CHAPTER - III

Past One O’Clock
The emergence of Marathi theatre in the nineteenth century was a response given to the process of modernization. The new theatre in Marathi sought to challenge the establishment not only in theatre discourse but also against the reality outside which was characterized by unequal relations of power. Modernism in Marathi theatre found its expression in Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar and G.P. Deshpande. Unlike Tendulkar's modernist perspective and Alekar's absurdist point of view, Deshpande's gender perception is essentially political. Almost all of his plays define politics especially in terms of the power structures in society and gender relations.

Deshpande's characters symbolize political forces. His plays reflect how the left parties inherit the patriarchal structures of unequal relations of power. One such play is Past One O' Clock.

Nanasheb Agnihotri, the protagonist of the play, is a typical party patriarch. He calls himself a non-believer, one of the real modern people in the world. Yet he cannot stand it when Uma, his favourite daughter, expresses a doubt about the philosophy of Mao. He fiercely criticizes her:

Uma: Nana, your Mao-(Pause) of course I know he is no longer yours – said that making revolution is not drawing pictures. What did he know about painting any way?

* The page numbers in parentheses refer to Govind Purushottam Deshpande's Past One O' Clock (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998).
Nana: Do not start that nonsense all over again. Mao was right, take it from me, and carry on with your paintings, that is enough. You need not talk.

Nana: Our politics was never for the elite. May be it was the politics of a class, the politics of hardworking labourers and farmers. Our politics is the politics of plebeians...

Uma is in her mid-thirties, tastefully trendy. She is not beautiful but has a kind of magnetic charm of which she is well aware. She has sharp differences with Nana and yet adores him. She is a fierce individualistic painter and the stubbornness in her ideas, she relates it to her painting. Her individualistic fervour is seen in her conversation with her family members who have gathered at their father Nana’s residence for the celebration of Nana’s seventy-fifth birth anniversary:

Uma: A linear person (*laughs*). I am a painter after all. I can’t help using the language of painting. Line is important, you see (*Looks teasingly at Nana*). For both revolutionary and the painter. If you miss the line everything is lost. (p. 63)

And this stubbornness of Uma has resulted in divorcing Vinayak, her husband. She hates her husband because he tries to imprison her in the image of her body, her physicality, her sexuality. Uma resents this. Being the painter
of machines, she is frustrated in her search for a rock-hewn man. Her creative
spirit refuses to be imprisoned in the traditional logic again which Nana is not
really able to understand:

**Uma:** Nana, no! He has no right to be here. Today’s celebration
is for your children alone. There is no need for a son-in-
law, and that too, an ex-son-in-law.

**Nana:** Uma, you know only too well that legal answers are not
always the final answers. You are indeed a machine
incarnate! Don’t you know how fond I am of Vinayak?

**Uma:** But I don’t like him, I mean, not anymore, and that is
important. Today’s celebration is for your children. A
son-in-law has no role in it. Actors are selected for roles.
Roles are not created to suit actors. (p. 62)

Her creative perception is reflected from the way she chooses colours
for her paintings, and the way she chooses Vinayak as her husband against
Nana’s interests at the beginning.

**Nana:** Et cetera et cetera.... any way. You have always been
stubborn, what else can I say? You didn’t listen to me
when you decided to get married. When you decided to
separate from Vinayak, then too you didn’t care for my
advice.... (p. 62)
Nana relates the paintings of Uma to modern machinery and wanted to write an introduction to her collection of her paintings with the title ‘Yantriki.’ He mocks at her paintings calling them the menacing howls of mythical demons heralding destruction.

**Nana (to Uma):** I see a lot of modern machinery in your paintings. When I look at them, I hear the sounds of machines, as I thought I am standing in a factory. They sound like the menacing howls of mythical demons.... heralding destruction.  

(p. 61)

Uma cleverly casts counter at her father calling him critic, and expressing her wish to write an introduction on her father’s critical essays with the title ‘Pakhandi’.

