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Transaction No. 24

NARMADASHANKAR
POET—PATRIOT—PIONEER
PROSE-WRITER

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PREFACE

Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave (1833-1886), better known throughout Gujarat as Kavi Narmadashankar or Narmad, has been well called "the first of the Gujarati moderns." The Institute arranged a meeting on February 23rd, just before the seventieth anniversary of his passing, to honour the memory of a brave man and his contribution to Gujarati literature. We publish here the paper prepared at the Institute's request by Shri Gulabdas Broker, a well-known Gujarati writer of the present day, for discussion at that meeting, which was under the chairmanship of Shri Masti Venkatesa Iyengar, a leading writer in a sister language, Kannada.

Sufficiently objective, surely, to have satisfied even Narmadashankar's severe contemporary critics, it yet accords him the warm appreciation which moderns Gujarat recognizes as his due.

There was in Narmadashankar an elemental quality like the sweep of the storm. Crude, passionate and egotistic he seems undeniably to have been, but he was also fearless, frank and generous. His shortcomings are there for all the world to see but against them must be set a vigor and a driving force that challenged obstacles and an unflinching loyalty to Truth as he at the moment saw it. He had the courage and imaginative vision of the pioneer and to his tireless industry modern Gujarati literature owes an almost incalculable debt.

NARMADASHANKAR

POET—PATRIOT—PIONEER PROSE-WRITER

(24th August 1833—26th February 1886)

By the year 1850 the British Power had firmly established itself in India. Politically it was supreme. People were for the first time, after centuries of unrest, heaving a sigh of relief at the calm and security ruling throughout the land. Culturally also, the impact of the new culture that the British represented was being felt throughout the country with terrific force. Old ideas and ideals, centuries-old methods and manners of living and outlook, prejudices and predilections ingrained in the people through the ages, were not only being questioned but were actually being looked down upon with contempt by the more impetuous members of the younger generation, newly educated in institutions then freshly established by British authorities. Everything Indian was, to this new generation of youngsters, bad, old-fashioned, odious. Everything foreign, *i.e.*, European, was marvelous, progressive, worthy of imitation and adoption. A big movement for social reform was in the offing throughout the length and breadth of the country.

A young boy of eighteen, Narmadashankar by name, was at that time prosecuting his studies in the College Department of the Elphinstone Institution at Bombay. He had a very sensitive soul and he was residing in a city sensitive enough to record the minutest movements in the political, economic, social or cultural climate of the country. The city recorded the movement for change on its sensitive instrument and the boy responded to the challenge implicit in it. He, in the company of some friends, founded an association called the *Juvan Purushoni Anyoanya Buddhivardhak Sabha* which would mean in a free English translation, "Institution of Young Men for Mutual Aid to Intelligence," and Narmadashankar became its first President. The aims of the institution were simple. It was to call four meetings a month, two of which were to be restricted to members only. At those meetings they read essays written by themselves and held discussions about them, among themselves. That would serve the purpose of training them in the arts of writing, public speaking and debate. The other two meetings were to be open to the public. At them members of the association were to deliver lectures to the public in order to bring about social reform.

The young President delivered his first lecture at the first public meeting. There were about a hundred listeners present. The subject of the lecture was "The Advantages of Forming Associations." The lecture seems to have been a success, for, after delivering it in Bombay in 1850, the lecturer wrote it down in 1851, and again delivered it in Surat on the 4th of July of that year. Later in the year, he published it in book form as an independent essay. That was his first effort in print and, though perhaps he did not realize it at the time, it was about the first prose writing of considerable importance in the Gujarati language. At any rate, the writer was destined to be the pioneer of prose literature in his language and its first important exponent.

But before fulfilling that destiny Narmadashankar passed through a period of years sowing his wild oats. He was barely eighteen years of age, having been born on 24th August 1833, but, as he himself confesses, during the year 1850, he had begun to feel the attraction of women. After that first *tebut* in Bombay, he spent about three years in his birthplace, Surat, the gay city of Gujarat, keeping house with his young wife. There he did some little work as a small schoolteacher, but mostly he spent his time in enjoyment. As he himself says, during the period between 19th February 1851 and 2nd January 1854, he did not read a single book either in English or in Gujarati, and wrote only one letter in English and about

three speeches in Gujarati. The rest of the time he spent in eating, drinking, making merry with women, and, when alone, in thoughts about fame and love. After the death of his first wife in October, 1853, he felt satiated with this life of meaningless enjoyment and worthless pleasure and with his service as a schoolteacher⁴, which offered no chances of advancement. His mind harked back to the old days, when, at school, he had dreamt of becoming a learned man and achieving name and fame as one. There was nothing to do now but to resign the post at Surat and go back to Bombay—the only city in his world which held any promise of fulfilling all his vague aspirations.

But to achieve name and fame—and that too as a scholar—learning was necessary. He rejoined the College in Bombay, though it was four years since he had left his studies. He tried to apply himself to the work in the classes, but his heart was not in them. There were stirrings within him of many varied feelings struggling for expression. There was that prime ambitions motive of becoming famous somehow, which was not yet fulfilled. Thus he was listless while his teachers were talking. When they were silent, he himself was talking — about doing big things and becoming a great man : about going to England; about becoming a linguist like Sir William Jones. His co-students poked fun at him.

But, in spite of all his general inattentiveness and indifference, when poetry was taught in the class, he was all attention. He greatly enjoyed the descriptions of nature in a poem called "Shipwreck" They took him to a yet unknown land of beauty. He ruminated and felt lonely in spite of company. In that frame of mind, one fine day he came across two or three poems of Dhira Bhagat, the well-known poet of mediaeval Gujarat. They fitted his mood and he pondered over them. They impressed him deeply. He felt like composing something in the same strain and actually composed two or three pieces.

