



**SUDHAKAR GAIDHANI**

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***Mahaavaakya (The Jumbo Utterance): An Epic in a Class by Itself***

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This article seeks to explore the place of *Mahaavaakya* in literature in general and in Marathi literature alone. As translator of Book I of the epic under discussion, which was titled *Devdoot*, and also translator of parts of Book IV, I can see Gaidhani's epic in a different perspective. Since my study of Marathi poetry is rather limited, though I am a little bit exposed to English and European literature, I would see *Mahaavaakya* in that perspective and would not be quite prudent of me to speak of the place of *Mahaavaakya* in Marathi literature. This paper aims to describe, analyze and categorize the epic rather than judge it.

We assume at the outset that the term "*mahaakaavya*" in Marathi and the term epic in English are synonymous. Now, according to the Chamber's Dictionary, an epic is "a long narrative poem that relates heroic events in an elevated style". The American Webster

Dictionary says, “an epic is a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero”. The Oxford dictionary calls an epic “a long poem about the actions of great men and women or about a nation’s history”. So, these major dictionaries are broadly quite agreed as to what an epic is. Here, let us be aware that the term “epic” is sometimes loosely applied in literature to novels conceived on a grand scale, on a big canvas and having some sort of resemblance to the proper epics.

NEKOPIRATI

My first submission on going through the work under discussion is that *Mahaavaakya* is not an epic in an extended sense. I rather think that this work has earned the epithet in its own right, in the now-mainstream meaning of the term. I am aware that some scholars consider this to be a debatable point and that is exactly the reason we are discussing the work in this fashion. That is also the reason I have titled this paper as “*Mahaavaakya*: An Epic in a Class by Itself”. We may consider this angle, that sometimes an original work of art extends the traditional definition of a literary form, and this is what Gaidhani’s work does. It will be my endeavour to bring out what kind of epic this work is. To tell that right away would be to let the cat out of the bag. We don’t tell the end of a story at the start, do we? So, please bear with me, please be with me.

Applying the western criteria of an epic, we see that *Mahaavaakya* has a larger-than-life hero in the angel bird Devdoot. Wordsworth, while commenting on the epic hero, says that he is ten feet tall. This statement comes in very handy to us. Devdoot was published in 1981, overtly describing a huge bird lying blood-spattered on a desert island and spotted by several birds flying overhead. So, its physical size is large, a symbolic representation of its expansive reach in space, and a life-span of several centuries. Coincidentally, in 1987 the newspapers reported that the fossil of the largest flying seabird had just been found, with a wing-span of about nineteen feet, way larger than the birds we see today. The description of Gaidhani’s angel bird was sent to the scientific community, and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington was quite thrilled. It wrote that “it is a rare occasion when science and poetry can meet with such a magnificent blend of happy chance”. The word they used was “serendipity”.

Devdoot is a cosmically travelled creature having a preternatural life-span, and its experience and the conclusions drawn from the experience, are the meat of the poem; what the angel has gone through is by no means ordinary. The ease and authority with which this hero, in his own way, comments on a range of subjects from the life of a village virgin to the nature of the ultimate power of the universe, may be taken into account while settling the question as to this poem’s epic status. So, perhaps no reader of the book, whether he agrees with the opinions of Devdoot or not, would deny the hero a jumbo status.

Says Devdoot in the opening part of this opus:

I dismissed in a superannuated dirge  
all the defunct prayers while the forlorn footprints  
of the directionless sailors of old were being gently buried  
in a massive drift of sand. Even now I hear  
the lip-to-ear dialogues from alien planets  
of rishis and of saints.

So, the hero *is* gigantic in conception.

Now we come to the style part of the work. An epic's style is universally required to be an elevated style. Does *Mahaavaakya* have it? The answer is, yes. Not that every line of this long work is in majestic verse. One may note that this is not so even in the works that are indubitably approved as epics in the traditional sense. And when we have an epic that dwells at length on the life of the common man, the man in the street, the villager, the farmer, the unlettered person, how can a high style be expected all through? But the general tenor of the work shows a strongly poetic style, using rare, literary words and a plethora of figures of speech. The style runs a gamut from the conversational to sublime.

Let us sample some lines both Marathi and English to see how far we can substantiate the above claim. As translator, I would have hesitated to quote myself, but am emboldened by two things: one, Gaidhani himself has totally approved my translation; second, an American literary scholar and poet Elizabeth Gibson who is by her own admission quite reserved in her judgement, has used the word "excellent" for what she read, quoting extensively what she liked specially. These are the reasons I quote myself in English as a representation of Gaidhani's style.

