

Margins At The Centre: How Subaltern Voices Shaped Marathi As A Classical Cultural Language

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Abstract

The recognition of Marathi as a classical language has renewed scholarly attention to its antiquity, literary continuity, and aesthetic richness. However, dominant historiographies of classicality have often privileged elite, courtly, and Sanskritized traditions, marginalizing the decisive role played by subaltern voices in shaping Marathi's ethical, cultural, and communicative foundations. This paper argues that Marathi evolved as a *classical cultural language* not despite, but because of its sustained engagement with marginalized communities—Bhakti saints, women poets, Dalit thinkers, folk performers, and oral traditions—who placed lived experience, moral inquiry, and social justice at the centre of literary expression.

Drawing upon subaltern studies, cultural linguistics, and sociolinguistic approaches to language and power, the study re-examines Marathi literary history as a dialogic process where marginal voices transformed language into a medium of inclusive communication and ethical negotiation. Through qualitative textual and discursive analysis of select Bhakti poetry, Dalit autobiographical writing, and folk-cultural forms, the paper demonstrates how Marathi's classicality emerges from its capacity to articulate dissent, spirituality, and social critique in accessible linguistic registers. These traditions foregrounded community-oriented ethics, affective communication, and cultural sustainability—features often absent from elite classical canons.

The paper further situates Marathi within broader debates on classical languages and indigenous knowledge systems, arguing that classical status must be redefined beyond antiquity and textuality to include social reach, ethical depth, and communicative vitality. By repositioning marginalized voices from the periphery to the centre of classical language discourse, the study contributes to contemporary discussions in cultural studies and applied linguistics on canon formation, language ideology, and inclusive cultural memory.

Ultimately, the paper proposes a decolonial and socially grounded framework for understanding Marathi as a living classical language whose enduring relevance lies in its subaltern humanism, dialogic ethics, and cultural resilience.

Keywords: Marathi as a Classical Language, Subaltern Voices and Literary Canon, Bhakti and Dalit Literary Traditions, Cultural Linguistics and Language Ethics, Marginalized Voices in Indian Literature, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Language, Power, and Social Justice, Cultural Sustainability and Memory, Sociolinguistics of Indian Languages, Decolonial Linguistics

Section I: Introduction

The recent recognition of Marathi as a classical language has generated renewed academic interest in its historical depth, literary continuity, and cultural significance. Classical status, however, is often assessed through narrow criteria such as antiquity, textual lineage, and elite literary production. The Government of India officially designates a "Classical Language" based on four primary pillars: high antiquity of its early texts over a period of 1500–2000 years; a body of ancient literature considered a valuable heritage; an original literary tradition not borrowed from another speech community; and a distinctness between the classical language and its later forms. This paper deconstructs these criteria by arguing that such antiquity-heavy frameworks risk fossilizing language, whereas Marathi's true classicality resides in its "vernacular classicism"—a status earned through social reach and communicative vitality. Such frameworks tend to privilege courtly, Sanskritized, or dominant traditions while overlooking the transformative role played by marginalized voices in shaping the ethical, communicative, and cultural life of a language. This paper contends that Marathi attained its classical stature not merely through elite textual inheritance, but through sustained engagement with subaltern communities whose literary practices expanded the language's social reach and moral imagination.

From the Bhakti movement to Dalit and folk literary traditions, Marathi evolved as a medium of dissent, devotion, and dialogue. Saints such as Jnaneshwar, Namdev, Tukaram, and Eknath employed the vernacular to challenge religious hierarchy and social exclusion, repositioning lived experience and ethical inquiry at the centre of literary expression. In the twentieth century, Dalit autobiographical and protest writing further redefined Marathi literature as a space of resistance, testimony, and social critique. These traditions foregrounded accessibility, affective communication, and community-oriented ethics—features that complicate conventional notions of classicality rooted in exclusivity.