Without his knowledge, he was approaching a stage in his career which was to lead him to great fame.

This experience of composing poems was new and intoxicating. The mood inspired by Dhira Bhagat's poems wore off, but the habit of composing verses remained. Some of these new verses he read to a meeting of the old institution of his young days which he had now rejoined. The effort was applauded, because there was complete ignorance of the rules and demands of poetry in the people who met in that institution. As a matter of fact, Bombay then had no tradition of poetry in Gujarati. People had written poems in the old days, and they were to be admired. But the fact that one among themselves could actually dare to form a line in verse was a marvel of such magnitude that people were dazzled. They made much of this new marvel among themselves. The young man felt encouraged and went on composing new poems. But he soon found that he was unequal to the task. He did not know the laws of prosody. So far as Sanskrit metres were concerned, it was all right. He could get books and study them with the help of Shastris. But what about *Deshi matras*? There was not a single book in Gujarati which could teach them to him. What was he to do? Without a knowledge of prosody, it was no use composing imperfect verses and calling them poetry.

The young poet turned in all directions, but a blank wall faced him on all sides. Should he write to Dalpatram, the well-known poet, and get guidance from him? No, he would rather not. Narmadashankar had heard that Dalpatram had tried once to wean away another poet's audience. Would he not do the same in his own case ? This prejudice of one poet against another, of a budding one for one already famous, is a recurrent theme in history, and these two great men of the nineteenth century were no exception. In case of Narmadashankar the prejudice persisted throughout his life. Then, if not Dalpatram, who else could guide

him? He remembered. Yes, there was that other man, from whom Dalpatram had tried to wean away his audience. Narmadashankar quickly wrote to him a long and very humble letter requesting his guidance. But his letter remained unanswered. The poet was depressed but not defeated. If he had to make an independent search for learning prosody he would make it.

That search is a romantic chapter in the life of this man. In Bombay he learnt Sanskrit metres from a Shastri. In Surat he found out that a mason had with him a book which belonged to the mason's Guru, and which contained some details about *Deshi* metres. He went to the mason and begged his help. The mason agreed on one condition: The poet would have to copy down the whole book at the mason's house; he would not lend him the book. The poet agreed. After some days the mason relented and the poet could take home some leaves from the book. The whole book was copied down. As by now the poet knew a bit of Sanskrit he could follow the meaning of the book by himself. Henceforth his verses were not to lack in sound metrical background.

Narmadashankar made another use also of his newly acquired knowledge! He knew through what difficulties he had had to pass to get acquainted with the correct metrical system. That was due to the lack of a book about metres in Gujarati. Other aspirants might face the same difficulties and might not have the industry or the zeal required for arriving at knowledge about these things. Why not make it easy for them by writing a book about prosody? No sooner said than done. That was the nature of the young man. In April, 1857, the book was out. *Pingala Pravesha* proved an instantaneous success. It 'was very well reviewed. Even Dalpatram wrote appreciatively about it. Encouraged by its reception, the poet delved deeper into the study of poetics, and in 1858 brought out two books of the same genre, *Alamkara Pravesha* and *Rasa Pravesha*. During the same period, three volumes of his own poems also were brought out. This rapid succession of writings rocketed the fame of the poet sky-high. The honorific title of *Kavi* (Poet) was bestowed on him by an appreciative and grateful public. That title clings to his name even today, a hundred and one years after he composed his first poem in 1855. The glow of those days has worn off, ideas about poetry have undergone a vast change since his time, many readers of today find very little that is genuinely poetic in his vast volume of verse, and yet, even today, Narmadashankar is "Poet" Narmadashankar to people throughout Gujarat.

Success was what he had hankered after, and now success was at his door, success sufficiently abundant even for a man of Narmadashankar's ambitions. His books were sold, his poems were read and applauded, his name was on every lip. Vast portals of more important literary work and still greater fame were opening before him. The small job of an assistant master in the Central School of the Elphinstone Institution was, if anything, a hindrance to his entry into those portals. The din that the school children made during the hours from 10-30 a.m. to 5 p.m., was, perhaps, silencing the sweet music of the Goddess of Fame. The shackles must be broken, the bondage should be thrown off. Body and soul, he must devote himself to the work that he liked and cherished, and not to this drudgery.

The mood seized him, and slowly grew from a desire into a strong? Determination Once that determination was made nothing could stop him. On the 23rd of November, 1858, he at last surrendered to his impulse and resigned his job. Reaching home, he looked at his pen, and with tears in his eyes, implored, "Now, I put myself in your lap." He would henceforth serve only Saraswati and not any master who would require his whole-time services, he decided.

When he took this precipitous step, he was only twenty-five years of age, and he had no stable means of sustenance. And sustain oneself one must. What could he do about it? He thought of becoming a *Hardasi Kathakar*. That would help him in his studies and earn him some bread. More Sanskrit studies were necessary for this work. He was prepared for it. He went to Poona and studied Sanskrit poetry and *Rasa Shastra* under a Shastri there. After four months of intensive study he returned to Bombay, but his dream of becoming a *Kathakar* remained only a dream. Bombay welcomed the vagrant back into its fold, and drew him headlong into its vortex of activities.

