



Michael Youngblood, *Cultivating Community: Interest, Identity, and Ambiguity in an Indian Social Mobilization*

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CULTIVATING COMMUNITY is an intricately woven, careful analysis of an agrarian social movement in rural Maharashtra called Shetkari Samgathna (*śetkari saṃgathnā*) written by an insider. Michael Youngblood deconstructs hegemonic prescriptions about successful social movements generated from without that are based on theoretical presuppositions that he terms “progressive solidification.” He discusses the cultural significance of symbols that produce a hinge for multiple, interconnected layers, positing the movement’s structural multivocality, to reveal sliding scales of converging interests within Shetkari Samgathna that produce meaning at the interstices of shared symbols. He proposes that this multiple and plural cultural imagery constitutes a medium of cohesive social action and leadership that allows for the formation of an alternative and mobilized social identity in rural Maharashtra.

The book describes how social identity encompassed by Shetkari Samgathna (often ritually expressed) charts anticolonial and postcolonial agitation when distinguishing between dual and juxtaposed imageries. The juxtaposition of a toiling and virtuous India (*bhārat*) that is ruled by a non-Brahmin figure titled the *baḷī rājā*, and exploited by a Brahminical India controlled by the black British or *kāḷe imgraz* reveals layered religious, social, and historical imagery to contest entitlement, privilege, and power.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first introductory chapter briefly describes Shetkari Samgathna and the role played by its leader Sharad Joshi, while outlining the image of an alternative, exploited farmer’s India that is conceptualized as *bhārat* and *baḷī-rājya* (Baḷī’s kingdom). Youngblood ponders the various theoretical and interpretative frameworks that can prove useful for understanding Shetkari Samgathna without running the additional risk of deploying too many assumptions, presuppositions, or textbook notions leading to progressive solidification. Identifying traps in theoretical presuppositions or progressive solidification, the author describes how movements are misunderstood as a narrow range of converging interests that provide voice to

the most prominent ideology among participants, or more problematically erase the rationale of other participants, who are ideologically less empowered. Therefore, while agitating for higher prices constitutes an important Shetkari Samgathna demand, other demands create multiple variables of overlapping interests that are also constitutive of the movement, described as having a mass base of more than 500,000 participants. Exploring interpretive theories such as proctological theory and frames theory, Youngblood discards these as useful but nevertheless romantic and fixed within certain immovable assumptions that are notional of community life. Raising further questions about concepts such as, in his terms, “claste” (intersections between caste and class) or subalternity, the author discusses how the concentration on converging interests within such theories, disinvests the movement from the divergence of interests that he encountered during fieldwork. Instead, he prefers a sliding scale of interpretation that allows for interests to slide in opposing directions, as suggested by John and Jean Comaroff, along with Stanley Fish’s concept of a dialogic community that theorizes the emergence of a social movement through communication.

The second chapter, “Contours of Community and Place,” details the profile of Shetkari Samgathna, which is a linguistic and geographic Marathi social movement enjoying preponderance in the Marathwada and Vidarbha agrarian regions of rural Maharashtra. Participating villages, areas, and communities here are considered *baḷī-rājya* (or the kingdom of King Baḷī), which is central to the movement’s characterization as exploited by Brahminical forces. This chapter concentrates on cultural symbols as important for mass rural, non-Brahminical, agrarian mobilization within Shetkari Samgathna. The author delineates the role of the *vārkarī sampradāya* (or the *bhakti* (devotion) of Vithoba at Pandharpur), the claiming of King Shivaji as a Shudra king by Shetkari Samgathna, and the significance of Jyotiba Phule’s non-Brahmin movement that propels *baḷī-rājya* as the protagonist of the hard-working, poor, and exploited farmers of *baḷī-rājya*.

The third chapter, “The Field of Signs,” describes Sharad Joshi’s leadership of the movement, his communication of Shetkari Samgathna’s agenda through written pamphlets, and the headquarters of the movement at Angarmaḷa. Furthermore, various symbols of interest that are central to the posters and materials used by the movement are analyzed. Youngblood discusses how the seemingly singular demand of “price” is multivocal and representational, since questions of wages among landless laborers are of paramount importance for the movement as well, in which price is transformed into a metaphor for control over rural livelihoods by outsiders. Youngblood further analyzes the self-referential figure of the farmer (*śetkarī*) as a “sign” for the agricultural community, despite differing landed interests, wherein agrarianism is united with the identity of *kaṣṭakarī* (one who toils). The denigration of agrarianism by Brahminical elites from western Maharashtra symbolized by Vaman (who according to Puranic myths, stamped on Baḷī and usurped his kingdom) becomes embroiled in a collective play of symbols that include the *śetkarī*’s *vāri* (pilgrimage) to Vithoba at Pandharpur, thus expressing a desire to reinstate King Shivaji’s justice for *baḷī-rājya*.

