

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



## Existentialism and Labor: Socioeconomic 'Self' in Narayan Surve's Poetry

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

**Dr. Sachin Shridhar Sukhadeve**

Regional Director

Indira Gandhi National Open University

Regional Centre - Jodhpur

Jodhpur, Rajasthan, INDIA

### Abstract

*The present article examines the existentialist aspects of Narayan Surve's poetry attempting to contextualize them in a broader landscape of European existentialist thoughts. While Existentialism re-emerged in Europe through the philosophies of Sartre, Camus and Heidegger, demonstration of existentialist themes – absurdity, meaninglessness of life, and struggle for existence – in Surve's poetry emerge organically from his own lived experiences as an orphan and his participation in Worker's Union Movement in industrial milieu of Mumbai (the then, Bombay). His verse present a fusion of existentialist absurdity with Marxist-Leninist commitment transforming individual pain into collective struggle for dignified life. Through close analysis of his poems, this study argues that Surve localizes and renews existentialist philosophy by de-rooting it European socio-political context and transplants it in the socioeconomic realities of Marathi labors' life.*

### Key Words

*Existentialism, Absurdity, Labor literature, Existential angst.*

### Introduction

Existentialism, as a philosophical and literary current, left a deep impact on twentieth-century world literature. Emerging from the intellectual climate of Europe with Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger at its forefront, existentialist thought derived from themes of absurdity, freedom, revolt, and the individual's quest for meaning in an indifferent world. It is to note that when rooted into diverse cultural contexts, Existentialism did not simply reproduced itself as a set of European prototypes. On the contrary, it found fresh articulation in local life-worlds, shaped by specific historical, social, and material conditions. Marathi literature is no exception. Right from novels, small narratives, theatre at some extent to poetry Existentialism found its territory in Marathi literature. In Marathi poetry, from B. S. Mardhekar's modernist experimentation to the raw, socially rooted verse of Narayan Surve, Marathi poets have grappled with existentialist concerns. Nevertheless these concerns are often refracted through their lived realities rather than through direct philosophical borrowings.

Within this broader framework, the poetry of Narayan Surve presents a particularly compelling case. Surve is an orphan raised by a couple of labor family and he later immersed himself in the struggles of laborers. His poetry with existentialist tone emerged from his struggle for existence. His poetry does not theorize

existentialist concepts abstractly but embodies them in the lived experiences of hardship, alienation, and resilience. It is thus relevant to say that Surve's life and art are inseparable. Where Mardhekar's existentialism arises from intellectual contemplation, Surve's existentialist thought emerges from his direct confrontation with deprivation, exploitation, and the ceaseless struggle for survival. Inflected by Marxist-Leninist thought yet deeply personal, Surve's verse reveals a fusion of existentialist absurdity and Marxist commitment, grounded in the dignity of everyday life. In this sense, Surve can be seen as both a people's poet and an existentialist rebel one who finds meaning not in transcendence but in unrelenting engagement with the conditions of existence.

This article attempts to explore the aforementioned aspect in Surve's selected poems. It argues that while existentialist tones are evident in his work, they are inseparable from the Marxist orientation that anchors his worldview.

The poet's engagement with Existentialism is not theoretical. On the contrary it is grounded in the immediacy of his life-world. This de-roots Existentialism from its original European socio-political context and transplants it in industrial era in urban region of Mumbai (the then, Bombay) city. This allows Surve to convey his existentialist thoughts to new audience on new soil. Thus the 'alien' philosophy is not adapted but it is revitalized. The tones of the poets struggle against the exploitation of labors in industrial context turns Existentialism from a mere historical construct into a dynamic evolving dialogue. This allows us to formulate the following hypothesis:

## **Hypothesis**

The poet under discussion derives his poetic imagination through the prism of his own life-world. Obliteration of European socio-political context from Existentialism allows the poet to reconfigure it through his own struggle for survival. This process renders an 'alien' philosophy adaptable to new cultural context i.e. poets fight against exploitation of labors.

