



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sacred book, profane print: Print-as-commodity and patronage in colonial western India

Madhura Damle 

Department of Political Science, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Email: [madhura.polsc@presiuniv.ac.in](mailto:madhura.polsc@presiuniv.ac.in)

(Received 30 August 2023; revised 2 August 2024; accepted 5 August 2024)

## Abstract

The first printing press landed on the western coast of India in the mid-sixteenth century. The introduction of printing technology did not immediately lead to a flourishing print culture, and the oral and scribal traditions continued to thrive for at least three more centuries. This article examines the emergence of print culture in nineteenth-century western India by surveying the literary sources in the Marathi language. It argues that the book was regarded as a sacred object in the pre-print era and reading was considered a ritualistic activity. Print, on the other hand, was seen as defiling and therefore orthodox Brahmins hesitated to embrace the technology of printing. They were also threatened by the democratizing potential of printing. As the print culture burgeoned, the sacredness of the book declined and it turned into a profane commodity. A market for vernacular books and periodicals started emerging gradually. However, pre-modern notions of literary patronage did not wither away as authors and publishers continued to bank on state patronage.

**Keywords:** Print culture; print-capitalism; patronage; colonial India; Marathi

## Introduction

Around the middle of the sixteenth century, the emperor of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) asked the king of Portugal to send a printing press to Abyssinia. Accordingly, a press was shipped from Portugal in 1556 accompanied by a few Jesuit missionaries. When the ship reached the western coast of India en route, it was learnt that the emperor did not wish to receive the press. The missionaries in Goa, who had been trying to acquire a printing press for some time, were able to secure the Abyssinia-bound press. This marked the beginning of printing in India.<sup>1</sup> However, for the next two-and-a-half centuries, the technology was not extensively used, except by the Christian missionaries. The oral and the scribal cultures continued to exist long after the arrival of print. For example, the ancient tradition of rote learning, oral transmission, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Anant Kakba Priolkar, *The printing press in India: Its beginnings and early development* (Bombay: Marathi Samshodhana Mandala, 1958), pp. 2–5.

performative recital of the Vedic texts by specific Brahmin sub castes was alive well into the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Puranic texts were *performed* by specialist Brahmins.<sup>3</sup> O'Hanlon argues that the paper revolution did not end oral practices—in fact, oral performances gained additional vitality due to the availability of paper texts.<sup>4</sup> Popular religious traditions, such as *vāraṅkarī sampradāya*, also relied on orality for the transmission of their literature. As Novetzke shows, *kīrtan* (musical sermon) was the most common way to consume *vāraṅkarī* literature, in which literacy was subservient to performance.<sup>5</sup> *Kīrtan* performances and *purāṇa* recitals were fairly common in the nineteenth century, and the literate class, including the English-educated and the reformers, also participated in the performances, both as audience and performers.<sup>6</sup> Oral and scribal practices in the age of print were not simply remnants of the past. As Deshpande illustrates, the colonial-era manuscript culture encompassed a multitude of old and new practices, which were 'modern products of the engagement with new ideas of publicity, community and power churned up by the regime of print'.<sup>7</sup> Printed books which mimicked manuscripts, especially those written in a calligraphic hand, were very popular. Several historians note that the success of lithography in India, among other factors, can be attributed to the visual experience that it produced, which was similar to that of the manuscripts.<sup>8</sup> Mir refers to the fluidity between the written word and oral performance, and to 'protocols of orality embedded in the printed texts', since the latter were to be orally disseminated by the performers.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Orsini elucidates that 'oral-literate' genres in print, such as *quissa* and *barahmāsa* songs, allowed multiple forms of consumption, including oral recitation, reading aloud, and silent reading.<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, too, points out that the

<sup>2</sup>A newspaper published from Pune reports that Brahmins from Surat were invited to recite Sāmaveda to an aristocratic family in Pune. The newspaper also recommended that the local Vedic scholars attend the sessions since Deccan Brahmins were unfamiliar with the musical recitals of Sāmaveda. *Jñānaprakāśa*, 27 September 1858, supplement.

<sup>3</sup>Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Performance in a world of paper: Puranic histories and social communication in early modern India', *Past & Present*, no. 219, 2013, pp. 87–126, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup>Christian Lee Novetzke, 'Note to self: What Marathi Kirtankars' notebooks suggest about literacy, performance, and the travelling performer in pre-colonial Maharashtra', in *Tellings and texts: Music, literature and performance in North India*, (eds) Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 169–184, <http://books.openedition.org/obp/2507>, [accessed 5 September 2024].

<sup>6</sup>While describing the role of *kīrtan* in disseminating poetry, Moropanta's biographer refers to a *kīrtan* performance at Gopalrao Deshmukh's house, which was attended by Justice Ranade; they were both forerunners of social reforms in the Bombay presidency. Lakshman Ramachandra Pangarkar, *Moropanta: Caritra aṅi Kāvyaivēcan* (Mumbai: Hind Agency, Booksellers and Publishers, 1908), p. 4 of 'Prastāvanā'. Similarly, in her reminiscences, Ramabai Ranade refers to *bhāḡavat* performances by Anasuyabai, a Sanskrit scholar, and *purāṇa* recitals by Pandita Ramabai, a Sanskrit scholar and social reformer. Ramabai Ranade, *Āmacyā Āyusyāntīl Kāhī Āthavanī* (Mumbai: Manorañjak Granthaprasārak Maṅḡalī, 1910), p. 104.

<sup>7</sup>Prachi Deshpande, *Scripts of power: Writing, language practices, and cultural history in Western India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2023), p. 188.

<sup>8</sup>Francesca Orsini, *Print and pleasure: Popular literature and entertaining fictions in colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Farina Mir, *The social space of language: Vernacular culture in British colonial Punjab* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), p. 91.

<sup>10</sup>Orsini, *Print and pleasure*, p. 20.

emergence of printed genres did not immediately displace pre-print cultures and practices.<sup>11</sup>

It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the print culture gradually started flourishing. 'Print culture' does not merely mean the extensive use of printing technology by various factions of society. The technology of print enabled mass production of the book. Anderson argues that 'the book was the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity'.<sup>12</sup> Thus, print culture also denotes commodification of the book and the transformations that it brought about in the literary sphere and society. This article seeks to examine this juncture in the history of Marathi-speaking regions in western India, drawing from vernacular newspapers, periodicals, novels, autobiographies, essays, and other literary compositions, as well as missionary reports and governmental records and publications.

A number of scholars have countered Anderson's thesis that print-capitalism led to vernacularization and thereby laid the base for the imagination of national communities in Europe and that this model was exported to the colonies.<sup>13</sup> Pollock argues that in South Asia, 'true watershed in the history of communicative media was the invention, not of print-capitalism, but of script-mercantilism'.<sup>14</sup> Chatterjee challenges the assumed opposition between capital and community in Anderson's theory and argues that community was not a remnant of premodernity, but, rather, very much part of modernity.<sup>15</sup> Chatterjee also illustrates that the crucial moment in the development of Bengali did not coincide with the development of print, but can be traced to a later period when the bilingual elite got involved in the modernization of their mother tongue. In light of these theories, this article explores the relationship between print and the vernacular in nineteenth-century western India. It argues that the sacredness of the book declined with the emergence of print culture, turning the book into a commodity. However, the idea of 'patronage' continued to steer the vernacularizing thrust in Marathi-speaking regions.<sup>16</sup>

*Pustak* is a generic and commonly used term for book in Marathi. *Grantha* means a book, a composition, a text. While both are *tatsam* (borrowed from Sanskrit without acclimatization) words of similar meaning, the latter is weightier, and their usages vary slightly. 'Booka' and its plural 'booke' appeared frequently in the nineteenth-century

<sup>11</sup>Anindita Ghosh, 'Cheap books, "bad" books: Contesting print cultures in colonial Bengal', in *Print areas: Book history in India*, (eds) Abhijit Gupta and Swapan Chakravorty (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), p. 188.

<sup>12</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 2006), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44–45.

<sup>14</sup>By script-mercantilism, Pollock implies a cultural economy constituted by professional scribes and purchaser-patrons and by non-professional copyists. According to him, the pre-print publishing industry in India was supported not only by royal patronage and religious sponsorship, but also by autonomous scribes, often *kāyasthas*, from whom manuscripts were purchased at substantial cost. Sheldon Pollock, 'Literary culture and manuscript culture in precolonial India', in *Literary cultures and the material book*, (eds) S. Eliot et al. (London: British Library, 2006), pp. 87, 91.