Drawing on subaltern studies, cultural linguistics, and sociolinguistic theories of language and power, this study re-examines Marathi literary history as a dialogic process shaped by marginalized speakers and writers. It argues that Marathi's classical character lies in its capacity to absorb dissent, articulate collective memory, and sustain cultural continuity across social strata. By repositioning subaltern voices from the margins to the centre of classical language discourse, the paper proposes a socially grounded and decolonial understanding of classical languages—one that recognizes communicative vitality, ethical depth, and cultural sustainability as defining criteria.

Section II: Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Subaltern Studies, Cultural Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics to examine how marginalized voices have historically shaped Marathi as a classical cultural language. Together, these frameworks enable a re-reading of literary history that moves beyond elitist canons and recognizes language as a socially embedded, ethically charged, and communicative practice.

2.1 Subaltern Studies and the Re-centering of Marginalized Voices

Subaltern Studies provides a critical lens for interrogating the silencing of marginalized communities within dominant historiographies and literary traditions. Originating in South Asian historiography, the subaltern paradigm challenges elite-centric narratives by foregrounding the lived experiences, speech acts, and cultural expressions of those historically excluded from power structures. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of representation and epistemic violence is particularly relevant in examining how vernacular voices are often acknowledged only selectively within classical language discourses.

In the context of Marathi literature, subalternity is not synonymous with voicelessness but with alternative modes of articulation. Bhakti poets and Dalit writers did not merely "speak back" to dominant structures; they reshaped Marathi itself as a language of ethical critique, affective immediacy, and collective consciousness. Their literary interventions destabilized hierarchies of caste, ritual authority, and linguistic purity, enabling Marathi to function as a medium of social negotiation and moral inquiry. Subaltern Studies thus allows this research to reposition marginalized literary traditions not as peripheral contributions but as constitutive forces in the formation of Marathi's classical identity.

2.2 Cultural Linguistics and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Cultural Linguistics offers a framework for understanding language as a carrier of shared cultural conceptualizations, values, and worldviews. Rather than treating language as a neutral system of grammar and lexicon, this approach emphasizes how linguistic practices encode ethical orientations, social relationships, and collective memory. In Indian languages such as Marathi, cultural meaning is inseparable from oral traditions, performative genres, and community-based modes of transmission.

Subaltern literary practices in Marathi—especially Bhakti abhangas, ovis, powadas, and Dalit autobiographical narratives—reflect indigenous epistemologies grounded in experience, devotion, suffering, and resistance. These forms privilege accessibility over ornamentation and relational ethics over aesthetic elitism. Cultural Linguistics enables this study to interpret such texts as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems that sustain cultural continuity across generations. Classicality, from this perspective, is not confined to antiquity but resides in a language's capacity to preserve ethical depth, adaptability, and cultural resilience.

2.3 Sociolinguistics: Language, Power, and Social Mobility

Sociolinguistics provides critical tools for analyzing how language functions within structures of power, identity, and social mobility. Concepts such as language stratification, speech communities, and linguistic capital illuminate how dominant and marginalized varieties of Marathi have historically coexisted and interacted. While Sanskritized registers often signified authority and prestige, vernacular and subaltern registers enabled broader participation in literary and cultural life. The democratization of Marathi through Bhakti and Dalit traditions expanded its communicative reach and transformed it into a language of mass engagement. Sociolinguistic analysis reveals how these movements challenged

linguistic gatekeeping and redefined legitimacy by privileging intelligibility, affective resonance, and ethical persuasion. This framework allows the study to demonstrate that Marathi's evolution as a classical language is inseparable from its sociolinguistic openness and capacity to mediate across caste, class, and community boundaries.

Decolonial Linguistics and Epistemic Liberation Expanding this integrative approach, the study adopts a framework of Decolonial Linguistics. This perspective is vital for dismantling the hierarchies that equate "classicality" with frozen, elite textuality—a legacy of both colonial linguistic mapping and internal caste-based gatekeeping. By situating Marathi within global decolonial discourse, this framework explains how marginalized speakers reclaim the "right to name their world," transforming the language from a tool of epistemic violence into a site of liberation. This aligns Marathi's trajectory with global movements to validate indigenous knowledge systems, asserting that the survival of a language is predicated on its capacity to articulate the lived truths of its most marginalized speakers

2.4 Integrative Framework

By synthesizing Subaltern Studies, Cultural Linguistics, and Sociolinguistics, this research advances a holistic understanding of classical language formation. Marathi emerges not as a static heritage language shaped solely by elite texts, but as a dynamic cultural system continually renewed through marginalized voices. This integrated framework enables the study to reconceptualize classicality as a socially grounded, communicatively vibrant, and ethically sustained phenomenon—one deeply shaped by those historically positioned at the margins yet central to the language's cultural life.