If *Mahaavaakya* is not entirely in lofty style, it is both because the subject-matter of it so requires, and because Gaidhani has his nose near to the fabric of ordinary life. Milton was

one epic writer who sustained a high style throughout his twelve books of *Paradise Lost*. Result, no admirer of his, a critic has said to say, would have liked it to be longer. Besides, we are living in highly democratized times, and any literary work which is for a wider readership and not meant to be an exclusive domain of some few readers, which is not meant to be a cloister poem, so to say, would come down to the style of the spoken language. Gaidhani maintains a balance between high style and plain style, which is indeed very well.

Now we come to the third criterion of defining or rather recognizing an epic: it has to be a narrative poem detailing the deeds of a hero or heroes or a nation's history. Anyone familiar with the work will say that it is far from a one-thread narrative of events of the hero's life. Indeed it is not. What is the content of *Devdoot* and *Mahaavaakya*? Some autobiographical statements of Devdoot the angel bird, some events from his life from the time of Christ (whose contemporary and disciple Devdoot is), some of his formative experiences, and a lot of things he has seen and learnt from. Where do we fit this into the definition of an epic? **The answer to this is that *Mahaavaakya* has Devdoot's consciousness acting as the unifying thread.** What binds the book is the utterances of an assertive individual who has a finality of a unique kind. And it comes from an author with humble beginnings as a dishwasher in a village eatery who has the confidence to say he can conceive Devdoot.

Suppose you pushed the earth on – Where would you park it in space?

Your neighbor, your friend, a stranger may come up suddenly as your enemy, also as your deliverer. So, man is angel to man, and when he plays that role, he is to be called Devdoot. He is not a heavenly creature with white wings, in the literal sense, as often portrayed. Interestingly, since most of us have that kind of a picture of an angel, Gaidhani may have conceived the central fable scene of a big bird talking to smaller birds. But the situation is one hundred percent earthly – human life, human concerns and so on.

Just after defining an angel, Gaidhani in the next verse says that man is man's mother and man is man's butcher, and when he is the latter, he is a messenger of the Lord of Death Yamraj. In the opening scene of the epic, Devdoot addresses the birds saying that he would soon be carried away by the messengers of death.

That is to say, the angel is subject to laws of mortality and finally to be taken away by the agents of Yama.

This I cited to make a major point. When considering *Mahaavaakya* as an epic, we cannot draw parallels with epics of divinity, whether Indian or English or European, but rather we have to seek what similarities there are with epics of humanity. Therefore, once again, Milton's *Paradise Lost* would be a false trail for the students of *Mahaavaakya*. *Paradise Lost* is about the temptation and disobedience of Adam and Eve by Satan and their expulsion from heaven, and eventual deliverance by Christ. *Mahaavaakya* does not conform to any established religion and lays down no Ten Commandments. It talks rather of the defeated scriptures, of creating your own gospel. It is replete with worldly wisdom that a reader would be inclined to accept according to his/her taste.

Another major epic of English literature is *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth, an autobiographical account of how terror and beauty of Nature (N capital) moulded the poet's sensibility. In *Mahaavaakya*, while the narrator's "I" is very much there, we find very little of his personal experiences, and hence it differs from *The Prelude* in a major way. Again, Devdoot's personal experiences are not stated in a chronological way. All the same, these experiences are worth noting.

Devdoot is manifestly a preceptor, a guru, for he compares himself with the Buddha and Christ, towards the end of Canto I, in certain details. The opening line of the poem is: "O seafaring birds hunting for pearl-feed!" Pearls are a traditional image for pieces of wisdom, and Devdoot is interested in sharing his store of wisdom with those who are equally interested in having it. When the giver and receiver of wisdom are matched in their eagerness in their respective roles, the best of learning becomes possible.

The question that anyone would ask is, from whom did Devdoot learn his great lessons. Our hero confesses this in Canto II, when he recounts his extended dialogue with Christ. Let us have it. Here Christ is a mature wise teacher, Devdoot the wide-eyed child.

Last time I saw Lord Jesus behind  
Jerusalem's holy wall, and well, He heard my  
childish prattle and smiled at himself.

With folded hands I said, "Lord, I'm puzzled to  
see you Here behind the wall, Leaning your head –  
Could you tell me the reason?  
For it is a long time since  
The frustration of  
Pilate's ignorant design  
Of condemning to death  
God's beloved son.

Lord, shall I tell you something?  
The stones which remained unthrown  
At your command, have all along  
Lain as such.  
These stones have always insisted  
On a sinless man's touch.

The Lord replied, "O lamb,

Before the tigresses of the dark caves make an attack,

Go to the Roman beach And have a sunbath.

And before sunset

Take in the empire of light as much as you want.

If you meet my executioners on the way

Take them to heart.

... ..