**Uma:** Critic as creative artist! Long live Nana the critic! (Goes upto him and ruffles his hair). You were caught napping, Nana, and you gave up. (Nana is about to say something but she does not let him). We should bring out a collection of your critical essays. I shall write an introduction to it and title it ‘Pakhandi’.

(p.61)

The play begins with the family celebration of the seventy-fifth birth anniversary of Nana, a communist leader, modelled on the well-known
communist leader, one of the father figures of the communist movement in India, S.A. Dange. The anniversary is an image of the history of the communist movement: the anti-imperialist struggle against the British, struggle against the Indian government in the early years after Independence, the split in the communist party in the seventies, the rise of the Naxalite movement, and the path of parliamentary politics charted out by the party later on. The play highlights ‘how there is a premium on mysterious silence.’ Nana in a mock dictatorial tone responds to Uma’s comment, says that this is not a day for quarreling. This is how the tension springs up in the house and continues to spread despite repeated efforts of the family members to control the situation.

Nana’s Children represent different strands in the Indian polity today. Not only Uma, but Madhav, Raghav and Uddhav also represent their own respective ideologies. Madhav, Nana’s eldest son is a self-proclaimed ‘apolitical person’ who can’t stand political discussions. And he is the only person who constantly strives to create a congenial atmosphere in the house.

**Madhav:** No political discussion today. Uma, let it be a day for only light chit chat and lots of fun. It’s Nana’s day today and his favourite drink – Black Label. Do you understand Uma? I am the master of ceremonies today. (p. 63)
He expresses his severe contempt against ‘politics,’ especially the Indian politics.

Madhav: What goes for ‘politics’ here wouldn’t be called that anywhere else in the world. Uma, there are two things that we in this country can’t tackle properly — one is politics, and the other is alcohol. (p. 63)

Whereas Nana says that his politics has been never for the elite. It has been for the class – the class of hardworking labourers and farmers.

Raghav, Nana’s second son, on the other hand, is a bureaucrat in the Government, the Minister’s secretary, and a pillar of the establishment. He is politically and professionally smart enough to gain the minister’s confidence.

Madhav: And the Chief Minister said, Raghav Rao, what shall we do without you? We shall be in trouble if you are packed off to Delhi –

Raghav: Oh yes! That’s what he said. Nana, the boss will be speaking at the public-reception for you. In fact he asked me to write his speech for the occasion. But I said, sorry, Sir! For once I have to say, I can’t do it. It is not possible for me to write anything about Nana. And you know, Madhav, he appreciated my position. (p. 64)
Both Raghav and Madhav have good opinion on their brother-in-law Vinayak. While Madhav terms him an ‘organized person’, Raghav wishes his presence in the house on the day as he was present on Nana’s sixty-first birthday also. Where as Uddhav is not in the good looks of Raghav.

Uddhav, the youngest son of Nana is a naxalite. Uddhav is the only person in the family who is against ruling party after his father and hence is the fond child of Nana. Owing to his past militant career in the party, Nana now expects Uddhav to go on with his ideology.

Nana: Raghav, don’t take small things to heart. A person of your standing should take such things in his stride. Uddhav is a political prisoner he has an ideology of his own, hasn’t he? (p. 65)

Words spoken in favour of a naxalite naturally stimulate a bureaucrat. Raghav gets furious at Nana’s attitude and outbursts at once:

Raghav: Ideology! Why do you have to give a decent label to the irresponsible politics of a pack of idiots? What kind of ideology is there behind people flaunting a slogan like ‘Chairman Mao is our Chairman?’ (p. 65)

Madhav tries to control the aweful atmosphere of the house by warning all the family members:
Madhav: (who has been sitting there sipping his drink quietly):

No political discussion today. Let it be a day for only light chit chat and lots of fun. It's Nana's day today…

(p. 63)