<sup>15</sup>Partha Chatterjee, *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup>Naregal also suggests that Anderson's thesis needs modification with respect to the colonial situation, but does not develop the argument further. Veena Naregal, *Language politics, elites and the public sphere: Western India under colonialism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p. 156.

literature, particularly to mean a bound or printed book or a textbook. ‘Reading booke’ meant ‘taking formal education’ and, at times, had a negative connotation. *Pothī*, on the other hand, meant a book, a manuscript, but more specifically, a book with loose leaves. Date’s *Māhārāṣṭra Śabdakośa* uses *pothī* in illustrative sentences in the entries which mean ‘behind and before’, ‘to rip open’, ‘to be in confusion’, ‘disorder’, ‘to muddle up’, ‘to get into derangement’, ‘confusion’, ‘jumble’, and ‘scattered’.<sup>17</sup> The association of *pothī* with these words highlights the character of *pothī* as a book with loose folios, which is why the page order frequently went haywire. Other words like *copaḍī* or *copaḍe* (stitched or bound book, booklet), *bahāḍ* or *bāḍa* (compendium, commonplace book, bundle of papers), and *vahī* (stitched notebook) signify different material features of the book.<sup>18</sup> This article traces the transition from *pothī* to *booka*. Other forms of materials such as *kīrtankār bāḍas* and bureaucratic documentation are not included in the discussion to limit the scope of the article.<sup>19</sup>

The first two sections of the article describe the nature of literary practices in the early modern period, followed by a couple of sections on the decline of the sacredness of the book with the emergence of print culture. The last three sections discuss the commodification of the book, attempts to carve out a market for vernacular publications, and the idea of literary patronage.

### Reading as ritual

Reading cultures in ancient European societies were ‘profoundly oral and rhetorical’ and readers ‘relished the mellifluous metrical and accentual patterns of pronounced text’.<sup>20</sup> The culture of silent reading emerged in around the seventh century in Europe with the introduction of spaces between words. On the other hand, *scriptura continua* can be observed in Marathi writings (both manuscripts and a few printed books) until the early modern period.<sup>21</sup> References in contemporary Marathi literature indicate

<sup>17</sup>Yashwant Ramakrishna Date, *Māhārāṣṭra Śabdakośa* (Pune: Māhārāṣṭra Kośamaṇḍala, 1932–1950); available at <https://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/date/>, [last accessed 11 April 2024].

<sup>18</sup>J. T. Molesworth and George and Thomas Candy, *Dictionary, Marathi and English* (Bombay: Bombay Education Society’s Press, 1857).

<sup>19</sup>Deshpande discusses at length scribal practices related to bureaucratic documentation and illustrates how, at times, orality underwrote the materiality of written documents and how spoken and written words engaged in a ‘procedural dance’. She also throws a light on literate practices of religious sects, particularly Rāmadāsi *sampradāya*, in which vocalized reading accompanied by revision and memorization were a part of the daily regimen, along with writing, which was seen as a form of devotional labour and as the materialization of everyday religiosity. Deshpande, *Scripts of power*, pp. 36–47 and pp. 116–120. Novetzke draws our attention to *kīrtankār* notebooks or *bāḍas*, which were generally manuscripts with stitched spines, meant to hold the notes and jottings of a *kīrtan* performer. The writings in *bāḍas* were meant to serve orality and performance. Thus, he points out, ‘oral’ texts of the *bāḍa* were very different from the ‘literary’ texts of the *pothī* or *grantha*. Novetzke, ‘Note to self’; Christian Lee Novetzke, ‘Divining an author: The idea of authorship in an Indian religious tradition’, *History of Religions*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2003, pp. 213–242, pp. 230–231.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Saenger, *Space between words: The origins of silent reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup>In Stevenson’s grammar, while interword spacing is used in Nāgari paragraphs, Moḍi paragraphs are written in *scriptura continua*. J. Stevenson, *The principles of Murathee grammar* (Bombay: Education Society’s Press, 1833).

that reading did not necessarily mean silent reading, even in the nineteenth century. Very often, it stood for vocalized reading, recitation, and was closely linked with memorization.<sup>22</sup> Further, reading was associated with piety and the very act of reading was considered to be a ritual. While describing the reading habits of the elite in early modern western India, Naregal writes, ‘at least in the elite circles the practice of performative reading and listening as an edifying and/or recreational activity was quite common’.<sup>23</sup> She explains that such reading sessions were carried out even in military camps and that the Brahmins, who accompanied the military on campaigns, performed these readings.<sup>24</sup> A survey of Marathi literature, particularly autobiographies, indicates that the practice of performative and vocalized reading was not confined to the elite or Brahmins, as noted by Naregal, but was also common in non-Brahmin households in early modern western India. It was customary in many Marathi-speaking households to read Prākṛt scriptures, the most popular texts being the works of Shridhar, namely *Rāmavijaya*, *Pāṇḍavaprātāpa*, and *Harivijaya*, which were the rendering into Marathi of *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Bhāgavata* respectively.<sup>25</sup> In a lecture delivered as late as 1891 at the Elphinstone College Union, a British civil servant said,

Go to any town or village in the Deccan or in the Konkan, especially during the rainy season, and you will everywhere find the pious Maratha enjoying with his family and friends, the recitation of the Pothi of Shridhur—and enjoying it indeed. Except an occasional gentle laugh, a sigh, or a tear, not a sound disturbs the rapt silence of the audience, unless when some one or other of those passages of supreme pathos are reached which affect the whole of the listeners simultaneously with an outburst of emotion which drowns the voice of the reader.<sup>26</sup>

Women in some Brahmin households read the scriptures by themselves. However, more commonly, the texts were read out to women (whether Brahmin or non-Brahmin) by a Brahmin man especially appointed for this purpose or any young boy in the household. As O’Hanlon describes, the presence of *purāṇa* texts in the house and copying and donating the *purāṇa* manuscripts were considered as virtuous, but the greatest spiritual benefit lay in listening to the *purāṇas* performed by an exponent.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup>The prevalence of continuous writing and performative reading has been observed in other parts of India, too. Venkatachalapathy argues that orthography followed in Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts—writing without spaces and punctuation—determined the mode of reading. Reading a continuous text entailed deciphering it and therefore necessitated vocalized reading, which could not usually happen in private. He also describes at length *arangettram* ceremonies, where the texts were ritually premiered to an audience. A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *The province of the book: Scholars, scribes, and scribblers in colonial Tamilnadu* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), p. 222.

<sup>23</sup>Naregal, *Language politics*, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Though *prākṛt* is a generic term meaning a vernacular language, Marathi was referred to as Prākṛt by its speakers until the nineteenth century.

<sup>26</sup>H. A. Acworth, ‘Marathi Poetry’, in *Elphinstone College Union Lectures, First Series 1891–92*, (ed.) R. B. Paymaster (Fort Printing Press, 1893), p. 98.

<sup>27</sup>O’Hanlon, ‘Performance in a world of paper’, p. 97.

A well-known litterateur Baba Padmanji (1831–1906), born in a *kāsār* (coppersmith) household, writes that when he learnt to read Marathi, he would read out the religious texts to women in the family, who would be joined by other non-Brahmin women from the neighbourhood. He describes that he became ‘a little *purāṇa*-exponent to the neighbourhood’.<sup>28</sup>

Reading was considered as an activity earning *puṇya* (merit), a way of worshipping the gods and a part of daily rituals. Reciting the texts on sacred days or during holy months was deemed to be all the more righteous. Reading through a text in a day or seven days was also popular.<sup>29</sup> An eminent Marathi grammarian Dadoba Panduranga (1814–1882), a *vaiśya* by caste, recounts in his autobiography that his father used to read a chapter from the Prākṛt scriptures every night.<sup>30</sup> Padmanji also mentions in the autobiography that his father regularly read a chapter or two from the Marathi version of *Gītā* and also worshipped the manuscript. He further refers to the fact that his father always took the manuscript with him on his trips, and kept it beside him even while sleeping.<sup>31</sup>

Padmanji recounts in detail that while reading out the scriptures, he would sit cross-legged on a short bench and would lay the manuscript on a small desk. Since the manuscripts were not bound, he would hold each loose folio in his hand, one by one, and read from it. He further states, ‘the usual ceremony of waving the lamp was performed at the close. Some women used to place sugar, plantains etc. before the sacred book as an offering to it, and also put a garland of flowers round my neck’.<sup>32,33</sup> Padmanji also gives an account of the visit by an eminent professor, who was also a renowned journalist, to his hometown. The professor read books while being carried in a palanquin. Padmanji equated this reading habit with that of ‘sahibs’ [the British].<sup>34</sup> The professor’s act of reading books in a non-ritualistic manner and his visits to the Christian missionaries led the villagers to infer that he must be reading the Bible. A legend from the early eighteenth century has it that an orthodox Brahmin, who read out *purāṇa* to a woman in a royal family at Panhala (Kolhapur), became very upset when the woman had a conversation with someone about state affairs while the reading session was going on. The Brahmin wrapped up the *pothī*, sent it back home, and declared that he would not carry on with the *purāṇa* recital if she continued to not pay attention.<sup>35</sup> These anecdotes illustrate that the book was treated as a sacred artefact, and reading was deemed to be a virtuous and ritualistic act. Reading habits different

<sup>28</sup>Baba Padmanji, *Aruṇodaya: Bābā Padmanji Hyānce Svalikhita Caritra* (Mumbai: Bombay Tract and Book Society, 1955), p. 59.

