

Over 300 years ago Maratha families migrated to South India. Their descendants continue to live there, forming a peculiar community. They have assimilated South Indian culture yet they continue to consider themselves 'Maharashtrians'.
ASHOK GOPAL reports



Shivaji's Forgotten Cousins

IN MADRAS and other parts of South India they are known as 'Raojis'. They speak a language which many Maharashtrians may not instantly recognize as their mother tongue: the pronunciation veers towards Kannada or Tamil; the words are largely archaic (*phashte* instead of *sakal*); Tamil, Kannada or Telugu names for vegetables and cereals have replaced Marathi terms; the feminine gender is largely replaced by the neuter (*gaadj aala*).

To make themselves more accessible to South Indians they have long dropped 'tongue-twisting' surnames like Dadphale and Puntambekar for

the simple and non-controversial 'Rao'. At home they cook typically South Indian food with minor variations and most of them speak Tamil, Telugu or Kannada with an assurance and control that any South Indian would admire.

They are descendants of Maratha families who migrated to the South over 300 years ago.

Many amongst the younger generations have no inkling of their original family names or their 'native place' in Maharashtra and very few of them can read or write Marathi; most have visited Maharashtra only briefly.

But for all that, they still consider themselves 'Maharashtrians', and,

proud of their culture, they continue to follow the Marathi (Datey) *panchang* and observe all Maharashtrian festivals with a vigour which is truly astounding: in Pune or Bombay *satyanarayan puja* is usually completed within an hour; in a typical Raoji household in Madras it lasts for at least two hours.

Most importantly, the majority of them have chosen to arrange marriages within the community (often with first cousins) rather than with local Tamils, Kannadigas or Telugus.

Who are these quaint people and from where do they derive their peculiar resilience as well as adaptability? Very few Maharashtrians know that

the Raojis played an important role in shaping South Indian culture, especially the tradition of Carnatic music; very few are even aware of their existence or how they landed up in the South in the first place.

The Raojis are the product of a historical aberration the likes of which could possibly have occurred only in the tumultuous years of medieval India.

In 1636 Chatrapati Shivaji's father Shahaji Bhosale, a commahder in the Bijapur Sultan's army, captured the fort of Gandikota in present day Cuddapah (Andhra Pradesh) and eventually secured for himself a large *jagir* over north Karnataka including present-day Bangalore, Kolar and Tumkur. This was the first major instance of a Maratha presence in the South (Maratha families had earlier been employed in the administrative set-ups of the Deccan Muslim states as well as the Hindu empire of Vijaynagar).

For nearly 25 years Shahaji lorded it over his southern *jagir* with the authority of an independent chieftain: an inscription dated 1657 refers to him as '*Ajarka Khan Maharaja Rajasri Shahajiraja Saheb*'. In 1664 Shahaji died an accidental death and Venkoji, his son by his second wife Tuka Bai Mohite (Shivaji being his son by his first wife Jijabai), took over the *jagir*. In 1675 Venkoji advanced to Tanjore (Thanjavur) in the deep South and threw off his nominal allegiance to the Bijapur Sultan. Venkoji's reign in Tanjore marks the origin of the Raojis — Maratha officials in the administration who learnt to adapt to local conditions and slowly but inevitably lost their links with their homeland.

Although not particularly distinguished by military or administrative abilities Venkoji and his successors were savants and connoisseurs of the fine arts. Venkoji himself is credited with some literary abilities and his son and successor Shahaji was a versatile writer in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit. So were his other sons Sarfoji and Tukoji who also succeeded to the throne. Tukoji in particular was a great linguist with command over Tamil, Marathi and Persian.

Under the patronage of the Tanjore Maratha kings the city became the single most influential centre of Carnatic music. The father of the famous

Tamil songster-saint Thyagayya was a court musician and Thyagayya was himself born in 1759, six kilometres from the Tanjore Marathas' palace. Direct Maratha influence in Carnatic music is attested by the presence of instruments like the *gottu vadya* and the *jaltarang*. Tulajaji who ascended to the throne in 1763 wrote a comprehensive account of Carnatic music prevalent in his time, the *Sangita Saramritha*, a recommended textbook for music students in the South. The most important Maratha contribution to South India was undoubtedly the *kirtan*; until the advent of Maharashtrian *buvas* or *kirtankaars* the South had *bhagvatars* giving religious discourses without musical accompaniment.

The Tanjore rajas' Saraswathi Mahal library in their palace houses several priceless manuscripts including *bakhars*, *lavanis*, puranic works, poems, songs, dramas and stories written mostly in verse form in the language and style of Ramdas, the Maratha kingdom's patron saint. Significantly, the list of identified authors includes several women.

In 1855 Shivaji, the last of the Tanjore rajas, died without a male heir and the territory was annexed by the East India Company. Then followed an era of economic ruin. The late E. Vinayaka Rao, a prominent Madras advocate who was born within a stone's throw of the Tanjore palace in 1891, described the transition eloquently: "Some of the maharani wives of the late H.H. Shivaji Maharaja, the last ruler of Tanjore, were living (at the turn of the century) in seclusion in the palace, enjoying their modest pensions and decent incomes from their private properties. Several other members of the royal family were also living in the palace...a few elephants were still swaying in the outer courtyard. A few learned pundits were working in the Saraswathi Mahal library, deciphering and copying the famous old manuscripts in palm leaves and crumbling old country paper. In another suite of rooms, dusty old record bundles were arranged and rearranged and a few clerks were leisurely examining the musty old papers and cadjans to unearth the palace copy of some ancient grant or pedigree or order of precedence or point of ceremonial.