As the arrangements for the birthday celebration go on, Nana gets into a flashback, thinks of his deceased wife Saguna and craves for her presence on the occasion. Her presence is subtly woven through the evocative references which serves to build up even more sharply the family setting in the play. Nana remembers his wife Saguna, her house keeping; he wishes that she were alive as she would have been very happy to see the arrangements made by her children for the celebrations, the memory located in her role as 'house keeper' connecting naturally with Madhav's would construct the patriarchy. The family setting which glamourizes the house wife, is accentuated in his thinking. His nostalgia opens up a discourse in the form of a flashback:

Nana: The seventy-fifth anniversary. A meaningless figure, 'Amritamahotsava!' Do we have a single good reason for celebration? The debit and credit in life, can you really balance them? Can you Uddhav? ... My tired limbs, the old house ... Saguna, I can't live without you any more! I too want to meet you ... I would have crumbled a long time back. Why this Amritamahotsava? Why? What for?

(pp. 67-68)
Nana, who has been constantly controlling his children from spoiling the charm of the day, now himself gets sunk into his incoherent thoughts. Nana acknowledges their failure to maintain congenial atmosphere at home.

**Nana:** That is not that easy, Madhav. All these fifty years we have tried and failed. Homey togetherness remained only an illusion. Saguna was so unhappy about it. Till the last she was pining for that. She had to endure a great deal, her tolerance was stretched to the extreme. (p. 69)

As Samik Bandyopadhyay views: “Nostalgic evocation in the form of an apostrophe addressed by Nana to his dead wife opens up a discourse loaded with political reverberations, the names and incidents bringing in their train phases and episodes in the history of the communist movement in India”¹

**Nana:** Marches slogans, strikes and demonstrations... Yerawada, Visapur, Arthur Road... Elections.. *(Nahin rakhani! Nahin rakhani, sarkar jalim nahin rakhani!)* In capitalist society we have a democracy that is curtailed. Wretched. For the minority, Communism alone is capable of providing complete democracy... I feel drained now. (p. 68)

The reference to Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak and *Kesari*, the weekly that he had founded, traces the beginnings of the communist movement to the first communist in the Indian National Congress discovering an affinity
with the radicalism of Tilak’s *Kesari*. The playwright explains here that the ‘weekly’ established in the late nineteenth century by Tilak was the vehicle of a rather aggressive kind of nationalism and anti-imperialism. A whole range of extremists, terrorists and nationalists were influenced by the paper and of course, by Tilak’s prose and personality. Nana’s father must have been a Tilakite, and though religious himself, he would not quite approve of his son chanting the *Karunashtaka*, a seventeenth century poem with a strong other-worldly and metaphysical content, appealing to the Lord to come and liberate the devotee from the shackles of Samsara. The reference to *Kesari* carries yet another suggestion. The early generation of Maharashtrian communists were great admirers of Tilak and his brand of nationalism for its sheer aggressiveness and uncompromising attitude. This is not to say that they shared Tilak’s social views. Their admiration for Tilak also drew on Lenin’s favourable remarks about him in 1908. Dange, to cite one example, has always been an ardent admirer of Tilak.

The communist movement has travelled a long way since Nana’s militant career in the party, to a point where ‘there is a premium on mysterious silences’ in his party. When Raghav asks Nana how he was initiated in to politics, Nana recollects the incident which left an indelible impression upon him. Like many others, Nana’s dream of organizing resistance against British rule made him attend one of Lokamanya Tilak’s speeches at the Kirloskar Theatre.
Nana: Lokamanya arrived at the Kirloskar Theatre. And then the words started flowing in a cascade. It was as though the entire audience was awash with his thoughts. What a quality and force his language had! I don’t exactly remember what the subject was, but he probably said something about military education. The thing that I remember very well is his stress on the need for a clear Political ideology as the basic premise. I had once told Uddhav about this. (p. 71)

Nana sees a ray of hope in Uddhav though he has been away from home for a long period of six years and got arrested by the police. It is Vinayak who brings the news of Uddhav’s release to Nana. Again a duel erupts between Vinayak and Uma. Uma scolds him for having visited Nana’s house on the occasion despite her written warning to him not to attend the party. Nana ruthlessly stops Uma and says:

Nana: Uma, all this is too full of legalities and quite ridiculous. If he has come today, it is on my account. You can’t stretch the bounds of your agreement that far. The relationship between Vinayak and me cannot become part of your agreement. (p. 73).