For, at that time, Bombay was simmering with activities. Dalpatram, the respected poet of Gujarat, had come down to Bombay for treatment of his eyes. It was an event of great importance, for Bombay had up till then known only one poet—Narmadashankar. It had read about Dalpatram, from afar. It was filled with curiosity to see and judge the relative merits of that old poet of Gujarat and this new poet of its own. A meeting was arranged at the bungalow of a rich patron of poetry and the arts. The aristocracy and intelligentsia of the town gathered together to hear both and see the contest. But the ever-immodest Narmadashankar was modest for once. Dalpatram recited his verses. They were well received. Now it was Narmadashankar's turn to recite. He modestly said, No, it was in Dalpatram's honour they had met, and they should hear only him. But he was pressed further. Meetings and lecture bouts had never repelled him. On the contrary, they were an incentive to him. He rose to speak. Vinayak Vasudeo, then Oriental Translator to the Government of Bombay, stood by his side and, as the poet went on reciting, he went on encouraging him. The recitation was excellent and the audience went into ecstasies. The poet's joy knew no bounds. He returned home fully convinced that he was a better poet than Dalpatram and that Dalpatram was envying him. That jealous sense of superiority persisted throughout his career, and vitiated his relations with the quiet, good-natured old man, who was really the better poet of the two.

But one remark, incidentally connected with the visit of the old poet, throws light on another aspect of life in the city and the activities of the poet. The rich people of Bombay who were lovers of poetry had arranged this meeting. They were secretly and among themselves enjoying the prospect of the ensuing contest. Some were secretly hoping, too, that the overbearing Narmadashankar would suffer a defeat at the hands of his older colleague. On the eve of that meeting a friend met Narmadashankar at his book-seller's shop and said to him jokingly: "Tomorrow, your mettle will be tested." The poet did not know about the proposed meeting. He thought that the friend was referring to a possible action against himself for libel for the articles and poems he had written and the lectures he had delivered against the Vaishnava Maharajas of the day. So he flared up and said, "Luther said that he would not give up his beliefs even if his enemies numbered as many as the tiles on the roofs of buildings of his part of the town, but I say that I will not care for the Maharaja even if my enemies number as many as the particles of those tiles when they are crushed into small pieces."

The poet was not active in the literary field only. The social reform movement, the prime moving force of his outburst of energy at the age of eighteen, had grown to huge proportions during these years, and Narmadashankar was playing a very active part in that movement too. A reformer of extraordinary courage and wisdom, Shri Karsandas Mulji had made the activities of the Vaishnava Maharajas his special target for attack in his paper, *Satya Prakasha*, and there was wild resentment in the dovecotes of orthodoxy. Narmadashankar had joined with his usual abandon the attack launched by his friend and,

through platform, poetry and prose; he was making it very hot for the Maharajas and their followers.

The old institution at which he had delivered his first lecture had changed its executive and was now managed by people who did not confine their activities to mere speech-making. Schools for girls were being opened, and to the orthodox that was anathema. They believed that if girls went to school, they would be widowed. And the condition of widows was too horrible even to contemplate. The reformers would have liked widows to be allowed to remarry. The orthodox would not even think of it. Narmadashankar composed poems and delivered lectures about widow-remarriage.

The terminology that he used in those poems and lectures was one of war. There were, figuratively speaking, two armed camps. Any day war might have broken out. The reformers were prepared for it. But one sweet-tongued Vaishnava Maharaja, Jadunathji by name, came to Bombay and tried to stop the breach. He spoke the language of mild reform. There was nothing wrong in girls' are educated, he said. He himself went to an annual function at a girls' school and distributed prizes. The orthodox got confused, embarrassed and silent. The reformers were jubilant. But Narmadashankar was not taken in. He was sure that the enemy had many weapons' and knew much strategy. Was this *volte-face* itself not a strategic move? If the Maharaja was sincere and not hypocritical, would he say that widow-remarriage should be allowed? Would he enter into a public controversy about it if he was against it? He, Narmadashankar, would take up the challenge and enter into debate with the Maharaja.

Now it was the turn of the Maharaja and his followers to rejoice. The spider had woven his web cleverly. The fly was entering the web by its own choice. The Maharaja gladly accepted the challenge to debate and called him to a place of his own choosing. The reformer colleagues of the poet backed out of the controversy, because they had not lost faith in the good intentions and reformist ideals of the Maharaja. The poet did not care. He was prepared to go alone to face the music. A physical culturist named Kisandas Bava accompanied the poet to the meeting as there was a chance of physical assault upon him. Two or three more friends went with him, too. The place was overcrowded. In the hall itself there were about two hundred Vaishnava followers of the Maharaja, and in the compound there were eight hundred more. They were all red with frenzy when the poet defiantly said, in answer to a question by the Maharaja, that the Shastras were not made by God. The heavens began to fall; voices began to rise; tempers were lost. Narmadashankar warned the Maharaja to control the frenzied crowd, because in case there was an assault upon him the responsibility would be the Maharaja's. Nothing happened to him though people were ready to beat him and thus bring him to reason.

The scene must have been inspiring and, at the same time, terrifying. On one side there was a crowd of a thousand-odd fanatics, and on the other there was this brave man with only four or five friends. The strongest of them, Kisandas Bava, the poet had sent outside with his own father who had rushed to the scene on hearing the news. One can picture the poet standing alone among this mass of men, with his head erect and his chest heaving. And whether one may or may not concede the wisdom of the course he had taken, one cannot but admire the absolute courage which animated him to undertake so hazardous a task.

Though he so bravely faced it, this encounter left a bitter taste in the poet's mouth. He felt that his comrades had let him down. He felt it was cowardice and not lack of conviction that had prevented them from accompanying him to this epoch-making event. And he concluded, again in his hasty and rash manner, that these people were brave where only talk

was concerned and where they got a lot of publicity; but when it was action that was demanded—well, he had seen what they would do.

