets. It defies any classification once it is realized that common thematic strands and recurrent motifs homogenize his work as a whole. In the end what we begin to hear is a single voice - unique and unmistakable - urgent, intense, human and erasing the boundary between the private domain and the public. ’’ (Says Tuka-I, introduction: xxxi)

Chitre’s existentialist Tukaram seems to sit comfortably with the post-Eliotian American ‘confessional’ and the Beat poets. This ‘reading’ of Tukaram is crucial to understand Chitre’s own poetic practice. Chitre is deliberately modeling his theory and practice on the poetics of Tukaram’s Gatha in Tukaram in Heaven, Chitre in Hell:

And I join the saints'
Immortal choir.
Tukaram in heaven,  
Chitre in hell,  
Sing the same song  
Centuries apart.  
Their bone derives
From the same stone
That stands erect at Pandharpur
In the shape of a god
Both gentle and rude
And always
Unmoved.

.......... 

It is Vitthala
who creates 
Sun and rain:
Tukaram's joy
And Chitre's pain
Are two faces
Of the same coin.
Counterfeit and divine.

.......... 

Our voices are hoarse with God:
He is our scream, our cry, our moan,
Tukaram in heaven, Chitre in hell,
Tuned to the same truth, centuries apart.
They dance in the same place
And celebrate
Sameness
As the only art. (As Is Where Is:61-62-63)
The identification with Tukaram as both a human being and as poet is based on the perception of an unbroken literary tradition which both Chitre and Tukaram inherit. However, the poem reveals the non-native influences towards the end where it becomes almost American in its slangy irony and self-deprecating humour.

Come pock-marked poets,
Join Tukaram and Chitre,
For the song of heaven
Is one helluva chant.
Ask, and you shall be refused;
But do not leave
Your voice unused.
It's all you've got.
(As Is, Where Is:65)

The influence of the Bhakti tradition extends beyond poetics and poetic practice. It becomes a part of the poet’s spiritual life. Using the motifs, images, symbols and other conventions of the Varkari tradition, Chitre’s poetry expresses the individual suffering in spiritual terms. For instance, the twin images of the river Indrayani and Dehu, the birthplace of Tukaram have great significance in the Varkari tradition. Chitre’s use of these conventional motifs is remarkable.

The River Indrayani at Dehu

Reflect my grief
River of loss and gain
Mother of bliss
Source of pain
Make my face
Reflect the sky
And every cloud
Passing by

River receive
My ashes and
Hold my spirit
In your watery hand (As Is, Where Is:279)

In the famous legend of Tukaram, the river personified as goddess returns the notebook (the ‘Vahi’) consisting of the poet’s compositions after he was told to immerse his works by the Brahmin orthodoxy as he was a shudra and had no right to profess spirituality. The river becomes the symbol of spiritual and literary tradition which preserves the Bhakta’s compositions (mostly oral). It is also symbol of timeless and unbroken continuity of life. Chitre’s explicit evoking of the river Indrayani as a symbol of both spiritual life and literary tradition is noteworthy. This use of the Varkari symbolism also characterizes Arun Kolatkar’s works, for instance his Marathi collection is titled ‘Bhijki Vahi’-the wet sodden notebook, the native symbol for inextricable intertwining of art, spirituality and human condition. When read in this framework, Chitre’s poem becomes resonant with native elements and spirituality which transcends cultural boundaries.

It should be pointed out that Chitre’s preoccupation with the Varkari tradition was not limited to Tukaram. In fact in his very intense involvement in translation of Jnandeva’s Anubhavamruta was a crucial period in his life as a writer, translator and philosopher. He notes:
Several translators and commentators on The *Jnaneshvari* and *Anubhavamrut* have tried to fit these concepts into Western philosophical categories and terminologies. When I started looking into Jnandev's work with the ambition of translating at least a part of it into my other tongue, English as an undergraduate student, my Western-style formal education led me to assume that Western categorization was universally applicable to any thought and linguistic expression of any other place and time in the history of the world. Western Indology supported the fallacy that all other civilizations grew out of Greek roots. It was as a bilingual translator (Marathi-English) with some knowledge of Sanskrit that I approached the problem and soon realized its magnitude and complexity.

