

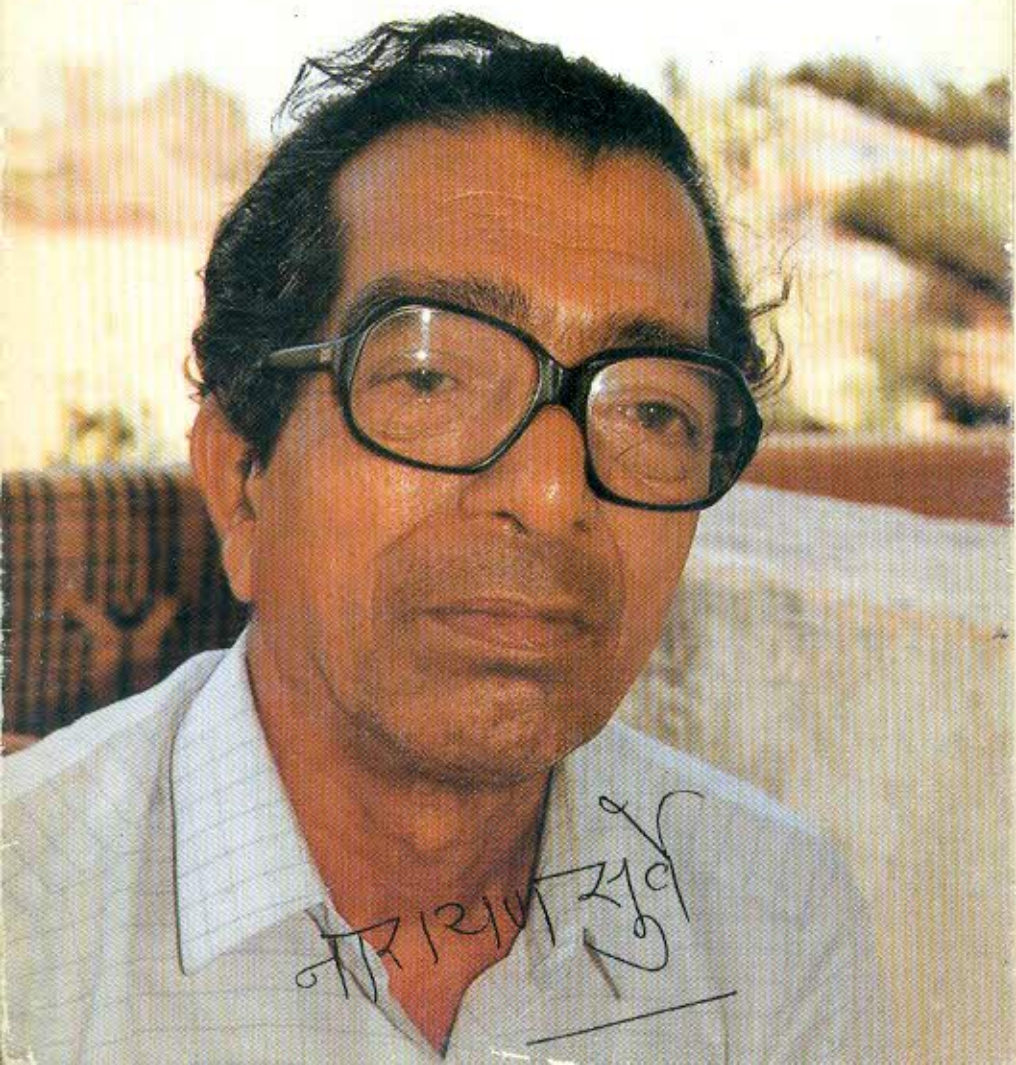
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Sahitya Akademi  
&  
Abhinav Bhashabhyas Kendra

