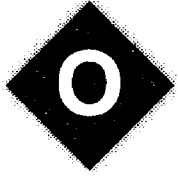


Poko : The Native Juvenile Comes of Age

- Dr. Kiran Budkuley



Over the last couple of decades, the Konkani Novel has been making giant strides towards new goals in terms of generic complexity, thematic enrichment as well as technical innovation. Taking that effort a brisk step ahead is the maiden novel, by Nanda D. Borkar, Poko. This enticing tale of the gritty protagonist's juvenile struggles is a path breaking work in many ways. For one, the novel re-instates the marginal, native juvenile where he belongs at the centre of reckoning. Two, it gives reassuring evidence of the first major bildungsroman in Konkani – the novel of the protagonist's growing up. And, hopefully, if the novelist persists in his literary travails in like vein – as he has already indicated in his foreword 'Man-uktavnni' – this work may well be the prelude to another venture of growth...! This time of the novelist as an artist... a prelude to a future kunstlerroman in Konkani.

Despite such complex generic potential tucked away into its modest narrative, Poko is a simple novel that can easily double up as children's literature – that demands serious adult reading too. It seems to be a homespun version of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. Yet it owes almost nothing to these world masterpieces. Infact, there is no reason, even to conjecture that its author has so much as an acquaintance with these literary milestones. If he did, well, it does not become apparent anywhere in the text. Thus, it is to the credit of Nanda Borkar, that his Poko, arresting and original as he is as a literary creation, calls for comparison with some of the best juvenile characters in

literature – be they the ‘firang’ Hucks and Toms or their ‘ desi avtaar’ such as ‘Gotya’ or ‘Chandu’.

Poko is a poignant story of a poor, low-born, but sharp and ambitious little boy. Born to the kullwadi farmhands Dattu and Shantu, Poko as his name suggests has to overcome the hollowness and the infirmity that his social station bestows on him. Eldest of a brood of five-six siblings, he grows up under the steely discipline and tender affection of his illiterate but intelligent mother. Headstrong and insistent, she wants the best for her children – within the circumstances. Pressed by the compulsions of a hand to mouth existence, she is at times exploitative, domineering and a little self-centered. But it is all in the interest of her family. She has a hawk-eyed watch over poko and holds him in the iron grip of her care and control.

Dattu on the other hand is a devout hardworking and straightforward person who suffers from lack of education and insight. His aim is to make Poko an efficient, capable and trustworthy farmhand like himself. His lack of vision and a daring is unacceptable to Shantu who believes in the wisdom of learning by example. She sets a high store by education but is unable to provide Poko with much formal education beyond the 1st Class. Yet she is pragmatic in consenting to Dattu’s proposal of sending Poko away to Panaji as a ‘domestic help’ in the absence of a better deal.

Travails of an eight year Poko begin at this tender age. His journey is of a versatile nature, where hard work, separation from family, unemployment and adventure play a constant coil and shuffle. His masters are diverse and strange! From affection to exploitation, from trust to treachery, from neglect to concern and from reliance to dishonesty, Poko has a wide ranging emotional and societal experience. From domestic chores to mine labour, to shop assistant to waiter, to petty contractor to mine supervisor Poko’s modes of seeking out a livelihood are varied, tedious and demanding.

Warm, affable and keen, the lad makes intense friendships with nature as with a few well-meaning souls. One of his friends is instrumental in fostering his dormant but strong urge to study further. In his late teens, he manages to clear the primary grade in Portuguese education. After liberation his unassisted, single-handed quest drives this modern day Ekalavya to fulfill his dreams but not without untold disappoints and unsung hardships.

As said before, Poko is a simple tale but with a compels novelistic structure which conceals under its plain façade a complicated thematic undercurrent. This is yet to be explored by the novelist. Seen from the innocent eyes of marginal consciousness of

an unselfconscious village lad, the narrative becomes and unintended document of its age and ethos. Yet filtered through the perceptive vision of the author, this tale told in retrospect by the adult mind of the protagonist takes on a different level of authenticity even as the fictionalised biography of Poko. The reader cannot help recollecting the author's candid observation in the foreword that " It had mattered little to him during the conception and rendering of 'Poko' as to what generic visage the work would assume. It could be an anthology of literary essays or a novel or even assume the contours of an autobiography for all [he] would care..."