## **Methodology**

To reach at the proposed hypothesis this article will attempt to do a close reading of the selected poems from his collection *Sanad*<sup>1</sup> to identify recurrent existentialist themes. These themes will be placed in dialogue with European existentialist thinkers to examine similarities and divergences. Particular attention will be given to the absence of European socio-political context. Further, this article will see the themes in the poet's life-world setting, thereby situating his lived experiences as constitutive of his existentialist vision. The discussion in the following part, 'Narayan Surve and his socioeconomic 'Self' will allow to argue that poet's work represents a localized existentialism shaped less by direct philosophical borrowing and more by lived struggle for existence. By analyzing his poetic idiom, imagery, and recurring themes, we highlight how Surve articulates an existentialist vision that is not derivative of European philosophy but grounded in the everyday realities of Marathi life and labor.

It is pertinent to note that all citations from Marathi sources, whether primary or secondary, have been presented here in approximate English translation in order to ensure readability. The original sources of the citations are provided in the form of footnotes, following the Chicago Manual of Style 18<sup>th</sup> Edition.

## **Narayan Surve and his socioeconomic 'Self'**

Literally 'thrown-in-the-world', Narayan Surve is an orphan as he says in the introduction of his collection of poems *Sanad* (1982). He is brought up by a couple belonging to working class. His formative years were spent amongst labors allowing him firsthand insight into struggle for their rights. He equally witnessed a broader struggle for independence. All the aforementioned elements can be observed in Surve's poetry. Labors' life is very much highlighted in his poetry. In this respect, in Surve's poetry the central themes revolve around 'Being for others', to use Sartre's term, and the notion of 'thrown-in-the-world'. It entails from this that his poetry contrasts with Mardhekar's poetry who sees the 'Self' in an isolated way. The ontological and existentialist

quest derive from his birth, his life and his death in Mardhekar's poetry. Thus, 'Being-for-others' is absent for Mardhekar. Contrarily, Surve does not ignore this aspect of the 'Self'. Consequently, we discern social involvement in his poetry. Existentialist elements emerge through references to the life that he lived in the society rather than in isolation. Following citation highlights his approach towards life.

We must carry on, although life is a pain  
Many sufferings in life still remain.  
(...)  
The day arrives, passes fruitlessly, I know.  
Must the journey be quitted, we stumble though  
Forgive me, but don't ask me to do so.<sup>2</sup>

The above cited verses establish their relevance with Sisyphus' approach towards life. The poet, despite sufferings in his life, demonstrates his preparedness to suffer more to embrace life itself. He passes sterile days mechanically like a machine without any hope for his future life. This highlights absurd nature of his life and yet he remains resolute and refuses the advice of surrendering life. Is it not then pertinent to say that the poet validates existentialist attitude whether or not inspired by the European existentialist philosophy? This intellectual development of the poet does not seem to be derived from any theoretical or philosophical formation. On the contrary, it seems to be emerging from the hardships that he encounters while leading his life in deprived socioeconomic conditions. These hardships are blended with his own desire to struggle with these conditions to reassure life. The poet says in another poem:

In this infernal life, when the mind is led astray,  
Remember, we sought bread, we sought life always.  
The question remains the same we seek bread, we seek life,  
For the condition remains unchanged even today.<sup>3</sup>

As the poem suggests, we observe an inexhaustible desire to live despite the infernal nature of the life. This approach is reiterated in several poems. The poet demonstrates not only his desire to live but also to fight with each obstacle to ensure his existence. "If you don't find me in the camp, then be assured that I am fighting at every front of my existence"<sup>4</sup>, says the poet.

The poet's fight may allude to a communist's struggle, but it would be pertinent to note that 'transforming the world', as Marx would put it, seems his secondary objective. On the contrary, his primary objective is to 'transform the life'. The poet, influenced by Marxism-Leninism, is above all a rebel who shares a collective consensus and fights to change the condition of life. He has a perspective, aligning with Marxism-Leninism, that the rebellious spirit that he aims to manifest in society must first take shape within his own mind. This notion is very well articulated in the citation given below.