Even amidst all this tumult Narmadashankar's literary work was not neglected. Pupils in school had to learn his poems and they found it difficult to follow their meaning on account of the many unfamiliar words appearing in them. This gave him an idea. He should make a vocabulary of all the difficult words contained in his poems and arrange them alphabetically. Their number was very large. That gave him another idea. Why should he stop at giving an alphabetical vocabulary of the words in his own poems only? Why not do the same for every word in the Gujarati language? The task would be arduous and long, and would consume much time and energy. But there was no dictionary of the Gujarati language, and why should he not provide one, whatever the cost? Yes, that should be done. And he began it in 1860. It took him years to finish the whole work, though he published the first three volumes within the first four years.

Along with this new undertaking, the writing of poetry was going on apace. New subjects were tried and new methods were introduced. People had described nature when it came their way during the course of their poems dealing with other subjects, but nobody had written anything in the Gujarati language like, say, Kalidas's *Ritu Samhara* or Thomson's poem, *The Seasons*. The poet sat down and wrote *Ritu Varnana*, a rather long piece dealing with the various seasons and descriptions of nature. Whatever the worth of the book as poetry, it was a departure in a new direction.

In the midst of all these activities, the poet and his friends assisted a widow in her second marriage. The marriage proved a failure, but the poet did not accept defeat. By 1859 he had freed himself from all religious superstitions. Now he joined an assembly whose aim was to do away with distinctions of caste. A Maharashtrian friend was instrumental in bringing him to this institution.

The mention of a Maharashtrian friend in this context is a reminder not only of the cosmopolitan character of the city of Bombay even in those early days, but also of Narmadashankar's capacity for friendship with all classes and kinds of persons of the various communities inhabiting the island. The great scholar of Maharashtra, Dr. Bhau Daji, was a great friend of his and a great admirer. Vinayak Vasudeo, the Oriental Translator to the Government, has already been mentioned. Many kindly Parsis were proud to be his friends. The rich Bhatias and Baniyas of Bombay, people who made money by the millions, considered the poet their personal friend and loaded him with gifts of money and the like. Even some English gentlemen in Bombay were included in his circle of friends. The doors of the Governor's house were open to him on occasions of parties and celebrations.

And Narmadashankar was happy. He had fame. He had friends. He had influence. In spite of having given up a steady job and resorted to tuitions and the like for maintenance, he had not much trouble on that score, because money came to him plentifully through various sources like the sale of his books and gifts from his rich friends. The gift of a single share in the Friar Land Reclamation Scheme from a friend, his great patron Karsandas Madhavdas, fetched him Rs. 5,700/- as profit. He had nothing to complain of. He was conquering new friends in literature through his creations and winning new laurels.

Nature poetry he had already written, but what about writing an epic poem? An epic theme must have a suitable metre. He tried to find one and, failing to do so, improvised one for himself. The poem never got written, but the attempt was made. Some lines came out in the new metre. The metre remains today, a remainder to his compatriots that big themes

require suitable media. The metre that he improvised was not adequate either to his task or to the task of his successors. It has not been possible either for him or for them to treat an epic theme or to find a suitable metre for one. But the search goes on and he was the initiator of that search.

He composed a love story in verse, and wrote a small book in verse, about the Decline and fall of the Hindu Community. Speeches and essays he wrote in plenty, and got such appreciation for his work as would make even a popular political leader of today turn green with envy. One gentleman has recorded that whenever Narmadashankar was returning to Bombay from his periodical sojourns outside, a crowd of from ten to fifteen thousand persons would flock to the docks to receive him.

And, above all this, he lived lavishly. He received thousands, but he spent more thousands. The life that he led was gay and unrestrained. Intoxication was not barred from his scheme of life, nor was love-making. There was never a thought for tomorrow in Narmadashankar's mind in those days of his glory.

But, there is always a tomorrow, whether one thinks about it or not. The rich friend who was responsible on one occasion for allowing the poet to earn Rs. 5,700/- and who on another occasion had presented him with Rs. 5,000/- broke in a crash on the stock exchange at Bombay. The people who loved him had turned mad with the speculative upsurge which ruined many and absorbed all. Books were difficult to sell as years went by and money for their publication was hard to get. The lavish way in which he used to live—even in those unbelievably cheap days the rental of his house at Bombay was seventy-five rupees—was hard to maintain, and the poet got worried. He changed his permanent residence to Surat in order to reduce expenditure. But old habits die hard. There he bought a piece of land and built a house on it at a cost of Rs. 12,000/—. He called it "Saraswati Mandir" and on the frontal arch got his motto, "*Prem-Shaurya*" inscribed.

All this involved Narmadashankar in terrible expenditure and debts, and he was constantly worried. It was barely eleven years since he had seriously started on his career as a poet, yet in 1866, when he was only thirty-three, he ceased writing much poetry. But his writing did not cease. It only took a turn in another direction, for in that year he felt the urge to write his autobiography. He himself tells us why he felt the need. First, because there was no custom of writing autobiographies in the Gujarati language, he should introduce that custom. Secondly, because friends like Dr. Bhau Daji, Karsandas Mulji, and Rustamji Gustadji (Irani) and others were pressing him constantly to write one so that they could know the story of his life. Thirdly, so that he himself could really know himself; and the fourth and most cogent reason was that after a man's death it was difficult to learn the truth about him. He was certain about one thing, though. If he wrote an autobiography, he would write it only for himself. But he would get it printed all the same. That was his custom in everything. Whatever he wrote, he got printed. That helped in preserving the things better. Only four or five copies would be enough. If, after his death, people wanted the things to be made public, they were welcome to do so; but as long as he lived, well....it would be private. But write it he had to. So, in 1866, he wrote it and called it "My Story." It is the first autobiography in the Gujarati language, and makes excellent reading. Some names and events connected with living persons he has omitted to mention therein, because that would not be fair, he felt; but, in spite of the immense self-love evident in so many spheres of his life, the book bears the stamp of genuine truthfulness and comes very near the accepted notions of what an autobiography ought to be.