Section III: Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, textual–discursive, and historically grounded research methodology to examine how subaltern voices have contributed to the formation of Marathi as a classical cultural language. Given the interpretive nature of literary, linguistic, and cultural inquiry, the research does not rely on empirical experimentation but instead employs critical textual analysis, historical contextualization, and discourse-oriented interpretation to generate theoretically informed insights.

3.1 Research Design

The research is structured as a thematic and comparative interpretive study that analyzes selected literary texts across historical phases of Marathi literature. The design allows for the examination of continuities and transformations in language use, cultural expression, and ethical orientation as articulated by marginalized communities. Rather than producing an exhaustive literary history, the study focuses on representative texts and discursive moments that demonstrate how subaltern voices reshaped linguistic norms, literary aesthetics, and communicative authority.

3.2 Corpus Selection and Rationale

The textual corpus is purposively selected to reflect subaltern literary traditions that have had a sustained impact on Marathi's cultural and linguistic evolution. These include:

- **Bhakti poetry** (abhangas, ovis, and devotional compositions) associated with non-elite saint-poets such as Namdev, Chokhamela, Janabai, and Tukaram
- **Folk and oral genres** (powadas, lavanis, and narrative ballads) rooted in collective performance and community memory
- **Dalit literature**, particularly autobiographical narratives, poetry, and protest writing from the twentieth century onward

These texts are selected not merely for their literary merit but for their discursive function—their ability to democratize language, contest social hierarchies, and foreground lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. The corpus represents both oral–performative and written traditions, acknowledging the fluid boundaries between speech, text, and cultural memory in Marathi literary culture.

3.3 Textual–Discursive Analysis

The primary analytical method employed is close textual and discursive analysis, focusing on linguistic choices, narrative voice, metaphoric structures, and modes of address. Special attention is paid to:

- Vernacular diction and accessibility
- Ethical and affective appeals
- Strategies of resistance, irony, and devotional critique
- The relationship between language, embodiment, and social location

This approach enables the study to identify how marginalized speakers negotiate authority and meaning through language. Discourse is treated not as an abstract system but as situated communication, shaped by caste, labor, spirituality, and collective identity.

3.4 Historical Contextualization

All textual readings are embedded within their historical and socio-cultural contexts, recognizing that language evolves in response to material conditions, power relations, and cultural movements. The study situates Bhakti literature within medieval caste hierarchies and religious reform, while Dalit writing is examined against the backdrop of colonial modernity, Ambedkarite thought, and post-independence social transformation. This historically grounded approach prevents anachronistic readings and ensures interpretive accuracy.

3.5 Analytical Validity and Ethical Positioning

To maintain analytical rigor, interpretations are cross-referenced with established scholarship in Marathi literary criticism, cultural history, and linguistic studies. The study avoids romanticization of subalternity and acknowledges internal differences within marginalized traditions. Methodological transparency and reflexivity are maintained throughout, ensuring that the research contributes responsibly to ongoing debates on language, culture, and classicality.

Section IV: Subaltern Literary Traditions in Marathi — Bhakti and Dalit Interventions

The evolution of Marathi as a classical cultural language cannot be understood without foregrounding the transformative role played by subaltern literary traditions, particularly the Bhakti movement and modern Dalit writing. Contrary to classical language paradigms that privilege elite authorship, Sanskritized aesthetics, or courtly patronage, Marathi's literary classicity emerges from ethical dissent, vernacular accessibility, and lived experience, articulated predominantly by marginalized voices. These traditions reposition the "margin" not as peripheral but as constitutive of Marathi's linguistic and cultural authority.