The perspective that I gained taught me the importance of difference between collective consensus and the individual. It also taught me the scientific view that you can change the exterior world only if you change yourself inside out. This philosophy turned out to be objectively showing the direction than that of canonical texts of other scholars and researchers. Its name is Marxism-Leninism.<sup>5</sup>

The poet, thus, constructs a rebellious spirit within himself which fights not only for his own existence but also for the existence of others. Individual sufferings due to life's absurdity becomes thus the point of departure for him. His sufferings unify with those of others igniting the flame of revolt. This attitude of the poet aligns much with the one of Camus' *The Rebel*. The philosopher notes:

*Meanwhile, we can sum up the initial progress that the spirit of rebellion provokes in a mind that is originally imbued with the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world. In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins,*

*suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore, the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe. The malady experienced by a single man becomes a mass plague. In our daily trials, rebellion plays the same role as does the “cogito” in the realm of thought: it is the first piece of evidence. But this evidence lures the individual from his solitude. It finds its first value on the whole human race. I rebel therefore we exist.<sup>6</sup>*

The rebel in Surve is central to his Being and is not constructed accidentally. On the contrary, his active engagement in the combat for life, for survival and for existence around him constructs the rebel in him. His rebellious approach prompts him to write for disseminating not only the need of revolt but also for spreading the awareness of value of life. Firstly, he commences with writing and translating short stories and then shines in the genre of poetry. A fusion of Existentialism and Marxism can be witnessed in Surve’s poetry. Absurdity is engendered in his poetry by mechanical and repetitive tasks in life. The pathetic condition of workers’ life fueling revolt for ensuring the existence can be seen as recurrent theme. Camus sees Sisyphus as “proletarian of Gods”<sup>7</sup> but Surve can be viewed as poet of such proletarians as noted by the renowned critique Vidyadhar Date while noticing Vinda Karandikar’s influence on the poet. The critique writes,

One of his (Vinda Karandikar’s) most celebrated and early work is the anthology of interestingly called *Swed Ganga*, a *Ganga* of workers’ sweat. This was to have major influence on Narayan Surve, a true proletarian poet, a street orphan and textile worker, now widely recognized for his writing.<sup>8</sup>

The incessant struggle for life prompts the poet compare his life with that of hardened steel. “As steel is hardened in furnace, so is my life.”<sup>9</sup> The poet tells us that every day he dies and is reborn for suffering. He does not hesitate to state that life is beautiful only in appearance, but in reality, it is like meat showcase at slaughterhouse. Acknowledging this facet of life, Surve shows his preparedness to fight with anyone for his existence. The poet affirms:

Now that I am born in this world  
And dwell amidst its bare, naked reality,  
Life must be lived and made my own,  
Sometime while receiving two blows  
Sometime while returning them.<sup>10</sup>

Embracing life, even when it feels punishment, aligns with existentialist thoughts in Surve’s poetry. The poet produces identical image to that of Sisyphus rolling the rock on the top of mountain. As the work of Sisyphus becomes itself his life, so does the workers’ combat for life become itself their lives. The poet depicts this attitude with the help of following verse:

I can see  
(...)  
That the children dismiss the slowly approaching death  
As they dismiss the pile of seven stones.<sup>11</sup>

Poet’s tone resembles to that of children who declared revolt against the death itself. These are workers’ children who are not able to meet both ends for their survival despite relentless efforts. May the poet be or not conscious of European existentialist philosophy but his life itself is an existentialist fight which is imprinted on his semiotic thought. It is then relevant to say that the poet does not philosophize about concepts and ideologies; instead he embodies the philosophy in his practical life. The quest for his Being does not occur through philosophical contemplations; rather it unfolds within his existence itself amidst the world where he is literally