<sup>29</sup>Dhondo Keshav Karve, *Ātmavṛtta* (Hingane: Vaman Malhar Joshi, 1928), p. 49; Bhavani Shridhar Pandit (ed.), *Ravasaheb Keśav Śivārām Bhavāḷakar Yānce Ātmavṛtta* (Nagpur: Vidarbha Sanśodhan Maṇḍala, 1961), p. 38.

<sup>30</sup>Anant Kakba Priolkar (ed.), *Rāvabahādur Dādobā Pāṇḍurang* (Mumbai: Keshav Bhakijai Dhavale, 1947).

<sup>31</sup>Padmanji, *Aruṇodaya*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup>J. Murray Mitchell (ed.), *Once Hindu, now Christian: The early life of Baba Padmanji* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1889), p. 23.

<sup>33</sup>The practices mentioned by Padmanji, such as waving the lamp, remind one of garlanding the radio and television sets while listening to or watching *Gīt Rāmāyaṇa* or a TV series on *Rāmāyaṇa* in the 1950s and 1980s respectively.

<sup>34</sup>Padmanji, *Aruṇodaya*, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup>Pangarkar, *Moropanta*, pp. 16–17.

from these, such as reading during travel, were marked as alien and identified with those of colonial rulers or missionaries.

Another notable feature of literary culture in the pre-print era was the practice of loaning manuscripts. The next section discusses the practices of book circulation and traces the gradual transition in these practices, which culminated in the commodification of the book.

### Circulation of manuscripts

Manuscripts were scarce and expensive, and were therefore borrowed, lent, or exchanged with one's kith and kin. Naregal refers to letters between elite families requesting or acknowledging receipt of manuscripts for copying or reading. She also mentions that the texts borrowed, bought, or commissioned by these families were core Hindu texts, mostly Sanskrit. She further states that scribal workshops were patronized by the elite families in the precolonial period.<sup>36</sup>

While Naregal shows that loaning manuscripts was prevalent among royal families, it can be observed that it was common even among ordinary families.<sup>37</sup> For example, Padmanji tells us,

These texts [scriptures] were not printed at that time and it was very difficult to acquire their copies. We used to borrow the manuscripts that we did not possess. Nobody would lend the whole manuscript; usually one would borrow a few chapters at a time, read and return. We possessed a copy of *Harivijaya* which we had bought for fifteen rupees. It was written with a very beautiful hand. (These days, a printed copy of the text is available for a rupee!)<sup>38</sup>

Unlike the elite families who borrowed or bought Sanskrit texts, ordinary families read and exchanged vernacular scriptures, as evident from the contemporary literature. Similarly, scribal workshops were not limited to the royal families. A detailed description of a big scribal workshop in Mumbai devoted to copying down Marathi manuscripts is found in an autobiographical account written during the colonial era:

At any point of time, at least a couple of scribes were employed ... to copy down texts, with a beautiful hand, on fine papers, [and this] continued for several years. [The manuscripts] were covered with brocade jackets on which wooden planks of the same size were kept; then they were wrapped in cloth and tied with long ribbons. In this manner, numerous Prākṛt [Marathi] texts were painstakingly produced [in the workshop]. Name any Prākṛt text, and its copy—prepared in such a manner—was available in his collection. This gentleman was very passionate about books. He himself cut papers, drew margins and decorated the folios. My father, inspired by him, had also collected as many Prākṛt books as he could.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Naregal, *Language politics*, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup>Pandit, *Bhavāṅkar Ātmavṛtta*, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup>Padmanji, *Aruṇodaya*, p. 32. (Translation mine.)

<sup>39</sup>Priolkar, *Dādobā Pāṇḍurāga*, p. 64. (Translation mine.)



The manuscripts were copied not only for personal use but also for sale. In a work published in 1928, the author sketches the life of his grandfather G. R. Ketkar, who made a living by selling manuscripts to the royal courts. He was a financier to the Peshwas (pre-colonial rulers) in his early life and when the latter were defeated at the hands of the British, he renounced everything and went to Kashi (Banaras) for some time. Subsequently he started selling manuscripts to the Maratha chieftains with whom he was well acquainted. With 10 to 20 carts full of manuscripts, he travelled from one princely state to another. The chieftains bought several books; and honoured him and his family with clothes, headgear, jewellery, and other goods in addition to the price of the books. His caravan was provided with security during his travel in the princely states. He was also given use of a residence, cookware, and groceries during his stay in the princely states. In the state of Baroda, Ketkar would hire 50 to 60 Brahmins to copy manuscripts, who were paid Rs 3 per month. He was received very well in the villages where he stayed on his travels. The villagers supplied fodder for his bullocks and horses. Some copies of manuscripts were also sold in the villages, since it was a very rare event for a bookseller to visit villages. Landlords and other affluent villagers bought books, some with a view to donating them to priests. Ketkar's business of selling manuscripts continued until 1858–1859, after which he returned home, bought a lithographic press, and became a printer.<sup>40</sup> The life journey of this money lender turned manuscript seller turned printer is illustrative of the broader transformation that was taking place in the region in the nineteenth century. The defeat of Peshwas and the establishment of colonial rule adversely affected the enterprises and privileges of the upper castes. However, they were successful in retaining their social status by using old social networks and skills for new businesses. Ketkar's case also points to the prevalence of manuscript culture well into the nineteenth century, with the book being part of a sacred domain and a commodity at the same time, and finally the advent of the print culture.

As the print culture gradually began to emerge, the sacred nature of the book and supposed profanity of print came into conflict. Initially, printing was not welcomed by orthodox Brahminical society; however, new innovative techniques were developed in order to acclimatize printing to Brahminical notions of sanctity.

### Sacred book versus profane print

The initial response of the literate classes to print technology was shaped by ideas of purity and defilement associated with the caste system. The set of practices and customs based on the ideas of purity typically followed in upper caste Marathi-speaking households around the nineteenth century was called *sovalē-ovale*. *Sovalē* denoted the pure, holy, clean, sanctified state, while *ovale* stood for the profane state. Not just persons, but objects such as cloth, vessels, food, etc. were also sanctified by the performance of certain rites of purification, including washing, applying *kumkum* (vermilion powder), or putting in fire.<sup>41</sup> The touch of a profane person or object would

<sup>40</sup>Shridhar Vyankatesh Ketkar, *Mahārāṣṭrīyānce Kāvya Parikṣaṇ* (Pune: Jñānakośa Chāpakhānā, 1928), pp. 124–126.