It is a matter for regret that the events of the next twenty years of the poet's life and their motivating causes are not so well recorded for posterity as this period of his youth and glory. But they also bear witness to his tireless energy, dauntless courage and general preoccupation with things of the mind and spirit. It is true that after the early period of extensive poetic creation, he ceased to write much poetry, but it is also true that during these last twenty years of his life, he wrote much, read much, and thought much. The early enthusiasm for the causes that he espoused with so much zeal had vanished and given place to an opposite reaction but, whatever he went in for, he remained to the end as uncompromising and adamant as before. His financial condition had undergone a very heavy strain, as we have seen, and during almost the whole of this latter period it weighed heavily upon his mind, but the volume of his output did not suffer much on that account. He put the whole of his energetic self to work in finishing the *Kosha*, the early volumes of which he had published by 1864, finished the huge task and, in spite of innumerable difficulties in getting such a huge work published, at last he did so in 1873, thirteen years after he had undertaken the work. He dedicated it to the whole of Gujarat in a lovely poem "*Java Jaya Garavi Gujarat*"¹ which has been, so to say, a national song of the Gujaratis ever since and will remain with them as long as their language does.

History and the play of historical forces upon men and society absorbed his attention and energy during this latter period, and the fruits of that absorption were not long in coming. He collected about two hundred books dealing with the history of the world, and himself wrote out a world history, *Rajya Ranga*, and published it in two volumes between 1871 and 1876. Earlier he had delved deep into the epics of India—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—and the European epic, *The Iliad*, and brought out three books dealing with these three epics in 1870. With his talents and tastes maturing he had read much about the lives of great men, and himself brought out a volume, *Lives of Great Men*. That, too, was in 1870.

And in 1870 also there was another event in his life which created a great stir in the whole of Gujarat and on account of which he was cast out of his Nagar community.

About that time the poet had come in touch with a young widow from his own community and had begun to care for her. The woman reciprocated. The matter developed. The widow demanded marriage. The poet was on the horns of a dilemma. To marry or not to marry? Marrying he was setting an awkward example because he already had one wife. Not marrying, he was running away from what he had preached during all these long years—widow re-marriage. He cogitated long and finally decided upon marriage.

His living wife consented to the marriage though she did not agree to the suggestion that she should live apart and away from the newly married couple. A dialogue of historical importance took place between the two. It throws a revealing light on the characters of both—on her, a doting, self-sacrificing Hindu wife whose devotion and willingness to suffer knew no bounds, and on him, a domineering, overbearing husband, the eternal male, whose will should be law and whose minutest desire an order to be obeyed. The poet himself has jotted down this conversation with his wife, and though it does no credit to him as a man, credit is due to him for the fact that he jotted it down for posterity.

Financially he was already broke, and now socially he was ostracized. The new wife bore him a new son in that same year and that increased his responsibilities. An article in the paper which he then edited, *Dandiyo* (The Drumstick), ruined any chance that he had of getting a sizable sum from a gentleman of Bhavnagar in Saurashtra for the printing and publishing of his dictionary. To earn some little money, he had to turn to writing dramas, a

task for which he had little aptitude and less ability. The excesses in which he had indulged in his early life began to tell on his body. And the work, incessant and constant, of writing, writing, writing, went on and on and on. It was not a happy time for the poet.

But there were moments of compensation. Navalram Trivedi, then a young enthusiast and later the first great critic of Gujarati literature, wrote an article about Narmadashankar as a poet. Premanand, by common consent the greatest poet the Gujarati language has produced, was, in that article, given a place below the one occupied by Narmadashankar. Narmadashankar pocketed the compliment and was happy about it. When, at a later date, Navalram seemed to change his opinion, the poet did not agree with him. In a small note he made, Narmadashankar granted Homer, as an ideal poet, a hundred marks. If Homer won a hundred marks as a poet, how many marks would he, Narmadashankar, and how many would Premanand win? Unabashedly he put seventy against his own name, and sixty against the name of Premanand.

Poor Dayaram, the last great poet before the present age, and a fine lyrical poet of any time, scored only forty per cent. One may laugh, but Narmada - shankar was happy.

Even so, compensations were small, the difficulties great. By 1879, it had become almost impossible to run the house. The poet had again to migrate to Bombay to see if difficulties could be overcome. But they were too big to be overcome. One day in 1882, there was nothing to eat in the house. The poet smiled and said, "That is also a phase of life," ordered some puffed rice with a four-anna piece that was in the house and forgot about it.

Yet, in spite of all these difficulties, the poet was not able to do two things: To reconcile himself to the idea of accepting a full-time job, or to be less generous than he had been in the time of plenty. Some days prior to the incident narrated above, an old Brahmin had come to the poet with a note from a friend. He wanted some help. Narmadashankar ordered his secretary to give the Brahmin a hundred rupees. All the money the house contained was Rs. 7/-. The secretary asked the Brahmin to call after some days. When he returned, there actually was cash in the house, because a loving friend had sent a thousand rupees to the poet as a gift. The first sentence that the poet uttered on seeing that money was, "Keep apart a hundred rupees from this amount for that Brahmin, and do what you like with the rest."

