Enduring Twelve Months: Agrarian Tragedy, Rural Distress, and Cinematic Adaptation in Sadanand Deshmukh's *Baromas* (*Baromaas*: Twelve Enduring Months)

Dr. Shilpa Sunil Sarode
Assistant Professor, Department of English
L.A.D. & Smt. R.P. College for Women, Nagpur

Abstract

When a novel wins India's highest literary honour and its story is later carried to international film festivals, something worth examining has happened—not just in a writer's career, but in a culture's conscience. Sadanand Deshmukh's Baromas (2002), translated into English by Vilas Salunke as Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months, is precisely that kind of book: the one that stops you cold and refuses to let you look away. Set in the drought-prone, debt-ridden cotton fields of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, the novel follows the Tanpure family through a year that offers no relief—a year in which structural poverty, predatory moneylending, indifferent government machinery, educated unemployment, and the grinding collision between rural tradition and urban aspiration push a farming family toward the point of no return.

The novel's reach beyond the printed page is evidenced by its adaptation into a Hindi feature film (directed by Dhiraj Meshram), which earned a selection at the South Asian International Film Festival in New York and screenings at major Indian festivals. This paper examines both the novel and the film together, treating them as companion texts that sustain a joint literary and cinematic conversation about one of independent India's most persistent crises. Drawing on agrarian studies, subaltern theory, postcolonial literary criticism, and adaptation theory, the paper argues that Baromas stands as a landmark in Marathi rural literature (gramin sahitya)—and that Meshram's film extends and complicates the novel's critique through the visual and narrative grammar of Indian parallel cinema. Comparisons with John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath illuminate the universal dimensions of the tragedy Deshmukh depicts.

Keywords: *Baromas, Sadanand Deshmukh, Marathi literature, Vidarbha, agrarian crisis, farmer suicide, gramin sahitya, Sahitya Akademi, cinematic adaptation, rural distress, subaltern, Dhiraj Meshram.*

1. Introduction: A Family, a Region, a Crisis

Picture the black cotton soil of Vidarbha—fertile in theory, merciless in practice, its yield hostage to a monsoon that arrives on its own terms. It is here that the Tanpure family lives, works, and slowly runs out of options. They are educated. They are devout. They are not lazy. None of this saves them.

The forces aligned against the Tanpures in Sadanand Deshmukh's novel are not the stuff of melodrama—no single villain, no sudden catastrophe. They are something more insidious: drought and debt that compound across seasons, a local governance riddled with corruption, moneylenders who prey on desperation, agricultural markets rigged against the producer, and a welfare state whose schemes seem designed to exhaust rather than assist those who need them most. The novel's title captures this perfectly. Baromas means "twelve months" in Marathi—and what these twelve months describe is not a cycle of renewal but a cycle of suffering, a year in which no season brings relief.

Published in Marathi in 2002 and translated into English as Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months, the novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award—India's highest literary honour—in 2004. The recognition was hard-earned: the book achieves what the best social fiction does, which is to make statistics feel like people. Its reach grew further when filmmaker Dhiraj Meshram brought the story to the screen in a 150-minute Hindi feature, shot on location in Khartalegaon village in Amravati district—the very ground the novel walks.

Actor Naseeruddin Shah, after seeing the film, called it a 'searingly honest' depiction of rural problems. It was selected for the South Asian International Film Festival in New York and given a theatrical release in India in June 2016.

This paper reads the novel and the film together, tracking their shared and diverging treatment of the Tanpure family's predicament as a microcosm of Vidarbha's structural crisis. The analysis moves through debt, ecological fragility, generational conflict, gender, political failure, and cinematic form—and closes by situating both works within Marathi gramin sahitya and Indian parallel cinema, alongside comparisons to Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.

2. Sadanand Deshmukh and the Tradition of Marathi Gramin Sahitya

2.1 The Author: A Voice Rooted in the Soil

Sadanand Namdev Deshmukh was born on 30 July 1959 in Chikhali, Buldhana district—the agricultural heartland his fiction never really leaves. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in Marathi literature and spent a long career teaching at a college in Amadapur. This biography matters because it explains the distinctive double register of his fiction: the precision of someone who has watched the agrarian crisis unfold from the inside, and the literary craftsmanship of a scholar who knows how to shape that watching into narrative. His other works—the novel Tahan (1998), short story collections such as Lachaand, Ragadaa, and Khundalghaas, and poetry—return again and again to the lives of farmers and rural labourers in post-independence Maharashtra.