My poetics too carried the one-dimensional burden of English poetic practice, tradition, and theory. .................. I also realized that just as I could not approach Dante Alighieri without a foregrounding in Christian theology of his time and a deep understanding of Latin, I could not begin to deal with Jnandev without a foregrounding in Hindu and Buddhist theology, and an understanding of Sanskrit and Dravidian traditions of his time. This changed the course of my career as a translator determined to clarify and internalise his source text. (The Practice of Marathi Poetry, 118-119)

Jnanadeva’s *Anubhavamruta* is an exegesis on Vasugupta’s *The Shiva Sutra*. The mystical doctrine of Shaivism which is found in Anubhavamruta is in Chitre’s view the *Poetics of Bhakti*. He argues that this mystical doctrine is the philosophical and aesthetic foundation of the entire Varkari poetic praxis. Not just that, Chitre provocatively adds, even the practice of contemporary Marathi poetry stands on this foundation. Chitre coins a term ‘spiritual expressionism’ to characterize the driving force of Varkari Bhakti poetry, which is
also the guiding spirit of later Marathi poetry right up to the present day. He says 'It gives
Marathi culture and literature itself a distinct face and presence in the global community of
literatures'

Chitre elaborates the mystical Shaiva doctrine as expostulated by Jnanadeva as follows:

The Experience of Being' is a key concept in Jnande

v's interpretation of the opening of Vasugupta's Shiva Sutra: "Chaitanyam Atma" that Shaivites
of the Kashmir school take as the utterance of the First Principle by Shiva, the
Primordial Being, to Shakti, its inherent capacity and inclination to create.

The Primordial Being or Shiva is believed to permeate and transcend all that is created or exists. By the inherent dynamism that is Shakti. 'Atma' is 'The Self'. 'Chaitanya' is 'Spontaneous Awareness'. The two cohere as 'The Coupled One' or Shivadvaya.

'Sat' (Being), 'Chit' (Awareness), and 'Ananda' (Bliss) have a singular origin—Shiva.

Creation is interpreted here as a-spontaneous free play of Self-Awareness (Chidvilasa or Samvidvilasa)-continually generating 'unique finite forms and states of being that mask the Creator, who is primordial and cannot be conceived or cognised except by re-cognition (Pratyabhijna) by a finite (human) being' of the Shiva inherently present in oneself. The Cosmos is the palpable presence of Shiva that is only spontaneously and precariously reflected by human awareness.

The whole universe is seen by the Shaivite as Shiva's ever-changing, innovative, self-expression. The sentient agent herself/himself is Shiva. Once Shiva’s presence occupies a human recipient, the human individual loses
Shakti or finite, concrete, awareness of the phenomenal world and experiences blissful rapture—Ananda (that is another name of Shiva).

The seeming polarity of gender-discriminated Shiva and Shakti (Subject and Object) is really an indivisible unity—Shiva-Shakti—now seeming to expand, now seeming to contract, but never coming apart.

This unity is also metaphorised as the Adi-Spanda (‘The Primordial Pulse' with its oscillation between a systole and a diastole; or Prakasha-Vimarsha—‘Energy or light cyclically excreted and reabsorbed' or 'light emitted and reflected upon itself', or 'Cognition and Recognition of The Self'; and 'Nimishonmesha' or 'the opening and closing of Shiva's eyes') (The Practice of Marathi Poetry, 118)

The usual distinctions between metaphysics, aesthetics and spirituality collapse in this familiar analogy between the Creator and the Artist. Just as the transcendent and complete Creator, the primordial Being, creates the world of differences out of ‘spontaneous play’ of His Self Awareness, the Artist creates the multiplicity of aesthetic forms and images out of the same ‘Self-Awareness’ which is in fact that of Shiva. The function of art is to re-cognize the Primordial Self Awareness which lies underneath human self awareness; in short, it is a form of ‘pratyabhijnya’. The metaphor of Artist as a diminutive creator is not very novel or modern. In fact it is trite. It seems to justify some sort of obsessive subjectivity that characterizes poetry based on this aesthetics and at the same time it also seems to justify the obsessive subjectivity which is found in the American school of ‘Confessional’ poetry or the Beat poetry. However, this theory is noteworthy because of its impact on Chitre’s own practice and explains the poems like ‘Shiva’s Phallus’:

**Shiva’s Phallus**

He contains in his tranquility
The turbulence that creates and destroys
The curiosity that conceives and articulates
The hidden female in his spontaneous duality
Libido and destrudo not polarized but united
A phallus withdrawn from the void and the vulva
Yet stirring and pulsating to become a universe again
Vacillating
Between being and non-being
Knowing and unknowing
He is the sensuous ascetic
First person and audience
Actor and theatre
Orgasm of his own will
To call him a phallic god is to liken him to your own penis
Or pencil as the case may be

When I suffered from bipolar disorder
Wildly swinging between depression and mania
Melancholy and euphoria
My physician did not mention to me
That Shiva is the Lord of his own
Dementia

When I wished to fly away from my wounded world
On the wings of madness
Nobody thought of praying to Shiva
The Lord of the human condition

I’d lost the taste of life
But kept my tongue
And that was truly a miracle (As Is, Where Is:310)

While the poem talks about the Shiv Sutra mysticism, it also about the poet’s ‘autobiographical’ discussion of his own ‘bipolar disorder’. The poet’s preoccupation with eroticism, death, creativity and existential dimensions of human condition combines the modernist concerns with the Shaivaite mythological and metaphysical poetics. These seemingly incompatible frameworks having very different cultural and historical contexts are woven almost seamlessly in Chitre’s unique modernist poetics, which is at once spiritual, existential, autobiographical, native and cosmopolitan. These diverse and heterogeneous modernism can be discerned in his significant Marathi poems like ‘Mahamantrachhar’ or ‘Pronouncing the Great Mantra’ translated by himself. The poem begins on a spiritual and abstract note:

Ones man-made surface is peeled and separated
Layer by layer
Under the floating film of biography lies the pure water of Character
And the self-generated signature of nature in the form of words
All those attributed meanings delicately separate themselves
And that wetness without any steps as continuous as water
Reaching the bottom and beyond in its God-like propensity
The worded selfhood of our existence
Stays unblemished whether one finds what one searches till the
End or not (Shesha:93)

The mundane ‘biography’ of the speaker has to be uncovered ‘layer by layer’ to
reveal the pure self awareness of the Creator. This is the moment of ‘pratyabhijnya’. The
mundane biography of the poet is articulated clearly too.

I continue to sit on a bench in the garden
I wander around the zoo looking at the cages
I drink tea alone at the railway station
I look at the frozen river from the bridge through the fog
I see a line of tribal women
Carrying pails on their heads for construction work in the city
I recall faces I saw in Africa, Europe, and America (Shesha:94-95)

The wanderings of the cosmopolitan elite poet is not limited to the cities across the
world but also various artistic and cultural traditions.

I can read Sanskrit and Greek plays
Indian Bhakti songs and European poetry
I can view Hindu and Buddhist rock carving
Cathedrals and pagodas
Rembrandt, Velasquez, El Greco, Breughel,
Cezanne, Gris, Chagall, Klee, Rothko,
I can read Villon, Tukaram, Holderlin
Blake, Blok, Rilke, Baudelaire, Alberti, Lorca,
Kabir, Juan de la Cruz, Yeats, Auden
I can see and I can listen to
Bach, Rahimat Khan, Charlie Parker, Monk Coltrane,
I can drink all kind of wines and spirits

Consume bhang, mescaline, the magic mushroom,

I can smoke tobacco, charas, ganja, opium,

I can eat many kinds of meat, fruit, vegetables,

Therefore I find it hard to plunge deep into my self-awareness

(Shesha:95-96)

The poem ends as the speaker sinks into unconsciousness. However that is the way to enter the purer consciousness beneath the mundane consciousness. This consciousness beyond the material consciousness could in fact be death. The poem would hardly make sense unless the reader shares some familiarity with the metaphysics of Anubhavamruta.

Doctor, doctor listen to my poem

Before your own heart fails

Go cross the seven seas just once

Into the endless land of the self

Where layer by layer the crust of sin and virtue get separated

And the caked wound of commitment

I am drowning deep in the wound beneath it

Leaving all my reason to seek my self-awareness.