In spite of all this, it became impossible to carry on. Some friends arranged for a job for the poet. Against his will, he was persuaded to accept it. It would fetch him a petty hundred rupees per month in return for looking after the charitable institutions of Shri Gokuldas Tejpal. After twenty-four years the poet again put on the apparel of service. When he went out to attend office, there were tears in the eyes of all present. The poet smiled wryly and said: "Look here, I am going to slavery." Navalram, his friend and biographer, notes that from that day to the day of his death nobody ever saw a smile on Narmadashankar's face.

During all these years of trouble, hardship and hard work, a great change had come over the outlook of the poet about everything on which he had held strong and extreme opinions before. Reform had now no longer the appeal for him that it once had had. Quite the contrary. The reformers he now felt had feet of clay, and the reform movement was ill-conceived and inappropriate, as it had not its roots in the genius of India. His reading of history, his experience of the reform movement, his meditations in his maturer days, and many other things besides, had convinced him that all his life he had been on a wrong track and that all the problems needed reconsideration. He sat down to reconsider them, and wrote

articles about that reconsideration and his conversion to orthodoxy, which he had so hated before. The fear that people would laugh at this *volte-face* of his did not touch him, as the fear that people would perhaps kill him for his views had not touched him when he went for debate with the Vaishnava Maharaja. The bulk of these articles dealing with his changed outlook was published in 1886, the year of his death, in a single volume, *Dharma Vichara*. This complete metamorphosis in the ideas and ideals of the poet has baffled students of his life and much speculation has taken place to explain the phenomenon. But there is consistency even in this apparently inconsistent change. The man is the same man, adamant, obdurate, uncompromising, and fearless. The same impetuosity and unreasoning obstinacy are apparent in the latter man as had been apparent in the former, though latterly, it tried to hide itself in a cloak of reasoned arguments and more mature prose-writing.

The stress and strain of this struggle, mental as well as material, physical as well as spiritual, was too much even for a man of Narmadashankar's make-up. He was broken much before he died. His body was racked by rheumatism and he had to leave service in 1885. But there was no relief. On the 26th of February, 1886, at the age of fifty-three in the presence of both his wives and son, this most romantic character in the literary and social world of the nineteenth century gave up the ghost.

Looking back at the man and his work after this period of seventy years since his death and a hundred and twenty-three years since his birth, one cannot but wonder at and admire the tremendous energy and the terrible drive that Narmadashankar possessed. He swept away all that came before him, good and bad alike, and tried to drive straight to the goal which the impulse of the moment dictated. He made mistakes—and who does not?—and he paid for them; but, mistake or no mistake, successful or not successful, the great thing to remember is that he went on working to the last days of his life, and went on uttering what he believed to be the truth, though the "truths" that he had advocated once, may have been quite the reverse of the "truths" that he was advocating at a later period of his life. It would not be amiss, therefore, now that the main outline of his life is sketched above, to assess and evaluate the work and worth of the man and the writer.

The actual period during which Narmadashankar wrote most of his poems is very short, only eleven years, from 1855 to 1866, but during those few years he composed a huge volume of verse, and so it is but natural that we turn to his poetry first. It is true, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he is the pioneer in our language of what we call modern poetry. The subjective note which is the essence of lyrical poetry was found first in his poems. Till then there were small love poems, of course, but the hero of the piece was always Krishna and the heroine, Radha or some other Gopi. It is true that through the symbolic use of these eternal lovers, the earlier poets gave vent to their personal emotions, but the artificial convention was always there and it was impossible for the poet to give vent to all the emotions that he, as a person, felt. Dayaram, the last great poet of mediaeval Gujarat—he died in 1852, only three years before Narmadashankar began writing poetry—had written some very lovely lyrics but they were all of the old style and the personal note was lacking.

Narmadashankar began with a personal note. He could be nothing if not subjective and personal. He was too much engrossed with himself to be anything else so far as this highest medium of human expression was concerned. That changed the very nature of the poetry that was written. But that was not the only change.

Narmadashankar was the first man in Gujarati literature who in his poems independently described natural phenomena. Nature had its place in poetry before him, but

not as worth poetizing about independently, for its own sake. The romantic nature of Narmadashankar kept him aloof from his fellows even on occasions of great joy, and he liked to be alone. At such times, nature gave him company and revealed its manifold beauties to him. He described them in verse and thus laid the foundation of nature-poetry in Gujarati literature.

He traveled quite a little for those days, and wrote poems about his travels, the first of their kind in the language.

He had many love affairs and love poems there are aplenty in his work.

He loved his country deeply and truly, and wrote many poems dealing with this aspect of his love. Nobody before him had ever, perhaps, thought of composing a poem of this nature. It was the education of the English and the sentiments which it inspired that furnished the motivating force.

He fought a great deal and there are poems of his that are full of fight.

Many of the lines in these poems are everyday household utterances in families in Gujarat.

He was a great social reformer, and the huge bulk of his poems bears the imprint of this great upsurge of the poet's mind. In one of his longer objective poems named "Vajesang and Chandba," the hero is a Hindu and the heroine a Muslim and they marry for love—an unheard-of and unthinkable thing in those days. He believed in freedom for women and in marriage for widows because widows were extremely unhappy, and wrote poems portraying the miseries of widows and the claims of women for a freer life.