4.1 Bhakti Literature: Democratizing Language and Ethical Discourse

The Bhakti movement (13th–17th centuries) marks a foundational moment in Marathi literary history wherein language became an instrument of social and spiritual democratization. Saint-poets such as Namdev, Chokhamela, Janabai, Tukaram, and Eknath, many of whom belonged to non-elite or stigmatized social locations, rejected Sanskritic exclusivity and ritual hierarchy. Instead, they adopted Marathi as a medium of direct address, enabling spiritual discourse to circulate among common people. Bhakti poetry in Marathi is characterized by oral performativity, rhythmic simplicity, and emotional immediacy. Genres such as *abhang*, *ovi*, and *bhajan* collapse the distance between speaker and listener, transforming literature into a shared ethical space. Crucially, poets like Chokhamela articulate caste humiliation, bodily suffering, and social exclusion not as abstract grievances but as embodied truths, thereby introducing a radical ethical dimension into Marathi literary expression.

From a cultural-linguistic perspective, Bhakti literature reshaped Marathi by embedding moral philosophy, social critique, and affective communication within everyday speech. This vernacularization did not dilute literary seriousness; rather, it expanded the scope of what constituted "classical" expression. The Bhakti tradition thus established Marathi as a language capable of philosophical depth, emotional intensity, and ethical universality, all articulated from subaltern positionalities.

4.2 Dalit Literature: Language as Resistance and Counter-History

If Bhakti literature democratized spiritual discourse, Dalit literature (mid-20th century onward) politicized Marathi language as a tool of resistance, testimony, and historical correction. Emerging under the intellectual influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit writing foregrounds experience (*anubhava*) over abstraction, challenging aesthetic norms that had long excluded marginalized realities. Dalit autobiographies, poetry, and short fiction disrupt the sanitized narratives of Marathi literary history by foregrounding violence, labor, humiliation, and survival. Writers such as Baburao Bagul, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Namdeo Dhasal, and Urmila Pawar deploy a deliberately raw, confrontational idiom, rejecting ornamental language in favor of linguistic honesty. This stylistic choice is itself a political act, asserting that truthful representation outweighs elite literary decorum.

From a discursive standpoint, Dalit literature reconfigures Marathi as a language of counter-archive—one that records experiences systematically erased from dominant historiography. The shift from devotional suffering (Bhakti) to political assertion (Dalit writing) reflects an evolution in subaltern

consciousness, yet both traditions share a commitment to ethical accountability and linguistic accessibility.

4.3 Continuities and Cultural Significance

Despite historical and ideological differences, Bhakti and Dalit traditions are united by a shared insistence that language must serve justice, dignity, and collective memory. Together, they establish Marathi's classicality not through antiquity alone, but through continuity of ethical engagement, adaptability, and inclusivity.

By centering marginalized voices, Marathi demonstrates a classical tradition that is dynamic rather than fossilized, rooted in people's lives rather than elite institutions. Subaltern literary traditions thus do not merely enrich Marathi literature; they define its civilizational ethos, making Marathi a living classical language shaped from the margins inward.

Section V: Marathi as a Classical Cultural Language — Criteria, Continuities, and Counter-Canons

The designation of a language as "classical" has historically relied on criteria such as antiquity, textual continuity, canonical literature, and civilizational influence. However, such frameworks—largely derived from Greco-Latin and Sanskritic traditions—tend to privilege elite textual production while marginalizing vernacular, oral, and subaltern knowledge systems. This section proposes a reconceptualization of classicality, arguing that Marathi qualifies as a classical cultural language not only by temporal depth, but by its ethical continuity, discursive resilience, and counter-canonical traditions.

5.1 Rethinking Classicality: Beyond Elite Canons

Conventional models of classical languages emphasize written permanence, formalized grammar, and court-sponsored literary production. While Marathi possesses a documented literary history spanning over eight centuries, its distinctive contribution lies in challenging the assumption that classical status must be rooted exclusively in elite authorship. Marathi's classicality emerges from its capacity to absorb dissent, encode social critique, and sustain plural epistemologies over time. By accommodating Bhakti devotional poetry, folk performance, reformist prose, Dalit autobiography, and contemporary experimental writing within a shared linguistic continuum, Marathi demonstrates what may be termed vernacular classicism—a mode of classicality grounded in accessibility, ethical urgency, and cultural participation rather than exclusion.