While the interplay and mutual communication of symbols ensures inclusivity and the continuing unity of Shetkari Samgathna’s ideal of liberation in the face of black colonization, it also ensures differentiation of interests within the movement, as shared symbols expand the canopy of experience among its participants. Youngblood “peels the onion,” as he puts it, of the misperceived single-issue movement in chapter four,

“Dialogues of Interest and Identity“, where he investigates how various diverse *śetkarī* interests and identities find place in the movement. These diverse interests are posited as a shifting set of hybrid identities that are exemplified by two case studies of Perugaon and Dorlapur villages, where the following interests are identified as important: SBP (*svataṃtra bhārat pakṣa*), a political platform for rural leaders; exposing corruption through the Q movement (quit corruption); and regional autonomy demands for Marathwada and Vidarbha. Other issues include women-led (*śitā śetī*) forms of alternative agriculture; registering women as property owners; promoting women’s representation in village *pañcāyats*; cooperative marketing schemes; land development companies; infrastructural demands; compensatory demands; and temperance initiatives. Finally, labor and Dalit (formerly “Untouchable”) rights initiatives led to the declaration of participating villages as *baḷī-rājya gāv* (villages), consolidating rural and caste interests.

The fifth chapter, “Bali Will Rise: Dialogues of Interest and Identity, Continued,” is concerned with the *baḷī-rājā* as the figurehead or protagonist-leader of the Shetkari Samgathna. The author discusses the *baḷī-rājā* as a symbol of rural Marathi subalternity, and he explores various textual references to Baḷī’s defeat at the hands of Brahminical forces that result in Shetkari Samgathna’s battle against Brahminism. The *etkarī*’s narrative and engagement with rituals, such as the *ghaṭasthāpanā* (jug establishment) during the Navaratri festival reflects claims of a victorious Baḷī’s return to defeat a future Vaman. The ritual is described as explaining how the *śetkarī*’s alliance with Baḷī results in the boycott of Brahminical victory, signified by Diwali festivities. The chapter explores how farmers burn effigies of Vaman to mark their anti-Diwali politics and uphold Baḷī as their *śetkarī* king, calling for an increase in *baḷī-rājya* villages, and intensifying their claim of Marathwada and Vidarbha as the *baḷī-rājya* domain. Finally, Shetkari Samgathna hails Sharad Joshi as a rural insider, venerating him as the mythical Baḷī, the anti-Brahmin demon king who is the leader of the movement.

Discussing cultural idioms surrounding Sharad Joshi’s veneration in Shetkari Samgathna as an insider, a representative leader, and as Baḷī himself, the author provides field narratives that culturally characterize Sharad Joshi’s leadership as strong, or as *śīl*, a leadership that is celebrated for its actions being consistent with opinion. Moving to his concluding chapter, Youngblood reflects on convergences between the nature of participation and the dialogic diversity of participants, just as he explores the relationship between perceptions of divergence between leaders and leadership. According to the author, Sharad Joshi’s deification as Baḷī remains metaphoric for change within the movement, rather than a mark of the movement’s success, wherein Joshi’s projection as divine cements the cultural association between leadership and divinity, rather than a perception of leaders being supernatural.

Youngblood’s anthropological analysis of agrarian mobilization in rural Maharashtra that intersects caste, class, and religious fervor with women’s participation, all within the frameworks of nativist emancipation is quite unique and one of a kind. Academic enterprises about modern mobilization in rural Maharashtra, apart from studies such as QUACK’S (2012), are indeed rare and refreshing. Youngblood declares his interests in analyzing social mobilization from the beginning pages of his book, where he reveals his research compulsions to lie in the increasing valence of social movements in modern global times, social movements that have been inadequately understood, such as the Arab Spring.

Youngblood's book is a tremendous pleasure to read. Yet although his subject is indeed rare, and though the book is well articulated, sensitive, and thoroughly analyzed, I wondered in the end, whether readers might not gain a deeper understanding of Marathi rural life through theories of emotional communities and emotive labor (PLAMPER 2010). This is especially so since the author uses physical concepts to describe the *śetkarī*'s experience of the movement, such as toil (*kaṣṭa*), labor (*majūr*), and sweat (*ghām*). The reward of understanding divergent interests through emotional experiences could only heighten the understanding of the movement as an emotional community with consenting and dissenting voices. I would deeply recommend this thoughtful and well-written book for an audience interested in rural and agrarian studies, global social movements and their underlying strategies of action for empowerment, and sociopolitical history and anthropology of Maharashtra in particular and India in general.

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