(Shesha:101)

While elaborating upon Jnandeva’s philosophy Chitre notes, ‘The goal of human awareness is self-recognition of the inherent Shiva by giving up or ‘the discharging of ’ Shakti—‘coherent’ with Shiva as Shiva’s will to be An Other and exist as an assumed form, a persona or mask, a role-performing actor or singer or dancer. The Cosmos is Shiva’s ‘total theatre’ as the playwright-director—and ensemble of performers playing their assigned roles’
(The Practice of Marathi Poetry, 121). Poems such as ‘Chitre’s Orchestra’ actually ‘enact’ the Shiva Sutras:

**Chitre’s Orchestra**

*Atman* is the conductor

And the orchestra are the senses

The inner self itself is the stage

Say the Shiva Sutras

This is the secret of *Agama*

The Guru within us tells

To the shishya within

The moment I raise my baton

I begin to play the instruments

The moment I start playing

I begin to resonate

The moment I begin to resonate

A buzz goes around

I listen to it

Becoming all ears

And I become a crowded sound

I give the signal to stop

And the senses become still

The ears become emptied

Like the sky
In the theatre
Silence wells up
And the spectators
Overwhelmed
Reach their respective homes. (Shesha: 58-59)

When the mundane sensory experience and the worldly consciousness drop, ‘the spectators overwhelmed/ reach their respective homes.’ In another poem, we find,

**What I am Expressing Is Itself Love**
What I am expressing is itself love.
That had no other choice but to be expressed
May I once again tell you the exact sutra
The self is the dancer
The inner self the stage
The senses the audience
We’ll just go on blinking our eyes
And as we blink we’ll forget
What we’re at is making love
As though touch
Has opened the whole sky of awareness
And it is like starlight gazing at stars and calculating stars

(Shesha: 56)

Chitre’s description of Tukaram’s oeuvre given above as ‘by and large, consists of a single spiritual autobiography revealed in its myriad facets’ *(Say Tuka I, xxxiii)* and that ‘It defies any classification once it is realized that common thematic strands and recurrent motifs homogenize his work as a whole. In the end what we begin to hear is a single voice - unique
and unmistakable - urgent, intense, human and erasing the boundary between the private domain and the public’ *Says Tuka I*, xxxii) is an excellent description of Chitre’s oeuvre. In his obituary on Chitre titled ‘The Challenge called Dilip Chitre’, Sachin Ketkar remarks,

‘I think Dilip dada's one of the most important contribution to Marathi poetry and even the Indian poetry is his remarkable invention of ‘indigenous modernity’, which is simultaneously cosmopolitan and rooted, profoundly democratic and uncompromisingly artistic, deeply influenced by greatest international poetry and singularly situated in the democratic and pluralistic indigenous tradition of bhasha poetry. (13-14)

Ketkar elaborates that what Chitre saw that what unites powerful poetry of the post-Eliotian American poetry like the Beat Generation and Confessional poets with the extremely different, but equally powerful tradition of the Bhakti poetry as exemplified in Tukaram, was a certain existential -spiritual self-awareness, which is neither completely western nor completely peculiar to Marathi. What he says about ‘Sahitya ani Atmabhaan’, or ‘Literature and Self Awareness' in the book by the same name in Marathi is perhaps best guide to his practice. His critical outlook, likewise, embodied these values. He could perceive the seamless interconnection between the deeply progressive and pluralist dimension of his tradition with the universal human dimension of the international and western modernity. Hence his poetry will be something of an outsider to people brought up only on the westernized aesthetics or only on the native ones. Like Tukaram and probably Ginsberg, he made no distinction between living and writing.

Chitre’s poetry is distinctly autobiographical and confessional, having much in common with the American confessional poetry and the Beat poetry. It is possible to consider this creative amalgamation of the native poetic tradition or what Durisin refers to ‘intra-literary’ process, with the international poetic praxis like the confessional poetry,
expressionism and surrealism as an ‘interliterary relationship’. This interliterary relationship which assimilates the international poetic methods and aesthetics with the *bhashas* poetics seems to be a characteristic feature of many modernist Indian poets. Considering this assimilation as ‘interliterary’ makes it possible to read modernist poetry as a creative expression in its own right rather than merely as an echo of the western modernism.

Right from the beginning we note that his poems have plethora of personal and autobiographical references. His earliest works dealing with his life in Ethiopia or his later poems attempting to come to terms with the loss of his only son are very direct in their autobiographical context. In an article on his own life as a poet, Chitre says in an article in Hindu (4, Jan 2009), “My own poetry is rather private and spiritually engaged with issues in the secular life surrounding me. I regard my poetry as essentially autobiographical and historical. It describes my engagement with persons and places, the progression of time, death and loss, memory and perhaps a hope of liberation to which I cling.”