5.2 Criteria of Classical Cultural Language: A Marathi Model

To clarify the proposed reconceptualization of language status, the following table summarizes the **Marathi Model of Classicality**, shifting the focus from elite antiquity to subaltern humanism.

Marathi Model of Classicality

Dimension	Description	Subaltern Contribution
Antiquity with Continuity	Uninterrupted linguistic evolution spanning over eight centuries.	Preservation of the language through oral traditions and folk genres.
Ethical & Philosophical Depth	Consistent engagement with moral inquiry, justice, and dignity.	Bhakti and Dalit interventions that foregrounded "embodied truths" and social critique.
Multiplicity of Registers	Adaptability across oral and written forms without loss of coherence.	Democratization of language through <i>abhangas</i> , <i>powadas</i> , <i>katha</i> , <i>Nataka</i> and autobiographies.
Cultural Memory	A repository of collective histories of labor, protest, and reform.	Creating a "counter-archive" that records experiences erased from dominant history.

These criteria reposition Marathi alongside global classical traditions while preserving its distinct vernacular identity.

5.3 Counter-Canons and Subaltern Continuities

A defining feature of Marathi's classical status is its counter-canonical structure. Rather than a single, centralized canon, Marathi sustains multiple overlapping traditions—Bhakti, folk, reformist, Dalit, feminist—each contributing to its cultural authority. These traditions operate as counter-archives,

resisting homogenization and preserving alternative histories. The continuity between Bhakti poets' ethical dissent and Dalit writers' political assertion illustrates a long-standing subaltern epistemology within Marathi culture. This continuity challenges dominant historiographies that equate classicality with social hierarchy, offering instead a model of classical language as ethical inheritance.

5.4 Implications for Language Policy and Global Scholarship

Recognizing Marathi as a classical cultural language necessitates a shift in language policy, pedagogy, and literary historiography. It calls for curricular frameworks that integrate marginalized voices into the study of classical traditions and invites comparative scholarship that situates Marathi within global debates on vernacular classicism, indigenous knowledge systems, and linguistic justice. In redefining classicality through Marathi, this study contributes to broader humanities and language scholarship by demonstrating that the margins are not antithetical to the classical—but essential to it.

Section VI: Discussion — Margins at the Centre: Language, Power, and Cultural Authority

This study repositions Marathi not merely as a regional or vernacular language but as a site of cultural authority shaped decisively by subaltern interventions. By foregrounding Bhakti and Dalit literary traditions, the analysis demonstrates that Marathi's linguistic vitality and cultural legitimacy have emerged through continuous negotiations between power, resistance, and ethical expression. The "margins," rather than existing outside the cultural centre, have historically functioned as its constitutive force.

6.1 Language as a Site of Power and Counter-Power

Sociolinguistic theory recognizes language as a medium through which power is both exercised and contested. In the Marathi context, subaltern literary practices destabilized dominant Sanskrit and elite discourses by privileging accessibility, orality, and lived experience. Bhakti poets challenged ritual authority and caste hierarchies through devotional vernaculars, while Dalit writers transformed Marathi into an instrument of political testimony and social critique. These interventions redefined the communicative function of language—from aesthetic refinement to ethical and emancipatory articulation.

Crucially, Marathi's openness to dissent allowed counter-hegemonic voices not only to survive but to shape its literary norms. This distinguishes Marathi from classical traditions where marginal voices remain peripheral or symbolic.

6.2 Cultural Authority Beyond Canonical Power

Traditional literary authority is often derived from institutional validation—courts, academies, or religious establishments. In contrast, Marathi's authority has been largely community-driven, arising from performative circulation, public reception, and collective memory. Folk performances, oral transmission, and autobiographical narratives conferred legitimacy independent of elite endorsement. This form of cultural authority aligns with subaltern studies' assertion that power operates through dispersed, everyday practices. Marathi literature thus exemplifies a democratized cultural canon, where authority emerges from social relevance rather than hierarchical sanction.