Uma clearly answers that what Vinayak has come for is not to visit her father but to see her and talk to her. Vinayak looks visibly hurt and
acknowledges that Uma is correct. A moment’s silence, then Vinayak grips his drink tightly and, avoiding Uma’s eyes, gulps it down.

**Vinayak:** Uma is right as always... I knew Uma would be here today. I certainly thought of that. I have not met her for the last five years... Uma... Uma. (p. 73)

Vinayak comes forward as he speaks. The others are silent and in darkness. As lights brighten again Uma speaks:

**Uma:** You forgot that I am Uma. You forgot what Shiva had to suffer for going to his father-in-law’s home uninvited? Unsolicited presence always leads to peril. (p. 74)

The playwright has in most of his plays made use of the allegorical reference to the Indian Scriptures. This shows his great interest in the ‘bhakti literature’. He is basically interested in the process of change. This preoccupation with change is also evident in his prose writings on the bhakti movement. ‘Bhakti’ poetry runs through as a thread in all his plays. Infact the playwright himself directly admits that ‘part of his strength as a dramatist is his language, the vigour of his Marathi, and that comes from a direct link with the bhakti poetry of Tukaram.’

Vinayak however tries hard to convince her and expresses his feelings as:
Vinayak: Uma__oneday__ just for today. Please forgive me. I want to sit with Nana for some time. Read him a few poems. I seldom get sentimental. But today I feel like doing something outrageous to express myself on Nana’s seventy-fifth birthday.

(p. 74)

Vinayak is admired by Raghav for his poetry and expresses his wish to introduce him to his minister. While Vinayak is still tense Madhav glances at his watch, says ‘it’s quite late let’s celebrate Nana’s day’:

**Madhav (standing close to Vinayak):** Come, come, Vinayak, concentrate on your food, Uma is not going anywhere.

Let me propose a toast to Nana!

Nana, our Nana,

Uma’s Nana, Raghav’s Nana,

Uddhav’s Nana, Vinayak’s Nana,

Madhav’s Nana…

Party’s Nana,

Nana, the champion of the exploited,

Nana, the soldier, Nana the prisoner,

Nana, the Marxist.

Our Nana, Mother’s Nana.

Long live Nana... Long live Nana,
for one hundred years and more...! (p. 76)

Nana is moved by Madhav’s words of praise. He expresses thousand thanks to Madhav as he has remembered Uddhav and Saguna, his deceased wife. Now his only wish left is to see Uddhav on his birthday. He is ready to contradict anybody who talks against Uddhav.

**Vinayak** (to Nana): ... you have sown a bounty and received only a handful in return... you sowed a good deal but harvested only a fistful...

**Nana:** You mustn’t say that, Vinayak. I have produced an Uddhav....So what if he is facing rough weather today? I see our future in Uddhav — he is our hope — (p. 78)

When Raghav makes pungent remarks on Uddhav’s ability in carrying over the ‘revolution’, Nana reacts furiously:

**Nana:** The meaning is crystal clear, Raghav! You have to be a Part of the revolution in order to understand revolution. Revolution is not something to be understood, it is something which is done, and I don’t think we have been fortunate enough to have had that privilege. We are going to end up like this only.... dry... absolutely barren... (p. 78)
Raghav (to Uma): For the last fifty years Nana has been dreaming of a revolution that can never happen in this country. The result? Slogans, imprisonments, non-co-operation and conflicts. And yet nothing happened. The status quo persists. In fact, had we not wasted precious years dreaming of some impossible revolution, may be we could have taken a few steps forward. But then these people have confined themselves to their dreams. Dreams of towers... High towers, which are built in a jiffy and come down as swiftly. Revolution! Revolution! Opium of the intellectuals. (p. 79)

As the conversation goes on, Uddhav enters with an unkempt beard, crumpled kurta pyjama, chappals and a slingbag. He comes home freshly released from the prison. Nana is both happy and troubled at Uddhav’s coming home after a long gap of six years. Talking to his daughter Uma, Nana says that may be she is destined to suffer Vinayak’s torture. At this, Uddhav reproachfully questions Nana about the outcome of his seventy-five years of penance:

Uddhav: Destiny! ... After seventy-five years of struggle do you still use those words, Nana? Destiny is a useless, ridiculous term.