An important dimension of Poko's narrative, apart from it being a sociological document is its potent ecological perspective. It is one of the best in Konkani literature to date and that when Konkani writing boasts of some of the most intense or rural portrayals and pastoral kinships. The one feature that marks Poko apart from other 'nature' writers and poets in his viewpoint on man-nature bonding, his sense of commitment to nature and his realisation of the indelible inter-dependence of the two. The novelist's keen eye for science beauty only matches his spontaneous description. And his pensive, tender attitude adds a sobering mood to the celebration of beauty and bounty of Nature. One finds in him that timeless awe of nature and an inherent devotion so uncommon in a contemporary educated mind.

Probably this feature of the novelist's personality is born of his philosophical bent of mind and his preference for profundity over ebullience and for discretion over enthusiasm. Even to pick a berry from a bunch of Bimals hanging from a branch is anathema to poko as it would dislodge another few from the bough and disfigure the beauty and proportion of the natural blossom. Driven by this same depth of thought, Poko in hindsight offers psychological as well as philosophical comments on life and individuals in general. Sometimes, his observations about child psychology, pedagogy and discipline provide the reader with food for thought. However, at times his observation assume the form of the author's intrusion into the narrative and cause an aesthetic blockade. Fortunately, such occurrences are not frequent.

A noteworthy feature of Poko is the novelist's visible struggle to fight natural societal biases and prejudices born of them. He is particularly cautious not to give free rein to his caste biases. Coming from one from the deprived section of society and faced with discrimination, exploitation from the powerful and privileged higher castes, the restraint and objectivity in analysing notions of caste hierarchy by the author is commendable. In a lesser writer, this could become a unilateral punching bag of sorts-as it often happen in contemporary writing. But Borkar is careful to be judicious

wherever possible.

Yet, in a few instances his biased interpretation gets the better of him. For instance, early in the novel, he justifies the names of himself and his siblings – Poko, Pisu, Sukdo, Guru etc – as natural in a caste – conscious society that would view literary/ artistic names as the prerogative or monopoly of the higher caste. But he overlooks the facts that the parents of Poko have names that are common in the higher echelons of society. More over, Poko calls his father ‘Papa’ to which no one seem to object. In fact Tatyia is ‘surprised’ to know that he calls his father ‘Papa’. On this backdrop, author’s contention that the children’s names were such because of societal disapproval does not hold water. In fact, Poko’s friend has a normal contemporary name – ‘Pandu’. True, the abbreviations rankle but the taboo on names seems to be a thing of the past.

Poko has a vivid portrayal of the life of the poor and the illiterate. It sheds light on their food, costumes, festivals, household utensils, farming implements, fishing and mining activity, poverty and the pangs of hunger, unemployment, displacement and eviction. It is a work that upholds the simple ethical code of the uneducated and the god fearing. Yet, it also unfolds the villainy and the chicanery of the needy elements among the poor. Poko faces exploitation not only at the house of Kaka bhatkar or Anna Khanvate but more grossly in his own aunt’s house. Just as the village master discriminates against him, so do his well-to-do relatives. Whether it is Shivdas or Domingo or Jairam they are all out to take advantage of Poko’s weaknesses or losses. Similarly, when it comes to showing him affection, trust or giving him help, individuals across social ladder respond to that positive and the loving streak in Poko.

Poko is essence is a fine specimen of humanity. He is quick to learn and eager to please. Overwork seems to be his second nature. Diligence, trustworthiness and persistence are some of his sterling qualities. Extremely fond of drama, proficient in local music and a leading light of the Shigmo-mell, Poko is the quintessential native juvenile captured by Nanda Borkar in all his vagaries and moods. Some shades of his character, the author has found in the world around but some hews of his nature come straight from the core of Nanda’s heart. That is what makes Poko an accomplished work just like his creator’s pen.

(This article was written on the occasion of the release of Nanda Borkar’s Poko)