Then Devdoot , an intelligent pupil, asks, “Lord, if we started petting –

Not cats and dogs – but tigers and lions,

Will that be the final funeral Of sin and violence?...”

The question is as if self-answered in the negative. Then Devdoot picks up his lesson and says, as if edified by the personality of Christ itself:

”Lord, I need no camel for an easy journey.

Except for your compassion-rich path No path for me....”

Interfaces with great teachers need not be many. Devdoot obviously mulls over Christ’s message, internalizes some fundamental lessons of life, and builds his character and thought on the lessons along with many other influences.



As a result, at the end of Book I, Devdoot exhorts the birdkind with these words:

Hurry up, wash these wounds  
on the earth's heart lest it split into two –  
because this planet is all that we mortals have got.

To the extent that Devdoot has learned partly from epoch-making personalities like Christ by direct contact, it is an epic of growth. For Wordsworth, Nature was the main nurse, main governess, main tutor, main entrancement. Devdoot's chief nurse, apparently, is the life around him, as filtered through his unique consciousness, conditioned by the large formative influences mentioned above. We see more of the product rather than the process.

In these times of behind-the-curtain peeping, Devdoot's confessional utterances would be of interest, too. In Book I, there is a passage where Devdoot says he met a seductress:

Often I saw her [the seductive lady]  
getting stars tattooed in the open.  
I had bought her an emerald anklet  
by pledging myself with the ocean.

At last one day  
I took courage in both hands  
and saw how it felt this lady to address.  
Quickly, for that moment,  
she saw how it felt to hold me in her embrace.

This is the confessional and humanizing element on the life of the hero in the epic poem.

If we, therefore, go back to the pagan epics of the pre-Christian era, that is *Iliad*, *Odyssey* by Homer, and *Ulysses* by Virgil, we find that to a degree, promiscuity and infidelity in the heroes and heroines is to be found here. The Greek and Latin epics are tales on a grand scale, with much physical violence, and reveal the rivalries, valour, schemings and counter-schemings of the characters. We remember these epics on account of the heroes they portray, with their shortcomings and all.

*Mahaavaakya* does have a number of characters, too, from a wide range of stations of life. Devdoot has watched them, talked to them, learnt from them – both positively and negatively – and so on. One of the special features of this epic is the breadth of its canvas.

As happens in real life, we do not remember the particular details of an incident of a source of learning, but we remember the lesson we have imbibed. Devdoot, in the course of his epic utterance, keeps telling us the dos and don'ts of a fruitful and meaningful life. To that extent it is a mine of aphorisms, what we call *subhaashitaani*. The aphorism element in Devdoot is dominant, no doubt about it.

Here is a sampler:

You may sharpshoot But dying speak the truth.

Birds, lend a shoulder to your predecessor May this tradition prosper.

Friends, when you coat quinine with sugar

it's not to change the drug but to suit your tongue.

A million-rupee lottery may enrich one And not a million.

Pretty birds are what men like;

the hen, on the other hand, comes under the knife.

Friends, it is an obvious matter

living in the pond

we mustn't antagonize water.

How many days ,more

Shall we sing the nation's glory with the wolf at the door?

When hunger grows extreme honour-insult are all the same.

The world wanders naked – and saints give up shame.

One has to be very clear here that the saint that Gaidhani is talking about in the last quotation is very different from the idealized *sajjan* or *sadhu* that is found in classical *subhashits*, these saints are rather creatures of the age of falsehood, they're posers who're loosely labelled as saints.

And one more aphorism for you finally –

In a community of crows

only till supertime should a swan boast of his transoceanic flights;

otherwise the crows will see a false dawn

and start a massacre in the middle of the night.

*Mahaavaakya* is, therefore, clearly not to be likened to a saint's epic pothi or an epic of chastity and divinity from old literature. It is visibly secular. It is a common man's epic, of such a common man as aspires to and reaches a prominent station in life. Gaidhani had once contested for the post of member of Parliament, though a poet need not get into such a post, indeed he rarely does, for as Shelley says, poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Devdoot had been quoted in the legislative assembly, we're told. In Gaidhani's house there was a big picture of a lion with the legend below it: No politics. To understand this in Gaidhani certainly helps us to understand the hero of *Mahaavaakya*. Devdoot is not willing to brook dissent, for he knows what he knows. All through the work there is observation and deduction from life all round, past and present, high and low. So *Mahaavaakya* is not too much of an epic of growth, of the moulding of the hero's personal character. One has to make a fine distinction here. The episodes that Devdoot takes up are emotive, but that is as far as the lessons are concerned, for a quicker delivery of the lessons. The teacher moves others to emotion without getting emotional himself.