<sup>41</sup>Ganesh Prabhakar Pradhan (ed.), *Āgarkar-lekhasaṅgraha* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), pp. 226–235.



immediately turn a sanctified person or object into a profane one.<sup>42</sup> Some objects were considered inherently and unvaryingly pure or fit for use in a sanctified state. These practices were followed primarily in Brahmin households, but sometimes even non-Brahmin families emulated them.<sup>43</sup> Commodities like ink, candles, soap, etc. were viewed with suspicion by Brahmins owing to the belief that they contained animal fat.<sup>44</sup> Due to the conviction that the ink used for printing books contained animal fat, Marathi-speaking Brahmins were initially unwilling to accept the printed book. An 1863 account of Mumbai reports that 'a number of naïve and staunch Brahmins here were afraid of touching printed paper. Till date, one can find several persons in and outside Mumbai who do not touch printed paper and do not read printed books.'<sup>45</sup>

The orthodox Brahmins' aversion to touching printed books did not halt the advent of printing. Indigenous entrepreneurs innovated products that would conform with Brahminical codes. Printers and publishers used different inks and advertised that their books and periodicals were suitable for touch in the sanctified state.<sup>46</sup> *Digdarśan*, one of the earliest periodicals in Marathi, claimed that,

People believe that the printed book is non-sacred since the ink used for printing is made from animal fat, therefore we must write something about it. The press where the *Digdarśan* is printed uses *ghee* instead of animal fat. *Ghee* acts in place of animal fat, but it is not lustrous like the latter, therefore it requires more effort [to make *ghee*-ink].<sup>47</sup>

The usage of *ghee* (clarified butter) as a substitute for animal fat had a precedent in the ancient Hindu code and therefore it must have been thought to be a lawful alternative to animal fat. *Manusmṛti* prohibits the twice-born from eating meat except 'in conformity with the law' and advises that if one has a strong desire to have meat, 'he may make an animal of clarified butter or one of flour [and eat that]'.<sup>48</sup> *Ghee* was conventionally considered as a purifying or expiation agent and was used as an oblation in sacrificial fire. *Manusmṛti* advises that if one became 'polluted' by participating in a funeral procession, one could be purified by consuming *ghee*.<sup>49</sup> Even in the Buddhist tradition, *nirvāṇa* was compared with *ghee*.<sup>50</sup> The instance of using *ghee*-ink for printing shows how Brahminical society negotiated with modernity and how it adopted modern technology without disrupting its traditional structures and norms. In fact, technological innovations were used to reiterate traditions.

<sup>42</sup>Molesworth and Candy, *Dictionary, Marathi and English*, p. 872.

<sup>43</sup>Padmanji, *Aruṇodaya*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup>The Kalāśāstrottejak Samūha (Society for Promotion of Arts and Sciences), Pune, manufactured soaps without using animal fat so that they could be used in *sovaḷe*. *Berar Samachar*, 12 October 1873. A schoolmaster in Khandesh prepared candles that could be used in *sovaḷe*. *Berar Samachar*, 18 January 1874.

<sup>45</sup>Govind Narayan Madgaonkar, *Mumbaice Varṇan* (Aurangabad: Saket, 2011), p. 208. (Translation mine.)

<sup>46</sup>R. K. Lele, *Marāṭhī Vṛttapatrāncā Itihās* (Pune: Continental, 1984), p. 175.

<sup>47</sup>As cited in Priolkar, *Dādobā Pāṇḍuraṅga*, p. 159, footnote. (Translation mine.)

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 174, 37.

<sup>49</sup>G. Buhler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, vol. XXV of *The Sacred Books of the East*, (ed.) F. Max Müller (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 187.

<sup>50</sup>T. W. Rhys Davids (trans.), *Questions of King Milinda, Part II*, vol. XXXVI F of *The Sacred Books of the East*, (ed.) Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), p. 194.

Brahmins' reluctance to embrace printing also emerged from the fact that the printed book gave everybody, irrespective of their caste and gender, access to scriptures. Traditionally, only Brahmin men were privileged to study the Sanskrit scriptures, particularly the Vedic canon. Orthodox Brahmins believed that printing religious texts resulted in the decline of 'the sanctity and importance of the Vedas and religion in general'.<sup>51</sup> Several instances can be pointed out where printing was detested because of its democratizing potential. When attempts were made to establish a library at Mahim (now in Mumbai) in 1867, it was opposed by several people, with one objection being that it would provide everybody with access to the scriptures.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, a scholar translated a chapter from a Sanskrit grammatical text and sent the manuscript to the Board of Education. The Board, in turn, sent it to a reviewer who commented that printing the text would be viewed as a debasement of Vedic knowledge and would incur great displeasure among the people. The reviewer advised the author not to have the manuscript printed. The author followed the advice and put the text to one side.<sup>53</sup> Yet another example is recorded in the 'Report by Prof. R. G. Bhandarkar on the search for Sanskrit manuscripts' which was submitted in 1882. Professor Bhandarkar was given the task of collecting and cataloguing Sanskrit manuscripts in the Bombay presidency and Hyderabad during 1881–1882. He successfully collected manuscripts of philosophical, mythological, grammatical, and religious texts. However, as noted in the report, Kannada Brahmins belonging to the Mādhva sect did not allow any outsider to read the sectarian texts. Hence, Bhandarkar states, 'while a good many of the works expounding the system of Samkaracharya have been printed in Bombay and Calcutta, only one or two pertaining to the school of Madhva have, so far as I am aware, been printed'.<sup>54</sup> A non-Brahmin publisher published an almanac in 1831, which was prepared by a Sanskrit scholar and astrologer who was a tailor by caste. Many Brahmins were averse to using it since it had been prepared by a non-Brahmin. A well-known Marathi periodical remarked on this episode: 'our conservative folks kept mum because it was Mumbai under the British regime [where the almanac was published]. If it was the rule of our [erstwhile] orthodox rulers, the astrologer who forecasted the almanac and the owner of the printing press who backed him, both would have been punished by cutting off their hands'.<sup>55</sup>

With the proliferation of the print culture, the objections concerning the profanity of print dissipated silently and the book became a profane object and, finally, a commodity. A poem titled 'booka' in a Marathi primer (which is the translation of an English primer on poetry that was commissioned by the director of public instruction) describes the book as modern yet ancient; bound yet free; dressed in golden yet tacky, black as well as white; covered with hide; and replete with punctuation marks.<sup>56</sup> This characterization of a book—bound, with a punctuated text, and with a leather jacket cover—is very different from Padmanji's characterization of *pothī* discussed earlier.

<sup>51</sup>Berar *Samachar*, 2 June 1878.

<sup>52</sup>S. G. Mahajan, *History of the public library movement in Maharashtra* (Pune: Shubhada-Saraswat, 1984), p. 168.

<sup>53</sup>Priolkar, *Dādobā Pāṇḍuraṅga*, p. 159.

<sup>54</sup>National Archives of India (hereafter NAI), Home, Public, December 1882, No. 246–248.

<sup>55</sup>*Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1892. (Translation mine.)

<sup>56</sup>Mahadev Govindashastri, *Prākṛt Kavitece Pahile Pustak* (Pune: Jñānaprakāśa, 1860), p. 63.

In the earlier period, the leather jacket would have threatened the sanctity of the book.

The focus of orthodox critique gradually shifted from the profane materiality of the book to the profane content of books. Romantic novels, for example, were criticized in favour of books that bestowed knowledge. The growing importance of printed books was linked with 'Englishness' and vices resulting from it. A short story criticizing alcoholism and the illustration that accompanied it, which appeared in the well-known periodical titled *Citramay Jagat*, are worth examining in this context. The protagonist of the story introduces his wife to alcohol and she becomes addicted to it, which ultimately leads to the death of the entire family. The husband convinces his wife to consume alcohol by claiming that the greatness of alcohol is specified in English books. The accompanying image depicts a man sitting in an easy chair reading a book and a woman looking curiously at him.<sup>57</sup> The centrality of the book in this story is very intriguing. It is the book that authenticates the protagonist's claims and makes them acceptable to the wife. The narrative, however, views the book as a pathway to vices via Englishness. This was also a reason for keeping women away from books.

### Profane reading and women

It was not a universal practice to educate women in nineteenth-century western India. However, some women in Brahmin households were taught to read 'Bālābodh' (Nāgari) script in which Marathi religious books were written.<sup>58</sup> A few women in the royal families were also taught Sanskrit. However, women's literacy was expected to be confined to ritualistic reading. In the nineteenth century, Western-educated upper caste men began to take a lot of interest in the issue of women's education. They encouraged their wives to become educated and, in many cases, personally taught them to read and write. However, when women started reading books for non-religious purposes, it made society anxious. A contemporary periodical remarks that as soon as they became literate, women from Mumbai started reading 'books of love' (presumably romantic novels) and that it would be better to be illiterate than to read such books.<sup>59</sup>

Ramabai Ranade (1862–1924), a social reformer belonging to the Brahmin caste, narrates an incident from her childhood in her autobiography. Her father wrote a letter addressed to the family in which he mentioned that he would keep his promise to bring a doll and a saree for his daughter when he returns home. Ranade was surprised when she found out that her brother knew about her father's promise. The brother explained that their father wrote about it in his correspondence. Ranade recounts that as a young girl, she simply failed to comprehend the communicative power of the alphabet and asked, '[he] might have written it down, but *how did you come to know?*'<sup>60</sup> This incident reveals the condition of women's literacy in the region during

<sup>57</sup>'Dārūpāyī Kulakṣaya', *Citramay Jagat*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1912.