His poems like ‘Asella, Ethiopia, 1960, For M. Dayanand Mallya’ could be downright banal in autobiographical details.

An almost forgotten montage, a cascade of images in a narrative string,
No photographic images these; they haven’t yet yellowed or faded,
Mistah Jama, the Somali Muslim owner of the town’s best grocery
Who spoke some English he’d picked in his youth as a sailor,
He was ageing, but still had the spunk to take another young wife,
Exchanged bawdy banter with Thakur, our bearded colleague
From the Himalayan foothills, and was himself horny as hell, or so he said,
His mind set on a female student whom he finally got laid.
We were three Indian teachers of English
In this place where few people spoke any language other than Gallinya.
It was Jama who taught us our basic Amharic

And told Thakur where to find the best whores around.

(As Is, Where Is:320)

His more abstract and interesting poems like ‘Ethiopia’ reveals some of the typical concerns in Chitre’s works:

A Christian suffers from guilt, a Hindu from the Ego

A poet suffers from a lack of explanation

In a circumscribed world he looks out for a gap

That may help his articulate escape from emotion.

(As Is, Where Is:08)

The speaker reminiscences about the Mascal Day celebrations in Ethiopia and reflects on his identity as a Hindu and as a poet. However the poem is interesting in the very prophetic account of the poet’s son’s birth in Addis Ababa:

Then the night of crisis came, of the critical moment

Of caesarean birth: the doctor, with well-weighed gravity,

Prepared me for two deaths; assured would do his best

To save at least the mother; then the theatre

Closed its stainless lid, and I, forewarned, forsaken,

Paced on the polished floor.

In the deodorized passageway fear liberated me

From the careful premonitions of a change in destiny.

Vera Clement, a motherly beam on her face, and blood on her apron,

Shouted, "Congratulations!" to break the spell of knowledge, and said

It was a son, a lovely baby
I reeled under the mercury lights.

Then the anaesthetist, a kind old man,

Made me drink whisky in his quarters to relieve the tension,

Tried to make me talk, reminisced on similar situations.

I drank like a fish, but made no answer.

(As Is, Where Is: 10)

As the speaker/poet is stunned by the birth of his son, little does he know that he will be equally stunned by his son’s traumatic death decades later. The doctor who prepared the speaker/poet for two deaths was actually right about one. The poet evokes the tragic grief at the loss of his son in his later poems.

LOST IMAGES

For Ashay

I am backing home where you died.

One year later, to find

Changes that mask our surrender

To the inevitability of life.

I remember my Ambulance Ride

With my friend whom you called Daddy.

It took me a whole year

To understand my loss.

A lifetime is not enough

To realize what it means to be human:
We waste what we are given
To crave for what we cannot have.

This much I know by now
As a maker of images:
A face erased in front
Of the mirror that is our Lord.

Vithoba was seen by Tukaram
Reflected in the deep end,
Where the river was its own source
And the ocean that waits for it.

Perhaps when you struggled for breath
As you finally choked to death,
You tried to forgive your parent
And the world he created with you.
The first picture I took of you
In the Princess Tsehai Hospital---
In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
In the last week of June, 1961: (As Is, Where Is: 274-275)

Related to the birth and death of his son is another significant autobiographical reference, to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy which victimized Ashay and his family. In a poem called ‘Anniversary’ dedicated to his novelist friend John David Morley, the poet writes:
Then Ashay choked to death in Pune

On November 29, 2003

It was early morning in Feldafing when the phone rang:

“Fire? Smoke? Oh God! No! How’s he?

Where’s he?” I heard Viju and she knew

And I knew we’d lost our son---

Ashay, just 41, another survivor, now gone.

We told you, David, didn’t we? Ashay was

A fan of all your fiction. It was part of the taste

He developed after inhaling poison in Bhopal

Thanks to Union Carbide. A taste for everything

That’s black and bitter or colourless and tasteless,

For odours that emanate from one’s own bones,

From the bonfire of our beginning.

(As Is,Where Is:272)

In the poem called ‘The Bhopal Embryo’, the speaker/poet comments on the futility to discover either the remedy or the impact of the deadly gas. The mystery, unanswered by science, is contained in a jar which has ‘the Bhopal Embryo’ in it. The poem concludes on a philosophical rumination on the real cause of suffering, the

memory and the tragedy called life and its relation to art.