What Devdoot is doing in *Mahaavaakya* is more in the style of a teacher of princes who selects his own episodes to drive home his own lessons. And all this is done in the ultimate moment of his maturity. He is a kind of latter-day Confucius, worldly wise and street smart. It is an act of literary daring on Gaidhani's part to conceive such a character in midlife. And why not? He has among his admirers a personality no less than India's former Deputy Prime Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan, who found in Gaidhani's lines, printed on the cover of Devdoot Marathi, "the wisdom of ages".

The lines read in English as:

Dressed in gold we went to sell Gold –

not a soul turned to us.

Then dressed in gold we went to sell rags,

and lo! mad was the rush.

It would be politically incorrect on my part to explain these self-clear, rib-tickling, lines on which our ad industry and modern marketeering culture is founded.

*Mahaavaakya* is at places narrative and at places reflective. It is not merely a collection of aphorisms; it is, as importantly, a series of vignettes of Indian and global human society, but particularly of Indian society.

The poem is rich in pithy little stories about romance, hunger, exploitation of women in rural India, death.

How moving *Mahaavaakya* can be in its tales, let us see:

Where have they gone –

the birds in my mother's home?

By death's messengers

they've been caught and flown.

Your pet bird has gone on a journey far away.

Now wipe your tears, my bulbul, look how your eyes are red.

In the hills holy wanderers to this day

This ballad sad on harp-strings play.

But such lyrics about country life do not make *Mahaavaakya* a folk epic altogether. *Mahaavaakya* is indeed not so easy to classify, but let us still keep trying.

Now, what has *Mahaavaakya* given to the epic form in terms of technique? After creating a supersize spokesman hero in the character of Devdoot, who indeed is volubly eloquent, and after evoking a dramatic scene of his tragic dying, the poet exploits to the full the character and the situation to deliver his punches.

This technique has one broad predecessor – in Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*. In this book, Al Mustafa the Prophet is about to leave an island after an extended stay and after earning the inhabitants’ goodwill, attachment and respect. They are gathered to bid him a goodbye with their hearts full. They take this opportunity to acquire some spiritual edification, and one by one put him posers on what they need to know from this authority on life. Al Mustafa answers them questionwise, i.e. themewise. The language is chiselled prose, a little bit figurative and therefore poetic.

Devdoot and *Mahaavaakya* are poems that somewhat resemble Gibran’s work. But in Gaidhani’s poem we do not always know what questions are being put by the birdkind. The answers are self-sufficient. Also, there are extended passages of Devdoot’s self-inspired narration, where no question may be there. Compared to *The Prophet*, the language of *Mahaavaakya* is more figurative, more assertive, and ample storytelling laces the talk. Life in the raw predominates in *Mahaavaakya*. While Gibran’s *Prophet* would largely be taken as a work of philosophy, *Mahaavaakya* would indubitably be classified as literature, as poetry. This paper, we recall, is meant to describe and analyze rather than judge.

So, coming towards the conclusion, what kind of epic would we nominate *Mahaavaakya* as? It is not purely reflective, not pure narrative. Hence one needs to say this: The *Mahaavaakya* situation is a news conference situation or an interview-conference situation, where the interview runs to an epic length and sweeps a wide space, great spans of time, and penetrates many, many departments of life. The news conference is both intimately personal and widely general. And since this interview-conference epic is not topic by topic but governed by the flow of enquiry, or the speaker’s natural moment to moment inspirations, it can be called a **discursive epic**. “Discursive” means moving from one point to another without any strict structure. Such an epic is the natural outgrowth of the stream of consciousness technique.

This has by now become perfectly acceptable indeed quite permissible in literature. On a smaller scale, from time immemorial, theme-hopping is seen in the individual shers of a ghazal. On a larger scale, this technique called the stream of consciousness technique was practiced by Marcel Proust in his novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, and made more famous by James Joyce's English novel *Ulysses*. Curiously, Ulysses of ancient Latin literature is an epic proper. And Joyce evidently used that title to underline that this was "epic" novel. Now that *Ulysses* has become a standard for judging other novels (to wit, so-and-so novel of Rushdie is the *Ulysses* of rock-and-roll). This is exactly why we said that the meaning of a literary term may change and evolve with time.

So, in a nutshell, *Mahaavaakya* has given to literature this: a non-traditional canvas on which life – and more particularly Indian life in the raw – has been painted, going from picture to picture in a discursive way, projecting a street-smart hero Devdoot of jumbo proportions, who is a human being, but who also adores the compassionate qualities of Christ and Buddha.

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**Note:**

This research paper was presented at a one day national symposium on *Mahaavaakya an Epic Poem*, organised by Einstein Foundation International Nagpur on 26-Nov-2011

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