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 (gaadi 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 Maharaashtra festivals with a vigour which is truly astounding: in Pune or Bombay satyanarayan pyja is usually completed within an hour; in a typical Ranji 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 conflation of 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 commander 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 setup of the Deccan Muslim states as well as the Hindu empire of Vijayanagar).

For nearly 2b years Shahaji lorded it over his southern jagir with the authority of an independent chieftain: an inscription dated 1657 refers to him as 'Ajanka Khan Maharaja Raja Sri Shahajiraja Saheb'. In 1664 Shahaji died in an accidental death and Venkoji, his son by his second wife Tuka Bai Mohite (Shivaji being his son by his first wife Dijabali), 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 Sarfaji 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 Thiyagayya was a court musician and Thiyagayya 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 jalil. Thulajji who ascended to the throne in 1763 wrote a comprehensive account of Carnatic music prevalent in his time, the Sangita Saramitha, 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.

Prayer room in a typical Raoji home.

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 Brahmans and scheduled castes and tribes like kolis forming 10 and 25 per cent of the community respectively. Most of the Brahmans 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.

3bourn 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...
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 salary of a qualified Marathi teacher.

This predicament is symbolic of the Raoui’s contemporary status 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 acknowledged 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 CSE officer, performs puja every day even as he admits that desh abhimana is at a low in Maharashtra where scrupulous adherence to religious practices has largely been side-tracked, and Maharashtrian identity continues to thrive. Even so, he admits that a growing number of the younger generation have chosen to marry outside their community and forfeit religious observances.

Yet it is there an ambivalence of ‘going back’ to their roots. Three hundred years of separation have wedged an unbridgeable chasm between the Raouis and their homeland. Although a few Raouis have settled in Maharashtra, P.B. Jeevan Rao candidly admits that most of the community feels a ‘certain diffidence’ when encountering the ‘more militant group of Maharashtrians’, the ‘peculiarity’ of the Raouji 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 compelling reasons to come back to Maharashtra. Raouji remark: "Pothar, Raouji says: "I have no established residence 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 Raouis 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 us here by learning Marathi.” That simple fact determines the state of the Raoui community as present, as well as its future.

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