• • •
**Uddhav:** Revolution demands blood. Revolution is crude.

You did not have the strength then, you do not have it even now. Now you are fit only for birthday bashes...

(pp. 83-85)

All the while, so far, Madhav alone is expected to have a perfect understanding of the situation. He is the only person who has been trying hard to maintain peace at home. Now he has given up playing peace-maker. He has hit a high on alcohol. He too seems to get affected by the awful atmosphere there:

**Madhav:** Nana! It took me all those years to get high on alcohol.

I have been drinking for the last twenty-five years but I could not as much as get tipsy. My efforts are on.

All of you got your alcohol too early – for you, your ideology, for Uma, her painting; for Vinayak, the body, and for Uddhav, violence. Only I remained unaffected. Today for the first time I feel something is happening.

(pp. 85-86)

As Vinayak starts again the poetic description of Uma, she at once verbally resists this. She calls this pseudo-poetry into which Vinayak had drawn her ___ as he had drawn her into a relationship leading to marriage.
Vinayak: Really, Uma, just once. I want to see you with a thousand eyes, in the early morning dusk. After a fragrant bath... water trickling down your long hair. A subtly delicate Uma, like the flower of Prajakta. Just once, Uma! I want to see you, the sculptured beauty, linear, firm impenetrable! Uma, as beautiful as the early morning of Kartika.

Uma: Stop it, Vinayak! I have suffered this pseudo-poetry long enough. I cannot afford it any more. Not I and my colours... you and your words. We have nothing between us now. Whatever we had between us is all over. Now do not shed tears, thrusting the lameness of words on me. I have had enough. Go, quit. (p.87)

Nana gets emotional thinking of his dead wife, talks to himself philosophically:

Nana: Saguna, let me tell you the truth. Till now I was speaking of your support. Now suddenly the truth has dawned on me, Saguna, only you can perhaps help us hold together. The structure of our family shakes from an earth quake. The walls are crumbling down on all the four sides..... why? (p. 87)
Uma falls back under the spell once again, a few tense moments, giving herself to Vinayak as a body ‘become a poem,’ and Vinayak receives it as ‘my Uma... the dusky beauty stepping straight out of the sculptures of Ajanta’ before leaving the scene.

**Uma:** Vinayak, my body itself has become a poem. Each pore is blooming, sprouting into thousands of green blades.

**Vinayak:** My Uma... the dusky beauty stepping straight out of the sculptures of Ajanta... Uma... (p. 88)

As the lights come back Uma resolutely gathers herself while Vinayak looks at Nana speechlessly. The experience has left him motionless, spell bound. Nana speaks in a matter-of-fact manner, ‘you may go now, for some people luck does not go beyond a certain point. You invited this thunderbolt on yourself, it will have to last you for the rest of your life time. Go, you have to live all your life with this fire within. It is inevitable.’ Vinayak understands and smiles. Goes to Nana, bends down to touch his feet and leaves abruptly without even glancing in Uma’s direction.

There is silence and a sort of emptiness. Uma looks lost, her confidence is apparently shaken, yet she tries to speak with borrowed enthusiasm and says:

**Uma:** I did not want this. But some such moments do come, they sweep you off your feet, disorient you completely
as if to destroy you. It is painful to watch oneself going through this. Only when one builds walls around one self, one feels better... (p. 88)

In his response to the above scene, Nana falls back on rhetoric, of the Gadkari brand. The playwright views that Nana must have been in college when Gadkari was at the peak of his popularity. Madhav probably finds it both amusing and intriguing that Nana, who was citing Marx and Lenin a while ago, should lapse into a sentimental line from Gadkari so easily.