"One after another the old ranis passed away. So did many other members of the royal family. The end of an establishment meant the destitution of a large number of families of clerks, dependents and poor relatives....one after another the noble houses went down, their mansions were mortgaged, their lands were alienated, and their sons and daughters were driven to a life of chill penury...a good many families had lost all and were leaving Tanjore for good in search of employment elsewhere".

The 1931 Census reported that South Indian Maharashtrians numbered a little over two lakhs, forming 0.38 per cent of the then population of South India. Today it is estimated that there are about five lakh Raojis in South India. Of these, Kshatriyas form the majority, with Brahmins and scheduled castes and tribes like *kolis* forming 10 and 25 per cent of the community respectively. Most of the Brahmins and a large number of Kshatriyas have long migrated from Tanjore to cities like Madras, Bangalore, Chittoor, Anantpur, Trichy, Vellore and Coimbatore. There are a few Raojis in Pune and Bombay; some have even migrated to the United States.

Shorn of their powers and deprived of their livelihood after the British annexation of Tanjore, the Raojis were reduced to a peculiar form of penury: they were not rich, yet as former



Prayer room in a typical Raoji home.



Parshuram Rao: proud to be a Maharashtrian

rulers they could not beg. To most of the Brahmin and Kshatriya Raojis who had no land of their own, education offered the only mode of economic advancement.

Over the last 100 years highly educated Raojis have risen to commanding posts in government service. One of them, C.R. Krishnaswami Rao Sahib, was Cabinet Secretary; V.S.R. Bhosale, a direct descendant of the princely family is presently Deputy Manager (Traffic), in the Madras Port Trust, and P.B. Jeevan Rao, Honorary Secretary of the Brahmins' Mahratta Education Fund, Madras, is Assistant Director, National Productivity Council. There are others who are reputed advocates and teachers.

Yet if one looks at the community as a whole, these Raojis are an exception rather than the rule. Raojis, especially those of the lower castes who chose to remain in their settlements in the deep South, have virtually merged with local lower castes and tribes; some have joined the ranks of nomads, and overall they constitute an 'economically backward class'. Not surprisingly, the Tamil Nadu State Government has deemed that all South Indian Maharashtrians are eligible for a backward class certificate.

*Some Raojis allege that there is a subtle form of discrimination practised against them. Capt. K.B. Nowlay, a member of the Managing Committee of the Chatrapati Shivaji D.A.V. School, Kodambakkam, the only school in Madras that runs Marathi

classes, points out that a request for land on lease for the school's expansion programme has been pending with the Tamil Nadu State Government for years. However, he is quick to add that the Maharashtra State Government has also not been particularly helpful: it has yet to respond to the school's demand for funds to purchase a van and pay the salaries of a qualified Marathi teacher.

This predicament is symbolic of the Raojis' contemporary ethos as a whole. Caught between strong sentiments towards Maharashtra and the Southern states in which they reside, they hold steadfastly to their original culture even as their existence continues to be unacknowledged by a large number of Maharashtrians, and the pressures of modern day living draw the younger generation away from the community's mores: T.S. Narayana Rao, retired Esso engineer, performs *pooja* every day even as he admits that *desh abhiman* is at a low in Maharashtra where scrupulous adherence to religious practices has largely been side-tracked, and Mahadev Shastri, one of the last surviving Brahmin Raoji *purohits* in Triplicane, Madras, complains of a paucity of essential sacred texts even as he admits that a growing number of the younger generation have chosen to marry outside their community and forfeit religious observances.

Nor is there any serious possibility of 'going back' to their roots. Three hundred years of separation have wedged an unbridgeable chasm be-



tween the Raojis and their homeland. Although a few Raojis have settled in Maharashtra, P.B. Jeevan Rao candidly admits that most of the community feels a 'certain diffidence' when encountering 'the Bombay group of Maharashtrians'; the 'peculiarity' of the Raoji language and their lack of command over the script seem to be a major causative factor.

Moreover, in most cases, original family ties have simply withered off: T.S. Narayana Rao trekked to his native village of Satana in Nasik district, only to find that there were no Brahmin families left in the area, let alone his own.

Nor are there any compulsive reasons to come back to Maharashtra. As Dahiphule Parshuram Rao, reputed town of Nagar, Madras, says: "I have an established business here. I have no feelings of inferiority or superiority."

Parshuram Rao, however, adds that he considers himself, first and last, a Maharashtrian. "I am proud to be a Maharashtrian, and all my support will always go to Maharashtrian people."

Most Raojis echo this sentiment with equal intensity. But unfortunately noble sentiments are not enough to preserve a community. Capt. Nowale identifies the root problem neatly: "In the South there is no economic advantage to be had by learning Marathi." That simple fact determines the state of the Raoji community at present, as well as its future.



The Chatrapati Shivaji D.A.V. School, Madras