<sup>58</sup>Savitribai Phule, a non-Brahmin social reformer and the first indigenous woman to be a schoolteacher/principal in colonial India, however, could write in Moḍī. Her Moḍī signature as well as poems she wrote in Moḍī hand are available. M. G. Mali (ed.), *Savitribai Phule Samagra Vāṅmay* (Mumbai: Māhārāṣṭra Rājya Sāhitya Āṇi Saṃskṛti Maṅḍala, 2011).

<sup>59</sup>'Subodh Saṃvād', *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1867.

<sup>60</sup>Ranade, *Āṭhavanī*, p. 46. (Emphasis added.)

the nineteenth century. Ranade mentions that her aunt, who had basic reading skills, was widowed, after which a senior man in her family decided that reading and writing were not 'favourable' to women in the household and therefore they were barred from studying.<sup>61</sup> Subsequently she was married into a household 'where men wanted women to read and write'.<sup>62</sup> She was educated by her husband, which was disliked by other family members. The women in the family repeatedly told her, 'the men like it, but you should read only once in a while; does not it insult the elders at home?'<sup>63</sup> She was advised not to show much enthusiasm for learning even if her husband insisted. She was warned, 'your office is in your bedroom. You may read there, play around or do whatever you want, but don't you dare to disrespect us [by reading in front of us]'.<sup>64</sup> What the elders found 'disrespectful', in this instance, was the fact that Ranade was reading non-religious texts, including English ones. So long as women abided by the ritualistic practices of reading, they were allowed to read. However, reading as a leisure activity or reading to gain knowledge were unacceptable. Reading was also seen as an attempt to compete with the men. Thus, Ranade's act of reading was viewed as modern, profane, and masculine, which is why she was asked to limit her activities to the 'office'. Similarly, when Ranade delivered a speech in English in a public assembly, this was regarded as the loss of family honour by her family members.<sup>65</sup>

The portrayals of women's literacy practices in *Paṇa Lakṣyānt Koṅ Ghetō*, one of the most celebrated Marathi novels of the nineteenth century by H. N. Apte, parallel Ranade's reminiscences. When the protagonist speaks about her brother's desire to educate his wife, an elderly woman in the house exclaims,

... [N]ow he wants his wife to become educated! What else does he want to do? Does he not want her to wear a frock like a 'madam'? Too Good! Then he will be the sahib and she will be the madam. They can go for a walk, hand in hand. Will not they talk to each other in English, then? ... I will ask [my husband] to buy a pair of shoes and an umbrella tomorrow [for her] ... Now please be seated at the table.<sup>66</sup>

The associations made between women's literacy and conversing in English with one's spouse, going for a leisurely walk, using a table, and wearing Western attire—signified by frock, shoes, and umbrella—are worth noting. Elsewhere in the novel, the female protagonist and her husband leave their ancestral home and start living in Mumbai. This enables them to adopt a 'reformed' [modern] lifestyle. The novel portrays a romantic picture of the evening get-togethers and book reading sessions of young married couples on the terrace where they converse with each other freely, read books collectively, and discuss them.<sup>67</sup> It is to be noted here that it is only when the couple

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 58 (Translation mine.)

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 60. (Translation mine.)

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>66</sup>Hari Narayan Apte, *Paṇa Lakṣyānt Koṅ Ghetō!* (Pune: Mehta Publishing House, 1992), p. 219. (Translation mine.)

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., pp. 287–288.

leaves the highly orthodox joint family in Pune and settles in the Anglicized and cosmopolitan city of Mumbai as a nuclear family that the romantic reading sessions become a possibility. Ranade, too, could only begin her studies when she moved to Nashik to live in a nuclear family.

*Mahārāṣṭra Mahilā*, which claimed to be ‘the only Marathi magazine conducted by ladies’, was an early twentieth-century periodical devoted to the cultivation of the skills of an ideal housewife by the ‘ladies’. Its motto describes a beautiful and dutiful woman efficiently running the household.<sup>68</sup> A picture of three women clad in traditional sarees but Western-style blouses, one of them sitting on a chair, and all three reading a printed book together, was published in one of this periodical’s initial issues. However, the image is unlikely to be representative of the women’s actual experiences of reading and owning books, and participating in literary activities. *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, an eminent periodical, published lists of subscribers in most of its issues. A look at the extant issues from 1867 to 1888 (after which the subscriber lists were probably not published) reveals that there were no women subscribers, except for one ‘Mistress Janabai Chavhan, midwife’ in 1886.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in a photograph of a literary conference held at Baroda in 1909, not a single woman can be spotted among the hundreds of men.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the publication of the image in this periodical suggests that a taste for reading was thought to be a quality of an ideal modern housewife. It depicts the significant shifts in reading habits and manners that took place in the nineteenth century: reading was no longer a righteous act, but a leisurely activity; the tradition of men reading out to women receded and women began to read themselves; sitting in chairs instead of cross-legged on small benches became acceptable; silent reading replaced performative reading; and *booka* replaced manuscript *pothīs*. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a market for printed books began to emerge gradually and books turned into a commodity.

### Printed books, booksellers and market

For many years, missionaries distributed Christian tracts ‘gratuitously’.<sup>71</sup> However, it was noticed after some time that people were eager to receive the tracts and were even prepared to buy them. The missionaries at the American Marathi Mission thought that ‘a thing which may be obtained by all for nothing, will be generally valued at nothing. The books acquire respectability and importance in the sight of the natives, by the price demanded for them; they will be read with more attention and would be better preserved.’<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the Mission began to sell books, though at very low prices, and employed colporteurs.<sup>73</sup> It was hoped that colporteurs would relieve the missionaries

<sup>68</sup> *Mahārāṣṭra Mahilā*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1901.

<sup>69</sup> *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 18, no. 11–12, 1886.

<sup>70</sup> *Citramay Jagat*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1910, p. 84.

<sup>71</sup> *Memorial Papers of the American Marathi Mission, 1813–1881* (Bombay: Education Society’s Press, 1882), p. 101.

<sup>72</sup> Rev Geo. Bowen, as cited in *Memorial Papers*, p. 101.

<sup>73</sup> For example, the production cost of each copy of the New Testament published by the Bible Society in 1868 was Rs 2, but were sold at just 6 Anna per copy. As reported in *Jñānodaya*, 1 June 1868.

from the work of attending to the applications for books from ‘clamorous and thankless crowds’ and that they would instead be able to devote their time to preaching.<sup>74</sup> The books could be made available in the most distant villages through colporteurs. In 1851, seven-eighths of the sale of the tracts and books by the American Mission of Bombay were made by the colporteurs.<sup>75</sup> Padmanji refers to the Muslim peddlers belonging to the Khoja and Momin communities who chiefly sold old English books, including Christian tracts. He also mentions that he bought several books on Hinduism from one of the Brahmin booksellers who had their shops in the campus of Bhuleshwar temple in Mumbai.<sup>76</sup>

The Dakshina Prize Committee (discussed in detail in the following section) had authorized a number of individuals in various places to sell the books it patronized and published. A number of applications are found in the minutes of the committee requesting it to appoint the addressers as the agents for bookselling.<sup>77</sup> The Government Central Book Depot in Bombay (now Mumbai) was established in order to supply textbooks and other books to government schools and colleges at low prices. It produced textbooks ‘strongly bound, well printed, without errors, cheapest’ and also imported books published in England.<sup>78</sup> The books published by the Depot were sold at Zilla and Taluka towns not only to students and teachers but also to the general public. In fact, the curator of the Depot said in 1882 that ‘the sales to the public are more than five times more than the sales to the colleges and the schools’.<sup>79</sup>

*The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* lists registered joint stock companies in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1808–1809, in which the companies involved in the trade of printing, publishing, and stationery are included. Their nominal capital was Rs 17,90,000 out of a total of Rs 29,48,76,625 and the paid-up capital was Rs 4,47,910 out of a total of Rs 18,64,37,620.<sup>80</sup> Among a total of 18,849 income tax payers in the city, there were 49 merchants and dealers in books and stationery, 45 printers and publishers (including newspaper offices), and two people involved in printing and publishing companies.<sup>81</sup> In 1874–1898, 132 unilingual (Marathi) and 23 bilingual (Anglo-Marathi) newspapers were published in 11 cities in western India.<sup>82</sup> The number of Marathi periodicals increased steadily from five in 1832–1840 to 164 in 1911–1920, except for a dip in 1891–1900 compared to the previous decade.

<sup>74</sup>*Memorial Papers*, p. 103.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>Padmanji, *Arunodaya*, pp. 54, 85.

<sup>77</sup>Maharashtra State Archives (hereafter MSA), DPC Inward Vol. 7, Jan. 1863–Dec. 1866, Letter dated 29 January 1858.