All this he did, and much more, and it was enough for any man to be stamped as a pioneer of a new trend and the architect of a new age; but what of the poetic content of all this "poetry" of his? There were poets before him, and there have been poets after him. How would his work compare with the work of these others in its appeal as poetry? Unfortunately, the reply would not be very complimentary. He has written a huge volume of verse, but as poetry it is not of a high order. It is crude, rough, obscure at times and obscene very often. It does not show the refinement of a cultured soul, or the finish of an artist. There is great emotion at times, but the expression lacks taste. The vulgarity in many of his poems would put even a rough, unlettered, unsophisticated rustic to shame. He has written books about poetics and knows in theory all about what a poem should be but, in actual practice, what he calls poetry in his own compositions is many a time not poetic at all. To many of his poems he appends long notes to explain the meaning, which makes matters worse. Either the meaning gets more confused or the explanation does not stand justified by the actual words used in the verse. He is not a great poet, by any means. And perhaps... well, perhaps he does not understand what constitutes good poetry, in spite of the various books he wrote about *Rasa Shastra*, and the various others he studied under his English professors.

This lack of understanding of the finer element that is the essence of poetry is always apparent when Narmadashankar talks about what is the essential constituent of a poem! He calls it *Josso* in Gujarati, by which he means "emotional upsurge." The word is not a happy coinage, but that does not matter. Yes, emotion there should be in a poem; a poem without a background of emotion is no poem at all, but is that the only constituent of a good poem? Narmadashankar would seem to have thought, in the new poetry that he was writing, that it was the only necessity. Once it was there, everything *else* would automatically come, or, even if did not, it would not matter at all. Saintsbury has said somewhere that wrong beliefs

or opinions held by poets about the requirements of their art often lead them astray. In the case of Narmadashankar, they certainly have done so.

But, what then, is the explanation of the almost universal esteem in which he was held as a poet? The explanation would lie rather in the external circumstances of his time than in the internal merit of his poetry. He was doing something new, unique. He was fighting a battle. He was vociferous and unbeatable. And people had no clear ideas about what constituted real poetry of the new kind that he was attempting to write. Also he himself was fumbling for expression, and every weakness seemed to him the sign of a new merit. There was no critic worth the name in his days, and the great Navalram, in his first days of life as a critic, was approaching as a humble devotee the great master who was clothed in glory.

Thus, in spite of calling Narmadashankar a poet and honouring him as a pioneer and as a man working at a time when he had both to evolve a medium and at the same time to write in it, one cannot truthfully say that he was a great poet. There were possibilities in him of becoming a worthwhile poet, but he was not able to bring those possibilities to mature fulfillment.

But if thus Narmadashankar falls short of deserving a high place as a poet, his shortcomings in poetry are amply compensated by his prose. As he has noted, prose-writing was in his days of very recent growth. Whatever prose was written was not adequate to serve the purposes of literature. By common consent Narmadashankar is given the first place as a writer of prose. And here the honour due to him is not that due to a pioneer only, but that due to the wielder of a powerful instrument. From that day in 1850 on which he delivered his first speech about "The Advantages of Forming Associations" to the year of his death when *Dharma Vichara* came out, he had been using prose with greater and greater mastery.

The pioneering work that he did through this medium also is staggering. He wrote burning and biting articles about social reform, when formerly letters and the like only had been written in prose. He wrote the first book of history in the language. He composed a whole *Kosha* single-handed. He wrote thoughtful articles dealing with "Dharma" and, though they raised much controversy, the prose used in them was not the raw thing it had been in 1850-55. He was the first man to attempt an autobiography in his language. Though it is scrappy and incomplete, it has a great interest for students of Narmadashankar the man, and of his mind. And though much of the prose that he wrote bore all the marks of vulgarity, roughness, unrefined coarseness and the like, and was clearly journalism and not literature, it cannot but be said that he not only put the prose literature of Gujarat on its feet, but also himself contributed not a little to its great development later by his vigour, passion and personality. We must here agree with the view expressed by Mr. J. E. Sanjana, the most severe critic of Narmadashankar the man and the writer, that "Narmad has the honour of being the pioneer, the first great writer of Gujarati prose."

Turning from the writer to the man, we find that, in spite of all his great faults, he had a very powerful personality, and if one may say so, an admirable one, too. Yes, he had many faults, no doubt. He was vain and impulsive; he took offence without sufficient cause and offended in return in such a manner as to draw blood. He had no moral scruples in his relations with women, in spite of all his bombast about the equality of men and women, and the respect due to women. That he was a tyrant as a husband is evident from his conversation with his wife Dabigauri over his bringing another wife—a widow—into the house. He was often not charitable in his judgments of friends. And he was jealous—jealous, as said, of Dalpatram as a poet, and of Karsandas Mulji when he won great fame in the libel suit arising

out of his quarrel with the Vaishnava Maharaja. His faults were many, and of great magnitude. But he was great in spite of them. He was brave, very, very brave. Like charity, reform also begins at home, and he did not shirk it when his own turn came to make a reform. He belonged to the Nagar community—the topmost caste among the Brahmins. That caste was subdivided into Grihastha and Bhikshuka sections— people who took to trading and other jobs for their livelihood, and people who clung to the traditional ways of devoting themselves to rituals and the like and thus earned their bread. Narmadashankar belonged to the Bhikshuka section of the community. In his days it was a custom among the caste that when ladies were eating at a community dinner only the Grihastha ladies might put on *cholis*, and not the Bhikshuka ones. Narmadashankar would not stand this humiliating arrangement. On one such occasion in 1859, he asked the women of his household not to doff their *cholis* when they went for their dinner. There was a very great hue and cry. Religion was in danger. Many women ran away from the dinner at such a sacrilege. Even the women of his own caste resented this impious behavior. But Narmadashankar stuck to his guns. The custom perished. It may appear today to be a small thing, but it was no small thing in those days.