We forget what we survive because we survive what we forget

Though it may remain unexamined as though in a jar

Surrounded not by amniotic fluid but by lasting regret,

The light of a distant and dying star. (As Is,Where Is:299)
Some of his most widely anthologized poems like ‘The Felling of the Banyan Tree’, ‘Ambulance Ride’ and ‘Father Returning Home’ are distinctly autobiographical. ‘The Felling of the Banyan Tree’ narrates the felling of the Banyan tree as a metaphor for the speaker’s own uprooting and for the uprooting of the human beings in general. The city of Vadodara or Baroda, where Chitre spent his early childhood before he left for Bombay, is named from the Banyan tree or ‘Vad’ as it is called in Gujarati and Marathi. The speaker describes the felling of this massive tree which required seven days and fifty men to completely remove the tree as a tragic act of destruction and uprooting. The grandmother used to say that the trees are sacred, however, the father, however destroys them. The situation described here also hints at the destructive force of patriarchy underneath annihilation and uprooting. The symbolic and literal ‘rootedness’ itself is seen as a problem.

But the huge banyan tree stood like a problem
Whose roots lay deeper than all our lives
My father ordered it removed. (As Is, Where Is: 90)

The banyan tree was incredibly huge, ‘three times as tall as our house, its trunk had a circumference of fifty feet’. The tree which was chopped off returns as a dream or rather as a nightmare to the children after they move to Bombay, ‘where there are no trees except the one which grows and seethes in one’s dreams’. The narrative of uprooting and displacement in the poem also indirectly points at the sharp contrast between ‘small town’ of Baroda and the metropolis of Mumbai.

The elegy ‘Ambulance Ride’ is dedicated to the memory of Bhola Shreshtha, the poet’s friend, and as epigraph says, ‘who believed it was possible to create a whole symphony out of discordant elements’. The epigraph also hints at Chitre’s own poetics and the techniques used in the poem. The ‘Ambulance Ride’ is obviously a metaphor for human life and the poem becomes the poem of memory where the speaker engages in an imaginary
dialogue with his dead friend. ‘Remember the ride? /The one on which you died?’ becomes the refrain in the poem which combines the themes of memory, elegy and autobiographical mode. The refrain also allows Chitre to create a symphony out of the discordant elements of his own life in the poem. The poem begins by the description of the ride:

Eyelids pulled up
Like shrouds
Over your eyes
Mouth frozen in pain
We didn’t guess
You were already dead
The ambulance moved
In slow motion
Stopping
At every traffic light
Obstructed
By pedestrians.(As Is, Where Is: 69)

The speaker goes on to say:

I remember the ride
My lonely half of it
My desperate half
My quiet half
My empty half
The whole world smelt of formalin
Sunlight looked terribly ancient
They carried you on a stretcher
And then they declared you dead
I remember the amplified noises
I remember the hospital corridor.
(As Is, Where Is:70)

This mixture of memory with the deep sense of loss lingers over most of Chitre’s poetry. Memory, with its close association with the sense of self, seems to be one of the significant themes in Chitre’s poetry. As depicted in “Storm Monsoons of Lovemaking” out of memory

Just a torn page from the memoirs of an ageing lover:
Monsoons of lovemaking storm out of memory
Mixing the odours of death with the scents of life
On the olfactory palette I load my brush from:

Muscle, mud, and musk; damp, dark, and dripping;
Garlic on the breath; pheromones in perspiration;
Hot and humid, pubic, sticky, and juicy;
In a room found empty by chance.
(As Is, Where Is:313)

Apart from the Eliotian echoes in the lines, the poem depicts memory as crowd of images and sensations held together solely by subjectivity of the speaker. The erotic memories blend into the obsessive concerns about death. Memory produces the synesthethetic images which coalesce and produce mixed metaphors. Comparing olfactory experience with that of the process of painting is almost a ‘metaphysical conceit’ hinting at multiple literary traditions with which Chitre works. Memory, personal elements, subjective
experiences and autobiographical details overflow in most of his works. His well known ‘Father Returning Home’ is a good example of this aspect of his poetry.