When Uddhav, the extremist with a 'fractured arm' draws his inference from the Gadkari line itself, Nana defends himself; it naturally opens up one of the central debates in communist politics in India, that between the gentle, parliamentary way to socialism, with a special concern for the proletariat.

The tension erupts when Uddhav, released from a term in prison and the last to arrive at the party, challenges both his father and brother; but what is most ironic is the manner in which the preparations for the dinner, the courtesies of the brithday party, and the ceremony of drinking continue as a base along a predictable course, eroding from with in the intensities of debates and conflicts, both political and emotional-aesthetic the latter in their turn also serving to take away from the concern of the former.
Everyone is excited. Literally verbal duel erupts among the family members. What hurts Nana most is Uddhav’s challenge, mocking at his failure to achieve anything from his life-long political struggle:

**Uddhav (to Madhav):** These people have got over Marx and Lenin long back. *(Nana is Visibly hurt.)* Nana did set out for the revolution but came back from the check-post.

**Nana:** Came back from the check-post. Do all of you think the same? *(Raising his voice suddenly)* You ungrateful blighters... You have set your tails afire and are all out to burn Lanka, we are ready to hail you for that, but then this deed by itself will not kill Ravana, you need something more to kill Ravana which you do not have in you.

**Uddhav:** We do not have it in us, ... do you have it in you, Nana? Speak out, Revolutionaries earlier were ready to get reduced to ashes. Now the modern artists need unhappiness, perennial unhappiness *(Laughs)*.

**Nana:** So our life has become that simple is it? ... Uddhav, you are wrong *(shouts)*. If the revolution is standing on its feet today, it’s because of us. In this country we have made the worker conscious of the dignity of
labour. We have made him rise in his self-esteem. So what if we look a bit tired now? We’ve given forty to fifty years of our life to build this movement. So what if the tide is against today? It will turn in our favour. I may not live to see it. But it will happen…. (pp 88-89)

Uddhav ridicules Nana’s self-esteem. He says that what all Nana has achieved is ‘the philosophy of Depression’. And there is going to be a ‘yajna’, ‘an all-consuming fire’ in which every one is going to burn. Nana is going to burn, Uddhav is going to burn, Uma’s pictures, Madhav’s stoicism, Vinayak’s confusion and everything is going to burn like a swab of cotton. Nana gets confounded at the strange behaviour of Uddhav. Despite his great struggle to sustain his self-esteem, he fails to withstand Uddhav’s argument. Thus, Nana confronts utter exploitation for his last ray of hope, Uddhav, turns against him and his family members ridiculing his seventy five years of political life. Nana with his desolate heart cries his children’s names, feels as if he is sliding down into this valley. Their touch has become mute to him and nothing more is left for him to do. He crumbles down into his chair……

**Nana:** Past one o’clock. Go, Uddhav, go, Uma. Night’s milky way flows like a sliver stream, your dreams, your roads and your thunder bolts. Word-sculptures, And the story comes to an end. The saga of Narayan Agnihotri is over….. Go. It’s past one o’ clock……... (p. 91)
Samik Bandyopadhyay notes: “Deshpande’s characteristic ambivalence... turns Uddhav’s protest into yet another... evocation of the all consuming fire that will burn everything up and Nana’s defence into an evocation of “Night’s milky way” in the ultimate disintegration of ideology and history – and shadows rising from their private selves overwhelming the political discourse.”

As Maya Pandit says:

“The attempt to explore the stranglehold of Patriarchal ideology on revolutionary politics is beautifully illustrated in Past One O’Clock.”

In an interview by N.S.Jagannathan, Deshpande said “Tensions in relationship to the ideas and movements and not tensions as tensions are my obsessions.”

As Samik Bandopadhyaya argues:

“Deshpande can privilege the politics of patriarchy in politics; the way in which with in a strongly entrenched patriarchal tradition, Marxist leadership degenerates all too soon into a moribund patriarchal authority, demanding unquestioning obedience and blinding itself to the changing reality of the political process.”
REFERENCES