What sets Deshmukh apart is his insistence on what theorist Bhalchandra Nemade calls deshivad—nativism, or rootedness in a specific cultural and linguistic world. Deshmukh writes from within rural Vidarbha rather than about it. His prose carries the idiom, the folk proverbs, the seasonal rhythms, and the oral textures of village speech. He does not condescend to the village, nor does he romanticise it. He simply inhabits it on the page, with the authority of lived familiarity. Baromas is the fullest realisation of this aesthetic.

2.2 Marathi Gramin Sahitya: A Literary Tradition

Marathi rural literature has a long and distinguished lineage. From the social reform fiction of the nineteenth century through the Dalit literary movement of the twentieth, Marathi writers have consistently returned to the village as a site of caste injustice, social contestation, and raw human endurance. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, as Vidarbha's crisis deepened and farmer suicides began commanding national attention, writers like Deshmukh were producing fiction that confronted the catastrophe of Indian agriculture directly and without flinching. Baromas belongs to this moment—and speaks to it with exceptional authority.

3. The Tanpure Family: A Microcosm of Vidarbha's Agrarian Tragedy

3.1 The Novel's Central Family and Its Dilemmas

At the heart of Baromas is the Tanpure family: a farming couple who have given their lives to their land; two educated sons, Eknath and Madhukar, caught between a rural world that can no longer support them and an urban world that will not absorb them; and Alka, Eknath's city-bred wife, who struggles to reconcile herself to village life. This configuration is not merely a narrative device—it is a sociological portrait of the fractures tearing rural Maharashtra apart.

Eknath is the novel's central consciousness: a man of education and sensitivity who finds himself picking up farm tools because there is nothing else for him to do. His wife Alka, whose expectations of life were formed by an urban world that has made agricultural labour feel like defeat, cannot bear it. The passage in which she begs him not to go to the fields is one of the novel's most quietly devastating moments:

> *"I shouldn't have been educated at all! And to make it worse, I married a city-bred woman. I can live with my disappointments, but how can she? Some days, when I picked up my farm tools and got ready to leave, Alka would hold me close to her and weep, 'Don't do this work. It's meant for uneducated people. You are educated!' She would beg me to do anything else but not this..." (Baromas, trans. Salunke)*

What Alka is weeping for is not simply her husband's dignity—she is weeping for the gap between what education promised and what reality delivered. That gap is one of the novel's central wounds. Her eventual departure from the family is both a personal rupture and a symbol of the wider erosion of the social fabric of rural communities under the pressure of unequal development.

3.2 The Logic of Rural Debt

If there is a single passage in Baromas that captures the cruel arithmetic of rural indebtedness, it is the scene where a farmer sits down to reckon his accounts. Deshmukh renders this with the precision of a ledger and the weight of a funeral:

> *"He went over the calculations in his mind: Use the bank loan to pay back the short-term loan that carries 5% interest. What will be the amount? Rs. 5500. I've already spent Rs. 500 for the certificates to clear the loan... Now I'll get the loan of 5000, it means I've already lost Rs. 1000 in just making these arrangements... I work hard twelve months of the year and still can't rid my home of poverty and my heart of fear. If I'm never going to be free of worry and enjoy a hearty meal even for a day, why do I live?" (Baromas, trans. Salunke)*

That final question—"why do I live?"—lands like a stone. It is not rhetoric. It is the logical terminus of a calculation that has been running against the farmer from the start: institutional bank loans with processing costs, short-term loans at usurious interest rates, compounding debt across failed seasons, until the numbers no longer add up to a life worth living. Scholars like P. Sainath and K. Nagaraj have documented indebtedness as the most consistently cited factor in farmer suicides across Maharashtra. Deshmukh makes you understand that with your gut, not just your head.