In ‘Father Returning Home’, we get a moving portrait of the speaker’s father and an account of the father-son relationship. The speaker visualizes the depression and loneliness of the father who is estranged from not just his own children, but also his own world. The first stanza gives an evocative picture of the lonely, exhausted and sad father returning home from his work:

My father travels on the late evening train
Standing among silent commuters in the yellow light
Suburbs slide past his unseeing eyes
His shirt and pants are soggy and his black raincoat
Stained with mud and his bag stuffed with books
Is falling apart. His eyes dimmed by age
Fade homeward through the humid monsoon night.
Now I can see him getting off the train
Like a word dropped from a long sentence.
He hurries across the length of the grey platform,
Crosses the railway line, enters the lane,
His chappals are sticky with mud, but he hurries onward.

(As Is Where Is: 92)

The image of ‘suburbs sliding past his unseeing eyes’ bring out his loneliness and withdrawal from the surrounding world. The intensity of the withdrawal and loneliness is captured in similes like ‘I can see him getting off the train/ like a word dropped from a long sentence’. The father’s loosening grip on his world is suggested by ‘his bag stuffed with books’ which is falling apart. The second stanza describes the father back home. His children
can’t relate to him and he can’t relate to anything around him. This predicament comes out when the speaker says that ‘He goes into the toilet to contemplate man’s estrangement from a man made world.’ The father, unable to relate to the surroundings, goes to sleep dreaming of ‘his ancestors and grandchildren, thinking of nomads entering a subcontinent through a narrow pass’. The speaker implies that this very nomadic tendency which his father, and as his son he himself, have inherited have resulted in the overwhelming alienation, loneliness and suffering. Dilip Chitre’s own nomadic life seems to be indirectly hinted in the picture of his father.

He was member of a three-writer delegation (along with Nirmal Verma and U. R. Ananthamurthy) to the Soviet Union (Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia), Hungary, the Federal Republic of Germany and France in the spring and summer of 1980 and to the Frankfurter Buchmesse in Frankfurt, Germany in 1986. He gave readings, lectures, talks, participated in seminars and symposia, and conducted workshops in creative writing and literary translation in Iowa City, Chicago, Tempe, Paris, London, Weimar, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Frankfurt, Konstanz, Heidelberg, Bamberg, Tübingen, Northfield, Saint-Paul/Minneapolis, New Delhi, Bhopal, Mumbai, Kochi, Vadodara, Kolhapur, Aurangabad, Pune, Maebashi, and Dhule among other places. He travelled widely in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America as well as in the interiors of India. He was the visiting faculty of many universities and institutions, a consultant to projects. He was the Honorary President of the Sonthheimer Cultural Association, of which he was also a Founder-Trustee.

It is because Chitre’s life was largely that of a wanderer that many of his ‘autobiographical’ poems are actually poetic travelogues to various places in Europe, America and the Indian subcontinent. Especially notable is wry and funny poem like ‘Looking For Ludwig (for my Bavarian friends and particularly for Wieland Grommes and Gerd Hölzheimer)’ where the poet recalls his earlier visit to Bavaria and his imaginary
encounter with the King Ludwig. The speaker remarks that it was easier to run into the assassinated King in earlier days while it gets all the more difficult now.

Being King is only an idea
In theory one can be king of whatever one fancies
As long as the fancy is carefully fended
It was in the spring of 1997 that he visited me
Across the Starnberger See
On a moonlit and windless night…….

I was sitting alone in the glass tower
Of the Villa Waldberga gazing at the lake
That was Koenig Ludwigs watery grave

He was shot there and drowned with his shrink
Who was also shot and sunk with the King
Some people swear by the Prussian spy

All I knew was a garbled legend
More like the last folk-tale of Bavaria
In the exquisitely insolvent lake of fate
(As Is Where Is: 261-264)

However, when the speaker revisits the place in 2003, he finds it difficult to relate to the vision of the King. The speaker emerges as a sarcastic wisecrack who is definitely not very likeable:
Am I too old already
To think of Ludwig the romantic prince
And his era of palace intrigues and conspiracy?

Ludwig may regard me as a Hindu heathen
Perhaps patronize me out of curiosity
As other craftsmen and exotic skills

Ludwig may commission me to sing his praise
In classical Sanskrit of courtly Urdu
Like his Moghul counterparts in India

Does Ludwig know that I am the sort
Who looks-a gift horse in the mouth?
An ungrateful invitee to other people’s woes?