invite you to  
**meet the author**

Narayan Surve





**N**arayan Surve is among the few contemporary Marathi poets whose works have been unreservedly acclaimed by people from various walks of life. His poetry has struck responsive chords in the hearts of workers as well as university academics and pavement-dwellers as also intellectual critics. When Surve's poems started being published in prestigious journals in the late fifties, it was a revelation to the world of Marathi literature that a man who actually lived on pavements and worked in textile mills could produce such profoundly sensitive poetry. But long before Surve was acknowledged by the Marathi middle-class literary elite as a poet of exceptional merit, his songs had already been on the lips of agitating workers and volunteers in social movements. Many of his poems today have passed into legends as folksongs and Surve cannot claim them any more as his personal creation. Those were verses inspired by history, people, the environment and the creative upsurge of the people. The titles of his first three collections of poems appropriately indicate the confidence and fighting spirit of the oppressed in symbols that tran-

sceded the then prevailing jargon of middle class poetry.

In modern Marathi poetry, Surve can truly be regarded as a pioneer of a rebellious school that created space for *Dalit* poetry. *Dalit* here is being used as a broader term inclusive of all the downtrodden and the oppressed irrespective of caste, creed and sex. Surve has never hidden his attachment to Marxism. In fact, he is among the very few poets in Maharashtra who boldly acknowledges that acquaintance with Marxism has helped him understand life and society better and has lent depth, breadth and a compassionate vision to his poetry. And that is why his poetry easily leaves behind the Marxist cliches and directly touches the hearts of prostitutes, middle-class mothers, shop-floor workers and drawing-room intellectuals alike.

In Marathi, there is a long subaltern tradition of songs and poems that expresses the agonies and anguish of the oppressed castes and classes. But they were mostly bound by stoic fatalism and even defeatism that was the hallmark of the social structure then. In Surve's voice, the oppressed found a new note of spirited determination, a readiness to fight for human rights and even the confidence that the future was theirs. It symbolised the post-industrial awakening of the masses in this land.

Surve's was the first distinct voice of the oppressed in modern Marathi poetry much before the emergence of the now

conventional *Dalit* poetry, which finds itself trapped in the clichés of castes and looped itself into an imagery of violence which has lost its impact because of overuse.

Surve's poetry has originated from the red-hot crucible of a factory-shop finding its sustenance on Bombay's disjointed pavements and drawing its inspiration from the metropolitan slums where humanity is the only capital that people have. However, it has refused to confine itself to the congested milieu of its origin and has soared high in the sky to relate itself to the universal concerns of humanity. It reveals to us the human creative spirit which survives against all odds of life, sorrows, troubles, sapping exploitation and disastrous calamities. And indeed, his poetry itself is a melting pot of modern, post-industrial imagery and traditional symbols. It shocked and rendered speechless many sophisticated readers who discovered that the characters in Surve's poetry more often than not identify the half moon with a piece of coarse chapati rather than associate it with

some conventional romantic scene.

It is not that love, romance and tenderness have no place in Surve's poetry. On the contrary, they are all there in abundance. But in Surve's poems, we confront these emotions from a totally different perspective. In two of his masterpieces of conversational poetry, a form which he handles with astounding lucidity and beauty, Surve hurls at us with all primordial turbulence the touching turmoil of a woman's heart. The poems are *Money-order* and *Tumchach Naav Liva...* In both these poems, the woman happens to be a prostitute. In the first she dictates a letter to the near and dear ones back at home, a letter accompanying the money-order. And in the second, she is enrolling her child in a school when she asks the teacher in all innocence to write the latter's name in place of the child's father's. Most often Surve sees the woman as the mother or woman as the primordial female power. But she figures also as a romantic lover. The romance in his poetry always has the background note of a

With Ramesh Mantri, Kusumagraj and K.J. Purohit



factory's rhythm or of the clutter of trams and trains, the cacophony of the slum or the battle cries of an explosive social or political agitation.

Surve's conversational poetry has an innate rhythm and his verses and songs reveal his mastery over language and metre. There is hardly any sickly self-indulgence in his poems, nor is there a loud advertisement of his social commitments. It has the mellow mellifluousness of a romantic heart when it deals with ordinary situations and average emotions. But it sears and bursts with explosive fury when it encounters oppression and exploitation, particularly of women. It hardly leaves a pleasurable ambience behind. It leaves in its wake, a profound cathartic sorrow, a turbulent emotional disturbance and a sorrowful heart wrenched with unknown sadness, and yet full of human pity, hope and determination.