<sup>78</sup>NAI, Home, Public, April 1883, No. 186–189.

<sup>79</sup>NAI, Home, Public, August 1882 [A], 202–205.

<sup>80</sup>*The Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* (Bombay: The Times Press, 1909), p. 309.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 332. Gujarati, English, Portuguese, Hindu, and Urdu presses were also present in the city in significant numbers. It is not clear from the *Gazette* how many of the companies, printers, and publishers, and how much capital, were involved in Marathi printing and publishing.

<sup>82</sup>Indian Newspaper Reports, 1868–1942, Part 6 Bombay, 1874–1898; Part 7 Bombay, 1901–1921. [http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital\\_guides/indian\\_newspaper\\_reports\\_parts\\_1\\_to\\_4/documents/NewspaperListingsforParts6.pdf](http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/indian_newspaper_reports_parts_1_to_4/documents/NewspaperListingsforParts6.pdf); [http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital\\_guides/indian\\_newspaper\\_reports\\_part\\_7/documents/NewspaperListingsforParts1-7.pdf](http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/indian_newspaper_reports_part_7/documents/NewspaperListingsforParts1-7.pdf), [both accessed 5 September 2024].

The circulation of the eminent Marathi periodicals in this period ranged from 500 to 8,000.<sup>83</sup>

The publisher of the ninth edition (1923) of *Anhikasūtrāvali* stated that since the text was 'useful for all and essential for each', there was a high demand for the book and the earlier editions were all exhausted. He also mentions that the author possessed 'ownership rights' of the book and reprinting was not possible without buying the copyright. The preface categorically mentions that the publishers had 'lawfully' bought the copyright from the author's family.<sup>84</sup> This example is crucial because of the nature of the text, which was meant to instruct a Brahmin sub caste about daily rites and rituals. The content of the book was not the intellectual creation of an individual author; rather, it was the documentation of the religious practices of a community. Despite the sacredness associated with the text and the nature of its content, the book was treated as a commodity, copyright of which was bought from the author's family.

The willingness of people to buy Christian tracts; the presence of several types of booksellers in the market; the demand for books by the general public, as noted by the Government Depot officials; the existence of joint stock companies in the field of printing and publishing; a huge number of advertisements for books published in contemporary newspapers; several schemes announced by publishers to attract readers; the use of market idioms for books ('ownership rights'); and the presence of numerous periodicals indicate that printing was a flourishing commercial activity in western India by the end of the nineteenth century. However, Marathi litterateurs portray a different picture, suggesting that the market for vernacular books was not a robust one.

### Alleged weak market and colonial patronage

Even towards the end of the nineteenth century, several Marathi authors lamented that the production of vernacular books and periodicals was not a financially viable business. They frequently complained of poor sales and that they could not sustain themselves by writing only.<sup>85</sup> In the foreword of a catalogue of Marathi books (1810–1917), the author expresses his angst that only 2,067 Marathi books were published in the Bombay presidency, Central Provinces, and Baroda state during 1901 to 1910, as opposed to Bengal, where more than 10,000 books had been published during the same period.<sup>86</sup> The absence of leisure owing to poverty, the low literacy rate, the inability of English-educated persons to express themselves in Marathi, Bāḷalbodh script which was inconvenient for writing swiftly, the high costs of publication, and lack of profit were cited as the reasons behind graduates' unwillingness to become

<sup>83</sup>Shankar Ganesh Date (ed.), *Marāṭhī Niyatakālikāncī Sūci (1800–1955)* (Mumbai: Mumbai Marāṭhī Grantha Saṅgrahālaya, 1969).

<sup>84</sup>Viththal Narayan Purandare, *Anhikasūtrāvali* (Mumbai: Nirṇayasāgar, 1923), p. 8.

<sup>85</sup>Vasudev Govind Apte, *Lekhanakalā Āṇi Lekhanavyavasāya* (Pune: G. B. Joshi, 1926).

<sup>86</sup>Shridhar Vyankatesh Ketkar, 'Prastāvanā', in *Mahārāṣṭriya Vāṇmaysūci*, (eds) Yashwant Ramkrishna Date and Ramchandra Tryambak Deshmukh (Nagpur: Jñānakośa, 1919). Ketkar also mentions that the figure is far less compared to Gujarati publications. However, he prefers to compare Marathi print culture with that of Bengal since he believed that the societies were similar and lacked an indigenous trader class, unlike Gujarati society.



involved in book production.<sup>87</sup> The reluctance or ‘lack of appetite’ of the indigenous people to spend money on books and their low salaries were contrasted with the addictive reading habits and high salaries of the Europeans in India.<sup>88</sup> The vernacular newspapers complained of high postal charges, the cost of imported paper, and lack of access to government reports.<sup>89</sup> It was thought that the production costs could be cut by producing paper locally. Kolhapur Kalottejak Maṇḍalī (Association for Promotion of Arts) announced a prize of a hundred rupees for a native who could produce good quality, cheap paper.<sup>90</sup> *Aruṇodaya*, a press at Thane, appealed to all the vernacular presses to come together to collect funds and start a paper mill to end their dependency on imported paper. Another press responded that there were already two paper mills run by ‘natives’ in Mumbai from where the paper could be purchased by the vernacular presses.<sup>91</sup> It was a common complaint of the periodicals that subscribers did not send the subscription fees in on time, even after repeated reminders. A huge number of periodicals were short-lived. Even the successful ones struggled to recruit and maintain subscribers, and they made repeated pleas to people to patronize them and ‘not let them submerge’.<sup>92</sup> The periodicals had to maintain a low subscription rate to ensure affordability. The annual subscription fee of *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, for example, remained at Rs 3 from 1868 to 1935, though there was a multifold increase in the number of pages. The perception that the market for the vernacular publications was very weak led a number of periodicals and authors to turn to the colonial state for patronage.

Various departments and bodies of the colonial state promoted the vernacular print culture by subscribing to periodicals. For example, the Government of India had a subscription for 15,000 copies of *Jaḡad Vṛtta*, a loyalist Marathi newspaper, in order to remove the risk of its financial failure. The government also attempted to persuade ‘the native chiefs’ to patronize the paper.<sup>93</sup> A prolific Marathi author, most of whose books were published by the Department of Public Instruction, lauded the British rulers because he thought that they recognized the importance of authors and books, unlike the indigenous princes. He wrote that he would not have been able to publish so many books, had the government and its officials not generously sponsored the production of vernacular books.<sup>94</sup>

The colonial state also promoted vernacular book sales by establishing a state monopoly in the book trade. Around the 1880s, the government proposed transferring the business of the Government Book Depot to a private British company on a contractual basis since government interference in private trade was viewed as undesirable. It was also hoped that the competition would keep prices down. However, the then director of Public Instruction (Bombay) expressed the view that having a monopoly over

<sup>87</sup>S. K. Kolhatkar, ‘Marāṭhī Vānmayātil Viṣeś va Tyāñce Ugam’, *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 40, no. 11, 1909.

<sup>88</sup>Nityāce Marāṭhī Vartamānapatra’, *Berar Samachar*, 18 June, 1870; Vinayak Kondadev Oak, *Mahārāṣṭra Granthasangraha* (Mumbai: Nirṇaysāgar, 1897).

<sup>89</sup>*Berar Samachar*, 16 July 1873.

<sup>90</sup>*Berar Samachar*, 7 November 1875.

<sup>91</sup>*Berar Samachar*, 8 June 1873.

<sup>92</sup>*Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 28, no. 1–2, 1897.

<sup>93</sup>NAI, Foreign, Deposit—I, September 1909, No. 46.