Is Ludwig aware that I was a king too
In my childhood fancy in Baroda
With my clandestine access to the Kama Sutra?

That I frolicked in my own Perfumed Garden
Like a promiscuous beast among acquiescing beauties
Sowing my wild oats?
I am no longer nostalgic, I hear the heavy boots of death
Stalking me, but I am still reluctant to die
Or to accept my ageing with grace. (As Is, Where Is: 263)

Chitre himself notes in an interview for the website Rediff.com, “Mumbai became for me a map and a metaphor for the larger world. It prepared me for all the later big cities in my life: Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Paris, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Tokyo and Hong Kong, for example. All of them had something of Mumbai in them. In my later poetry, many of these other cities figure because I write poems instead of an autobiographical journal. They are not travel notes though. Cities in my work connect with all the major themes of life and death, though the countryside is equally present.”(Chitre, “Portrait of an artist”)

Probably due to autobiographical, subjective and personal emphasis of his poetry, women in Chitre’s poetry are very often reduced to objects of sexual desire or are seen in the context of erotic desire. In his ‘The Second Breakfast: Intimations of Morality’ one comes across women as a nameless object of desire, a body without identity:

Who was it that I slept with last night?
I do not remember her face because I do not remember
Any colours. She was warm. It was a live flow of flesh.
Her blood made a lot of noise. Her breath was hot.
We were naked in the night without knowledge……
….Was she a whore? Was she a Yakshi?
Was she seventeen or was she seventy?”

(As Is, Where Is:16)

Innumerable references to various women in Chitre’s poems make it difficult to state whether these women are real or imaginary, whores or Yakshis. In fact, inability to grasp real
women either in imagination or in reality is one of the recurring themes of his writings. One can even say that inability to represent real woman, this failure in imagining women, in his art is one of the motifs in Chitre’s work as in “Recent Portrait of A Woman”:

You are the most recent woman I’m trying to image
And easily the most elusive and intriguing
We’ve been intimate on just five occasions
Spoken little to each other, made love before you disappeared
For weeks, months-once for over a year.

I’ve often wondered what exactly is that we shared
Beyond the obvious biological need…..

…..
I am withdrawing, wistfully recalling what I loved and lost,
Lost and loved again even in the light
That makes your fugitive image so luminous even as it eludes me.

…..
I was always a naked person I am becoming now
But I dare not paint you as a nude in my crumbling studio.
For you will disappear into a world of your own
And, as an image-maker, I’ve seen only what I’ve shown.

(As Is, Where Is:307)

The erotic is never very far from the imagery and themes of death and mutilation in Chitre’s works. This becomes obvious in juxtapositioning of the images of sex and the images of death as in his poem “Death is the genital we all seek”
Death is the genital we all seek
The missing member of love
That dark carnivorous blanket
Under which bodies vanish
A sensuous and wet mouth
Plants kisses that grow into trees”

(As Is, Where Is:117)

Reviewing Chitre’s *As Is, Where Is*, the noted poet Keki Daruwala writes, “Dilip’s gamut is vast — from startling ambulance rides and hospital poems, to the fairly inane breakfast poems, to unicorns making love, poems about painters, dying or dead friends, post-Modi Gujarat. Then there is the poetry of the later years, smeared with sorrow, when he was stricken with the tragic loss of his son. Dilip Chitre is a poet in the Neruda mould. The gestures are large, often larger than life and there is hardly a subject he is afraid to tackle. He is often wordy, not just in his earlier poems but also in the later ones. And he wears his heart on his sleeve. As you read the poems you can see how his ideas start flowing and get transcribed on the page. (For instance, from “sipping black coffee” he will jump to smelling “the gradual aroma of slow mortality”.) The reader can almost scan his mind…. …..But then life bruises and lacerates most of us. Trouble is, Chitre can’t hide his bruises. He was never good with masks.”(Daruwala, ‘Land’s Truth’)

An *abhang* by Tukaram, translated by Chitre can be considered as a tribute to this poet:

To arrange words
In some order
Is not the same thing
As the inner poise
That’s poetry.

The truth of poetry

Is the truth

Of being.

It’s an experience

Of truth.

No ornaments

Survive

A crucible.

Fire reveals

Only molten

Gold.

Says Tuka

We are here

To reveal.

We do not waste

Words.

*(Says Tuka I, 33)*
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