Not only has Surve pioneered a new school in Marathi poetry, he has also signalled the beginning of a new era of modern *Dalit* poetry. His niche in the world of Marathi literature will ever remain unassailable.

Surve's style of reciting poetry has also endeared him to the masses. He fetches crowds of poetry-lovers wherever he goes in Maharashtra. Surve does not know who his genetic parents were. For he was born an orphan, his unfortunate mother having abandoned the infant almost immediately after giving birth. But before the infant fell prey to the canine predators

of Bombay's garbage dumps, it was taken to bosom by a woman, a textile worker herself. Her husband too worked in a mill. The couple gave love and warmth to the child and raised him as their own son. The boy was named Narayan. 'Surve' comes from Gangaram Surve, the father's name. Thus brought up in a textile workers' family, Surve has a profound understanding of the labourer's mind. Being an 'adopted' child, Narayan was showered with love and attention by his mother's women co-workers and his father's colleagues. He knew the mill area like the palm of his hand and worked in various departments of textile mills.

Surve grew with the working class movements of Bombay, imbibed their fighting spirit, has had schooling only upto the primary level and was naturally drawn into the freedom movement at an early age and then towards Marxism. A largely self-taught person, Surve started writing poetry and short stories as a growing child, participated in theatre and sang folksongs - sometimes his own - in chorus groups during freedom movement and workers' agitations, and later in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement. As he never forgets to emphasise, Surve drew his creative inspiration from the working class milieu, from the freedom movement and from the people around him. Some of his poems such as *Dongari Shet Maaza Ga...* constructed as impromptu songs for the purpose of workers' movements, portray with deep sensitivity and



*With wife and grandson*

understanding the authentic agonies and unending struggle for livelihood of the working class people, particularly working women.

Surve worked as a fourth class employee in the Bombay Municipal Corporation and so

did his wife whom he calls his friend, philosopher and guide. He retired as a primary school teacher. Lack of formal education was never a handicap. Today he is on the boards of studies (Marathi) of Pune, Shivaji and Marathwada universities and is the chief editor of Lok Vangmaya Griha of Bombay, a reputed publishing house. His poems have been translated into many Indian and European languages and he has earned several honours for his creative contribution. He also had the honour of chairing the first workers' literary gathering at Pune in 1992. For the young and aspiring poets in Marathi, Narayan Surve is already a legend.

## A Select Bibliography

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SANAD Bombay: Granthali, 1982 144p. 21.5 cm.

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### Translations

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KAVITA SHRAMACHI Bombay: Maharashtra Kamgar Kalyan Mandal, 1993 64p. 21.5 cm.

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*Inaugurating second Kamgar Sahitya Sammelan at Nagpur*

### **Awards and Honours**

1. Maharashtra State Award for *Aisa Ga Mi Brahma* (Poems) 1963 and *Maze Vidyapeeth* (Poems) 1967
2. Soviet Land Nehru Award for *Maze Vidyapeeth* (Poems) 1968 and *Jaheernama* (Poems) 1975
3. Sur Singar Kala Academy's Narsimha Mehta Award for *Maze Vidyapeeth* (Poems) 1969
4. Karad Literary Award and Govt. of India's Award for Outstanding Literary Work *Sanad* (Poems)
5. Best Teacher : Mayor's Award from Bombay Municipal Corporation 1978
6. First Fellowship of Board of Literature and Culture, Maharashtra 1978
7. Visited U.S.S.R. in 1973, 1976 Mauritius in 1985.
8. President, Dalit, Adivasi, Gramin, Stree Muktiwadi and Janavadi Samyukta Sahitya Sammelan at Walve 1989.
9. Kavi Kusumagraj Award by Marathwada Sahitya Parishad 1990
10. Organisation of Understanding and Fraternity, New Delhi's Award 1991
11. Yashwantrao Chavan Pratishthan, Bombay's First Literary and Cultural Award 1992
12. President, First Kamgar Sahitya Sammelan, Pune 1992