<sup>94</sup>Vinayak Kondadeva Oak, ‘Granthakarṭṛtva’, *Vividha-Jñāna-vistāra*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1905, p. 43.

sales was in the interest of the village schools, and that it was immaterial for trade in general if the monopoly was government or private. Official correspondence explains that private book trade did not exist in the Bombay presidency and that, except for a few cities, there were no separate booksellers. Even in the cities, it was noted, booksellers were few and 'in relation to the literary energies of the people the depot has supplied a want by assuming the function of publisher'. It was further argued that the Depot published vernacular books 'which no private bookseller would venture to publish'. The closure of the Depot was postponed, given its crucial role in supplying books to the general public in the non-urban areas.<sup>95</sup>

The annual practice of distributing enormous amounts of *dakṣiṇā* (gift to priests), which was instigated by a Maratha army chief in the eighteenth century and carried forward by Peshwa rulers, was continued by the colonial state.<sup>96</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, students at the government school at Pune protested against the 'old and pernicious system of *dakṣiṇā*' and recommended that the candidates who sought *dakṣiṇā* must produce translation(s) of Sanskrit or English works into Marathi or original compositions in Marathi. The memorandum that the students sent to the government read that 'no public fund ought surely to go for the support of individuals who are wasting their time in unproductive and useless learning'.<sup>97</sup> The Brahmin priests were furious at this 'audacious attempt' of the students and called an assembly at a temple before which the 'offenders' were obliged to appear. The students were threatened with the penalty of expulsion from the caste. A contemporary newspaper comments that 'Brahminical violence and intolerance triumphed' at the occasion.<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, the government conceded to the demands of the students and accordingly, the Dakshina Prize Committee (henceforth DPC) was formed for the encouragement of Marathi literature. Its chief function was 'to examine and award prizes to vernacular works whether manuscript or printed'.<sup>99</sup> It advertised, from time to time, prizes for Marathi books on particular subjects, commissioned the authors to translate certain Sanskrit and English works into Marathi, and conferred awards on books that the authors sent to the Committee for patronage. It also published books, sold them, and sent them to newspapers for review.<sup>100</sup> The correspondence between the DPC and various authors sheds light on the perceived weakness of the market for vernacular books, which became the principal reason why the authors sought the patronage of the committee. An author complained that the people did not patronize non-fictional works in Marathi. He exclaims, 'I am sorry to write that even after advertising, not even ten outstation orders [for his book] were received, except the ones from friends.' He further says that unless the book was patronized by the DPC, publishing a second edition of the book would not be possible.<sup>101</sup> Another author, who translated Dr Haug's *Origin of Brahmanism*, complains in a letter to the DPC, '... these [works] do not find so ready a

<sup>95</sup> NAI, Home, Public, April 1883, No. 186–189.

<sup>96</sup> *Jñānaprakāśa*, 11 October 1858.

<sup>97</sup> *Jñānodaya*, 1 November 1849.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> MSA, Director of Public Instruction Inward Vol., 1867–68, Letter no. 1175, dated 10 July 1860.

<sup>100</sup> Generally, 500 copies of a book were printed; if the DPC felt that there would be greater demand for a particular work, 1,000 copies were printed.

<sup>101</sup> MSA, DPC Minutes, 1851–1859, Letter dated 11 November 1901.

sale amongst the commonality of the Marathi readers as other Books for want of that interest which they find in *noval* [novels] and other light reading'.<sup>102</sup> Not only authors, but printers also sought the committee's assistance for their business.<sup>103</sup>

### Public patronage

Apart from the colonial institutions, the rulers of the princely states, small government officials, and private individuals patronized vernacular literature. For instance, the principal of Rajaram College, Kolhapur, announced a prize of Rs 150 for writing a play.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, the renowned social reformer Justice M. G. Ranade ordered the reprinting of a poem and distributed several copies for free because the poem described the plight of widows.<sup>105</sup> However, these efforts were limited and a market for vernacular books needed to be carved out. Therefore, a number of publishers and associations turned to the subscription model or 'public patronage'.

Inspired by the Tract Societies in the West run by the missionaries, Marāṭhī Granthottejak Maṇḍalī (the Association for Encouragement of Marathi Books) was founded in 1878 for the promotion of vernacular books. It intended to inspect 'goods' produced by authors and bring them to the market. Since the association was not sure of finding adequate customers, it published an advertisement in the newspapers promising that if a minimum of 1,000 people pledged to become their subscribers, then the association would start functioning. A thousand people readily sent in their signatures. The association circulated all its published books to the proposed subscribers, who were expected to keep books to the value of the annual subscription fee and return the rest to the association.<sup>106</sup> The scheme failed miserably. Some subscribers returned all of the books after reading them, stating that they did not wish to keep any of them, and never paid any subscription money. Some never bothered to return the books exceeding the cost of their subscription. The percentage of the people who actually paid the subscription fees was ten in the first year, five in the second, and just one in the third year. The scheme was revised but even that failed.<sup>107</sup> A series of articles was published assessing the functioning of the association in the leading Marathi newspaper *Kesari*. *Kesari* blames the dishonesty prevalent in *kaliyuga* for the failure of the association.<sup>108</sup> However, it is not surprising that the association did not collect subscription fees in advance and had confidence in its subscribers. The practice of manuscript loaning rested on mutual trust and kinship networks. Even in the print era, the literary circle—from where the probable subscribers would come—was very small, both in terms of numbers and geographical extent, and close-knit. These networks thinned out with the advent of modernity. The association used the language of the market to describe its intentions—the books were referred to as 'goods'. However, it was not primarily interested in profit-making. It sought to spread Western knowledge among

<sup>102</sup>MSA, DPC Inward Vol. 7, Jan 1863– Dec. 1866, Letter dated 9 March 1864.

<sup>103</sup>MSA, DPC Minutes, 1851–1859, No. 3 of 1857, S-205.

<sup>104</sup>*Kesari*, 17 February 1885.

<sup>105</sup>Karve, *Ātmavṛtta*, p. 146.

<sup>106</sup>*Kesari*, 24 May 1881.

<sup>107</sup>*Kesari*, 14 June 1881.

<sup>108</sup>*Kesari*, 24 May–26 July 1881.

the masses and expected people to patronize the association as a noble cause. People, however, were reluctant to purchase vernacular books. *Kesari* advised the association to apply to the education department for an annual grant to publish books.<sup>109</sup>

The publishers of *Bhārat Gaurav Grantha-mālā* also had a similar scheme in which the subscribers were promised four books a year. The lack of an adequate numbers of subscribers led to delayed publication and the publishers pleaded with the common people (who were called ‘patrons’) to lend a helping hand by subscribing to the book series and encouraging others to do the same. It also made an emotional appeal: ‘we do not think we have committed a mistake by being proud of our mother tongue and our literature and thereby beginning the [publication] enterprise in Marathi’.<sup>110</sup>

While the Granthottejak model failed completely, S. V. Ketkar’s *Jñānakośa* model had considerable success. For the compilation and publication of *Jñānakośa*, the first Marathi encyclopedia, Ketkar founded a private limited company with shares worth Rs 50,000. His idea was rejected by his sympathizers at first, who thought that business mindedness was not suitable for a holy work such as *Jñānakośa*. However, Ketkar convinced his kin to buy initial shares. Within 120 days of the registration of the company, 205 shares were sold. According to Ketkar, being a shareholder rather than a subscriber imbued people with a sense of pride that they were a part of the enterprise. The *Jñānakośa* also had subscribers, which included teachers, law students, a poor priest, and a *sanyasi*. Ketkar, his wife, and some others worked as canvassers for *Jñānakośa*. Ketkar worked very hard to canvass customers and was successful in securing a significant number of customers by himself. A few other canvassers were equally efficient and used various techniques to persuade the people. While one of them used old kinship networks, another used modern social networks such as lawyers’ tennis clubs to contact likely customers. Ketkar believed that having a good canvasser was better than having a royal patron. Various princely rulers bought only 50 copies of *Jñānakośa* out of the total 3,000 copies sold. Ketkar comments that ‘enormous tasks like *Jñānakośa* would now be fulfilled by people’s patronage. The development of literature does not depend on the princely rulers any more.’ A number of people offered ‘*dakṣiṇā*’ or donations to *Jñānakośa*, but these were sternly rejected, as it was a profit-making company. Secondly, Ketkar believed that the donation amounts would be smaller, and that it would be more beneficial if donors were convinced to purchase the volumes. There were numerous internal conflicts in the company. For example, investors did not get any dividends, with Ketkar describing his enterprise as having a ‘socialist form’. However, the *Jñānakośa* model turned out to be a profitable one.<sup>111</sup>

The success of the *Jñānakośa* model can be attributed to treating publishing as a commercial activity. Despite people’s aversion to profit-seeking in a ‘sacred’ publication enterprise, Ketkar remained firm on actively seeking both capital investment and customers. Like his grandfather, who used old social networks for the new business of selling the manuscripts (referred to in the second section of this article), Ketkar used old kinship networks to raise capital and get customers. On the other hand, many other publishers treated readers as patrons or even *āpta* (kin) and took pride in not

<sup>109</sup>*Kesari*, 19 July 1881.

<sup>110</sup>Vishwanath Vinayak Kelkar, *Mahātmā Paricay* (Bombay: Bharat Gaurav Granthamālā, 1912).