‘thrown’. Struggle for finding his Being continues despite uncertainty about its success. The poet constructs his ‘Self’ with the help of relentless struggle which he depicts as follows:

I lost half of my life searching my true ‘Self’.  
Despite thousands of detours, I couldn’t find it.<sup>12</sup>

Surve’s poetry is thus infused with existentialist and marxist themes, drawn directly from the socioeconomic conditions in which he lived – the very essence of his life-world. Considering his formal education till grade four, it would be difficult to believe that he might have read existentialist and marxist works. His poetry is derived from life and perhaps that might be the reason that he is called ‘people’s poet’. His poetry is not only the one of a rebel but also of compassion towards the exploited people as noted by esteemed critique G. P. Deshpande.

*The pain of the exploited life and exploitative society was there forever present in his writing. In that sense he was not a poet of revolution as much as he was a poet of Karuna.*<sup>13</sup>

Deshpande acknowledges the presence of sufferings and compassion in Surve’s poetry, yet it is to recognize that his poetry goes beyond the mere depiction of these themes. It demonstrates equally efforts to transcend these challenges and enhance living conditions. This approach distinguishes him from his predecessor B. S. Mardhekar. In Mardhekar’s poetry, Existentialism emerges both from his empathy toward human suffering *vis-à-vis* life’s absurdity and from the fusion of his formation in Indian tradition and Western education. Conversely, in Surve’s poetry, it arises from the awareness of life’s absurdity and yet unwavering enthusiasm for existence.

## Conclusion

Narayan Surve’s poetry demonstrates that Existentialism if de-rooted from its European socio-political terrain, can be revitalized in a distanced sociocultural setting. His verse validates that existentialist motifs such as absurdity, alienation, revolt and the quest for meaning need not be mediated through philosophical contemplations; rather they may emerge organically from the immediacy of lived experience. This is very evident in Surve’s poetry as reconfiguration of Existentialism can be noticed in it through his own socioeconomic reality as an orphan, a laborer and a participant in the struggles of the working class in industrial Mumbai (the then Bombay).

His poems synthesizes existentialist thought and Marxist commitment, where suffering is not merely individual but collectivized which provides a shared ground of rebellion. Surve’s life-world situates Existentialism within the hardships and dignity of labor, allowing a foreign philosophy to become an indigenous mode of expression. This transposition of Existentialism from Europe to Marathi poetry illustrates not only the adaptability of philosophical currents but also their capacity to evolve when refracted through different socio-cultural conditions.

Thus, Surve emerges as both a people’s poet and an existentialist rebel. His poetry captures an incessant struggle for existence, the assertion of life amidst suffering, and the collective impulse towards change. In his work, Existentialism ceases to be a borrowed philosophy it becomes a lived biography. It is deeply felt and authentically and artistically expressed.

## References

1. Surve, Narayan (2010) *Sanad*, Granthali, Mumbai.
2. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Maaf Kara,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed, Granthali, Mumbai.
3. Surve, Narayan (2010) “22 February,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed, Granthali, Mumbai.
4. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Jar Tumhala,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed, Granthali, Mumbai.

5. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Manogat,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed., Granthali, Mumbai.
6. Camus, Albert. (1991) *The Rebel - An Essay on Man in Revolt*, Translated by Anthony Bower, Vintage Books, New York.
7. Camus, Albert. (1975) *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Translated by Justin O’Brian, Penguin Modern Classics. Penguin Books, London, UK.
8. Date, Vidyadhar (2006) Vinda Karandikar: Deserving the Jnanpith, *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 4, 316–17.
9. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Don Divas,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed., Granthali, Mumbai.
10. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Majhe Vidyapeeth,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed., Granthali, Mumbai.
11. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Jahirnama,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed., Granthali, Mumbai.
12. Surve, Narayan (2010) “Ek Amhi Ase,” in *Sanad*, 6th ed., Granthali, Mumbai.
13. Deshpande, G. P. (2010) Thinking of Surve, *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 4, 2010, p. 15-17.

---==00==---