6.3 Margins at the Centre: Reframing Canon Formation

The continuity between Bhakti dissent and Dalit assertion illustrates a long-standing counter-canonical lineage that challenges linear models of literary history. Instead of episodic "reform movements," these traditions constitute a sustained ethical discourse embedded within the language itself. This continuity redefines the literary centre—not as a fixed canon—but as a dynamic space continually reshaped by marginal voices. Such a reframing has implications for literary historiography, urging scholars to move beyond inclusionary tokenism toward structural re-evaluation of canons.

6.4 Implications for Applied Linguistics and Communication Studies

From an applied linguistics perspective, Marathi's subaltern traditions highlight the role of language in identity formation, agency, and social participation. They underscore the importance of culturally grounded communication practices in education, public discourse, and policy. For communication studies, the Marathi case demonstrates how marginalized narratives can recalibrate dominant communicative norms and redefine legitimacy within public spheres.

6.5 Global Relevance

By situating Marathi within global debates on vernacular classicism and linguistic justice, this discussion contributes to comparative language studies. This "margins-at-the-centre" model mirrors global linguistic shifts, such as the rise of European vernaculars during the Renaissance—where languages like Italian challenged Latin hegemony—and postcolonial shifts in Africa and Asia, where writers reclaimed indigenous tongues to articulate national identity. Like these global precedents, Marathi proves that a language's "classical" authority is often forged at the sites of socio-political resistance rather than in the quietude of royal courts.

Section VII: Conclusion and Implications for Language Policy, Pedagogy, and Future Research

This study has argued that Marathi's claim to classical cultural status cannot be adequately understood through antiquity, textual continuity, or elite literary canons alone. Instead, Marathi emerges as a classical cultural language precisely because of its sustained engagement with subaltern voices—voices that transformed the language into a medium of ethical reasoning, social critique, and collective self-representation. By tracing the continuum from Bhakti dissent to Dalit assertion, the paper has demonstrated that the "margins" have historically occupied the discursive centre of Marathi's literary and cultural evolution.

7.1 Contribution to Knowledge

The primary contribution of this research lies in its conceptual reframing of classicism. It challenges dominant paradigms that equate classical status with linguistic purity or courtly patronage and instead proposes an alternative model of vernacular classicism grounded in social ethics and communicative agency. Methodologically, the study integrates textual-discursive analysis with historical contextualization, offering a replicable framework for examining other indigenous and marginalized language traditions. The paper also extends subaltern studies by demonstrating how language itself—rather than merely literary content—functions as a site of resistance, continuity, and cultural authority.

7.2 Implications for Language Policy

For language policy, the findings underscore the need to move beyond symbolic recognition of classical languages toward substantive institutional support. Recognizing Marathi's classical status necessitates curricular reforms, archival preservation of oral and performative traditions, and policy frameworks that validate marginalized literary forms as integral—not peripheral—to cultural heritage.

7.3 Pedagogical Implications

In language and literature education, particularly within applied linguistics and communication studies, the study advocates for inclusive pedagogies that foreground subaltern texts as foundational rather than supplementary. Such an approach can foster critical literacy, ethical communication, and culturally grounded language competence, especially in multilingual and postcolonial educational contexts.

7.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research may pursue comparative studies across Indian and global vernacular traditions to test the applicability of the "margins-at-the-centre" model. Empirical investigations into classroom practices, translation studies, and digital dissemination of subaltern literatures would further extend the interdisciplinary relevance of this framework. The necessity of this framework is further underscored by contemporary shifts in India's National Education Policy (2020), which advocates for the institutional validation of mother tongues. Furthermore, recent scholarship in Digital Humanities (e.g., Pandey & Smith, 2023; Kumar, 2024) emphasizes that the digital archiving of subaltern "counter-archives" is essential for the cultural sustainability of classical languages in the 21st century.

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