<sup>111</sup>Shridhar Vyankatesh Ketkar, *Mājhe Bārā Varṣānce Kām* (Pune: Jñānakośa Press, 1927).

earning a profit from publishing, even though they used phrases like 'literary market' and 'commodity'. A *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra* editorial declares that the makers of the periodical were not willing to earn a living by making a profit from it. It was claimed that they were running it in uncovetous manner, for the welfare of all.<sup>112</sup> A book written by a princely ruler was applauded in a book review published in the same periodical because the author did not write it with the intention of earning money.<sup>113</sup> Earning money or seeking profit from the book business were thus equated with greed.<sup>114</sup> Since writing, publishing, buying, and reading vernacular books were seen as a service to society, nation, and mother tongue, it was expected that the intelligentsia would produce books unmotivated by profit. The distinguished social reformer G. G. Agarkar appealed to 'university *putras*' (graduates) to enter the printing business in order to end the 'famine of Saraswati'.<sup>115</sup> There were very high expectations from the princely rulers, too, since they were *swakīya* (one's own).

Advertisements in periodicals were sometimes justified in an apologetic tone. *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, in a 1909 issue, announced that the publishers had decided to include advertisements which would not be 'objectionable'.<sup>116</sup> *Kesari* provided a generous space to book advertisements because it believed that 'books bestowed knowledge upon the masses which was an act of philanthropy'.<sup>117</sup> While responding to a complaint by a reader that *Kesari* was replete with advertisements, the editor declared that they were published not merely for commercial purpose but also for the wellbeing of the people. It was through advertisements, the editor further explains, that readers learnt about new books and medicines, which helped them to stay mentally and physically fit.<sup>118</sup> Thus, even a highly commercial activity like advertising had assumed a beneficent character.

### Patronage and commercialization of print in South Asia

The roots of the idea of patronage can be traced back to Vedic institution of *yajña* (ritual sacrifice). The patrons of *yajñas*, often kings, paid *dakṣiṇā* to the officiating priests not as a fee but as a present which guaranteed fruition of the sacrifice.<sup>119</sup> Unlike market exchanges, exchanges in patronage involved relationships infused with obligation, asymmetry, and competing claims to superiority.<sup>120</sup> The pre-modern notions of patronage carried over to the colonial period. The Western-educated students in the *dakṣiṇā* episode described above used the language of modernity and democracy to justify their demand for the abolition of the practice of *dakṣiṇā*. At the same time, by seeking state

<sup>112</sup> *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1868.

<sup>113</sup> *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 6, no. 9, 1874.

<sup>114</sup> This resonates with the notion that making money from imparting education was sinful. In his autobiography, Bhavalkar writes that 'Pantoji' (schoolteacher) was a contemptuous title since they sold knowledge to earn a living. Pandit, *Bhavāḷakar Ātmavṛtta*, p. 73.

<sup>115</sup> Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, *Sampurna Āgarkar* (Pune: Varadā Books, 1994).

<sup>116</sup> *Vividha-Jñāna-Vistāra*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1909.

<sup>117</sup> *Kesari*, 8 January 1884.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Barbara Stoler Miller (ed.), *The powers of art: Patronage in Indian culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

sponsorship of vernacular publications, they invoked the same ideas of patronage and benefaction that the institution of *dakṣiṇā* entailed. The nationalist newspaper *Kesari*, which advised Granthottejāk Maṅḍalī to appeal to the colonial institutions, also called on the idea of state patronage. Similarly, the authors who sent their works to the DPC and the Department of Public Instruction resorted to the age-old idea of patronage. The Sanskrit verse meaning ‘a scholar, a woman and a creeper do not look good without a support’ was cited by a Marathi author even in the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>121</sup>

The convergence of print technology and capitalism that led to vernacularization in Europe also resulted in the sharp decline in literary patronage. While the socio-literary dynamics of manuscript culture carried over into the print era even in Europe, the patron was ultimately eclipsed by the authority of authors and the importance of the reader.<sup>122</sup> Instead of appealing to wealthy patrons, printing allowed investors direct access to the buying public.<sup>123</sup> Several historians of South Asia also argue that while the early print culture in the region can be characterized as the age of patronage, patronage was replaced by market forces towards the end of the nineteenth century. Venkatachalapathy illustrates that with the rise of novel, ‘the art form par excellence of a growing middle class’, Tamil publishing broke decisively from patronage and became a market venture.<sup>124</sup> Orsini delineates how commercial publishers in North India ‘managed to succeed by offering a range of “texts of pleasure” which tagged along with, reproduced, or multiplied the pleasures offered by oral performers’.<sup>125</sup> Ghosh shows that the book trade matured in Bengal in the 1860s when composing Bengali works became profitable and some authors drew regular income from them. According to her, the growth of the market was possible because of the spread of cheap printing techniques, increasing print runs, which resulted in the lowering of prices and the operation of hawkers. While the ‘respectable’ presses had very limited output, the numerous Battala presses, which printed attractive, small, cheap, and popular material written in an unrefined and colloquial style, were doing a brisk trade.<sup>126</sup> Mitchell maintains that the patronage offered by the colonial state was dramatically limited and of a very different nature, leading to the ‘crisis of patronage’. The new sources of patronage, then, were located in communities of patrons—the communities that were newly imagined in relation to language.<sup>127</sup> Mishra points out that the early native-run Odia printing was heavily dependent on financial patronage from the upper class; however, the emergence of the commercial textbook market proved to be pivotal for the expansion of print culture.<sup>128</sup> Mir highlights the relative autonomy

<sup>121</sup>Oak, ‘Granthakartṛtva’, p. 55.

<sup>122</sup>Paul J. Voss, ‘Books for sale: Advertising and patronage in late Elizabethan England’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1998, pp. 733–756, pp. 733, 746.

<sup>123</sup>Arthur F. Marotti, ‘Patronage, poetry, and print’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 21, 1991, pp. 1–26, pp. 1–2.

<sup>124</sup>Venkatachalapathy, *The province of the book*, p. 81.

<sup>125</sup>Orsini, *Print and pleasure*, p. 9.

<sup>126</sup>Ghosh, ‘Cheap books, “bad” books’, pp. 176–177.

<sup>127</sup>Lisa Mitchell, *Language, emotion, politics in South India: The making of a mother tongue* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), pp. 63–64.

<sup>128</sup>Pritipuspa Mishra, *Language and the making of modern India: Nationalism and the vernacular in colonial Odisha, 1803–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 84–85.

of Punjabi print production, which was surveyed by the colonial state but not shaped by it.<sup>129</sup>

Contrary to these observations, Stark argues that although print culture led to radical shifts in the structures of patronage in North India, the colonial state emerged as one of the principal patrons. Though she identifies the second half of the nineteenth century as the age of the commercialization of books, she claims that ‘success as publisher invariably presupposed the ability to secure government patronage’. She further argues that printing-publishing was not driven by the profit motive alone; rather, it was considered an intellectual pursuit, contributing to modernity as well as to the revival of cultural-literary heritage.<sup>130</sup> In the same way, it can be argued that notions of ‘patronage’ did not completely wither away in the Marathi-speaking region with the advent of the print culture. While the book turned into a profane object and a commodity, seeking profit from the book trade was not always valued. It was believed that the urge for social reforms and love for mother tongue and nation would steer the publication and consumption of books. At the same time, seeking the patronage of the colonial state was deemed acceptable owing to the tradition of royal patronage for literature.

## Conclusion

A scrutiny of the nineteenth-century literary sources from the Marathi-speaking region reveals that the conflict between the sacredness of the book and profanity of print fizzled out in a short period, whereas the contradictory coexistence of book-as-a-commodity and reliance on state patronage continued until the end of the century. This article shows that, much as in other South Asian regions, the arrival of print did not instantaneously replace oral and scribal traditions. As printing and publishing started expanding in the second half of the nineteenth century, new modes of reading—silent, individual reading—emerged gradually and the reader base widened. This trajectory seems to be similar to other linguistic regions in South Asia. However, unlike in other regions where publishing became commercially viable towards the end of the century, the market for vernacular publications did not expand exponentially in the Marathi-speaking region. A few publishers were successful, but many others struggled to survive. Although the idiom of the market was employed, authors and publishers continued to bank on state patronage.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>129</sup>Mir, *Social space of language*, p. 64.

<sup>130</sup>Ulrike Stark, *An empire of books: The Naval Kishore Press and the diffusion of the printed word in colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), pp. 11, 64, 82.

**Cite this article:** Damle, Madhura. 2024. ‘Sacred book, profane print: Print-as-commodity and patronage in colonial western India’. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X24000337>