But even if it was a small thing, not requiring much courage but only audacity, his single-handed encounter with the Vaishnava Maharaja was no mean affair. It required courage of the most extreme sort. Even his life would be in danger, and he knew it. He would be unpopular with his friends. He knew that, too. But he went there and faced the ordeal for full five hours. When he was coming out of the meeting, people were thirsting for his blood. Some of them even asked him where the miscreant was, not realizing that the miscreant was there before them to be struck down. He replied, pointing in some direction: “There he goes!” He was saved, but he could as well have been beaten. He did not care.

Nobody would approve of his marrying the widow Narmadagauri in spite of his having a legally married wife, but it was no joke to take the decision that he took. His caste outlawed him, his friends and admirers did not like it, and people in general derided him. But he did not budge. If he had shouted himself hoarse to proclaim that widows should remarry, he was not the man to shirk when his turn came to put his precept into practice. That was the most honorable thing he could do under the circumstances, and he did it.

All these incidents bear witness to his bravery, but the bravest of all his actions was his proclamation from the housetops of his *volte-face*. He had turned his back on the ideas and ideals he had upheld and fought for during the greater part of his life. Now he was finding them all wrong. No, widows should not remarry. The greatest duty of woman was towards the man she had married, no matter what kind of man he was. The great wisdom piled up in the Hindu Sanatana Dharma Shastras contained the only truth worth following. All this talk about reform and changing the face of the world through it alone was so much bunkum. A Hindu should observe all the rules about eating and drinking prescribed by the Shastras and not be a libertine as he once had been. Well, since he had now found that these were the truths, he would proclaim them, and in no uncertain terms. People were aghast; many joked. Many more reviled. But Narmadashankar remained undaunted.

And it was not a fact, as some seem to suggest, that this reaction of his was inspired by considerations of popularity because the public was turning its back on reforms. True, the early enthusiastic and violently impulsive movement for reforms had given place to more sober thinking and a quieter approach, but the idea of reform was not dead. It was getting better organized and was being put in a more proper setting by the educated products of the new University of Bombay, whose first graduates were entering the fields of literature and social life. Narasimharao Divetia was writing poems about the miserable life of widows with

the same fervour as Narmadashankar had once done, but with much greater mastery over the craft. Govardhanram Tripathi was on the threshold of composing his great work, which is not a bible of orthodoxy at all. Manilal Nabhubhai was not as bigoted as many. And these were the new people who counted. Narmadashankar's great friend Navalram had already composed his poem powerfully satirizing the custom of child- marriage. In this atmosphere of enlightened reform, it demanded no small courage for a man like Narmadashankar openly to change his colors as he did. Right or wrong, wrong most certainly, he deserves the respect of all as a man who had the courage of his convictions.

Many have wondered at this *volte-face* of his and speculated about the causes, psychological and other, that made it possible. As there is no complete record of this later period of the poet's life, none can ever fathom all the causes that led to it, but the main cause seems to be the impulsive nature and temperament of the man—which ever pushed to extremes. In early childhood he was very religious and even superstitious. Under an opposite impulse, provided by his education in English and the friendships he formed in Bombay, he threw away his religious feelings, and, rushing to the other extreme, made irreligion his religion. The pendulum swung again, due to his experience of the world and the more mature thinking inspired by his reading of religious and historical books, and he rebounded to the earlier stand with a force much greater than any one could have imagined possible. But to students of the human mind and its behavior, this change of front in a man of Narmadashankar's psychological make-up, is not so great a puzzle as it must have been to people of his time.

His bravery and vision were not confined to the social sphere. Though Narmadashankar never took part in politics directly, even in those early days when he also, along with others, was praising the great benefits the British rule had conferred on India, he had the far-sightedness to see, and the boldness to proclaim, that without freedom, and that too not only from the social shackles, India would not rise to her full stature. He was the man who introduced the word "*Swadeshabhiman*" into the Gujarati language. He coined the word "*Swarajya*" more than twenty years before Dadabhai Naoroji, his revered professor at college, used it at a Congress session at Calcutta, and made it a rallying cry of all-India aspiration. He advocated the use of Hindi as a national language long before Mahatma Gandhi entered politics. It is true that he many times confused Nationalism with Hinduism, but that is the corollary, natural and not so very shocking as it seems to some, of the time in which he lived and the world in which he moved.

If we forget all the defects of the man and the writer, the one thing that strikes us most forcefully about him is his great industry. We cannot do better than remember, when we close the chapter of this brave man's life, the words of the great French painter Toulouse-Lautrec, who on his deathbed told his sorrowing mother:—"Mother, I have debauched, I have drunk, but I have painted." We can also truthfully say about Narmadashankar that he, too, had debauched, he too had drunk, but he too had worked hard, really hard, to the end of his days, so that his language and literature might become richer, and his society happier.

Narmadashankar died in 1886. In 1887, two epoch-making events took place in the world of Gujarati letters. One was the publication of the first volume of Govardhanram Tripathi's immortal classic *Saraswatichandra*. Another was the publication of Narasimharao Divetia's book *Kusum Mala*. One was in prose, the other in verse. Modern Gujarati literature owes a great, great deal to the publication of these two books. Would both or either of these two have been possible without the Herculean efforts and the immense amount of spade work of the pioneer of both these forms in their modern shape? We do not know, but we do

Feel that his efforts were not fruitless, and so we can joyfully accept the advice that the poet gave to his lovers and admirers in one of his famous lines, not to mourn for him. He wanted that line to be inscribed in stone. It has not been engraved in stone, but it is inscribed in the hearts of his countrymen for ever and for ever.