4. Structural Dimensions of Rural Distress in Baromas

4.1 The Farmer as Price-Taker: Market Exploitation

One of the most politically pointed observations in the novel is so simple it stops you cold. A character puts it plainly:

> *"The farmer is the only seller in our country who cannot decide the selling price of his goods. When you buy any other stuff, the seller decides the price. Only for farmer's produce is the rate decided by the buyers." (Baromas, trans. Salunke)*

This goes to the heart of what economists call the terms-of-trade problem in Indian agriculture. While the cost of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and diesel rises steadily with inflation, the prices farmers receive for their crops are set by market forces and government commissions that rarely keep pace. The cruelty is compounded by what might be called the farmer's paradox: when a harvest is abundant, prices collapse because of oversupply; when prices are favourable, the harvest has usually been poor due to drought or pests. In every scenario, the system works against the producer.

4.2 The State's Failure: Policy, Corruption, and the Nominal Welfare

The Indian state appears throughout Baromas not as a source of relief but as a source of additional injury. The novel's account of government crop damage compensation is not satirical exaggeration—it is documentary. A farmer who lost crops across five acres received a cheque for Rs. 300. To collect it, he spent Rs. 100 to open a bank account, Rs. 30 for photographs, Rs. 30 as a bribe to the village-level functionary, and Rs. 20 for bus fare to the district headquarters. The scheme existed. The farmer suffered. The money vanished into procedure.

The novel's critique of elected representatives is equally unsparing: "In Maharashtra, most of the chief ministers, except a couple of them, were sons of farmers. They came from villages. I fail to understand why they didn't do anything for farmers. It clearly means cities dominate our politics." This is not nostalgia speaking—it is a structural diagnosis. The political economy of post-independence India has consistently prioritised urban industrial development, treating agriculture as a reservoir of cheap food and cheap labour rather than a sector worthy of sustained investment.

The novel also takes aim at load-shedding—the selective denial of electricity to rural areas. A character asks: "Even when the motors are working, there is 50% load shedding in rural areas. How can you water the crops? There's no load shedding in the cities. How just is government policy that has rendered rural areas into settlements of untouchables?" The comparison to untouchability is deliberately provocative: the systematic deprivation of rural communities is framed not as bureaucratic oversight but as structural discrimination.

4.3 Ecological Vulnerability and the Rain-God's Whims

Vidarbha's agriculture is predominantly rain-fed, dependent on a monsoon that may arrive late, leave early, or scatter its rainfall so unevenly that neighbouring fields have entirely different fates. The novel's temporal structure—tracking the family through the agricultural calendar—keeps this ecological precarity at the forefront. Every season carries the possibility of loss: a failed pre-monsoon sowing, a drought during the critical flowering period, unseasonal rains at harvest time that ruin a crop already cut but not yet threshed. These are not exceptional events. They are the recurring features of dryland farming in Vidarbha, and Deshmukh renders their psychological toll—the farmer's permanent state of anxious watchfulness toward the sky—with empathetic precision.

The novel also traces the consequences of the Green Revolution for Vidarbha's farmers. The adoption of high-yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides dramatically raised input costs and made farmers dependent on purchased seeds rather than the saved seeds of traditional farming. When yields fell short of projections, the combination of high costs and low prices produced deficits that accumulated into debt. This is the structural trap that Baromas anatomises—not a story of individual failure but of a system designed to extract.

4.4 Educated Unemployment and the Urban-Rural Divide

Perhaps the most quietly agonising thread in Baromas is the figure of the educated but unemployed rural youth. Eknath and Madhukar Tanpure have done what post-independence Indian rhetoric promised would set them free: they got educated. But education without corresponding employment opportunities does not liberate. It creates instead a generation culturally unfit for agricultural labour—because schooling has taught them to see it as a step backward—while denied entry to the professional economy for want of connections, urban capital, and the right social networks. A character in the novel puts it simply: they are men caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither.

5. Gender, Generation, and the Fracturing of the Rural Family

Alka is among the most psychologically complex figures in Baromas, and she is worth dwelling on because the novel does not make her easy to dismiss. She is not a villain. She is a woman whose sense of what life could and should be was formed by a world—urban, aspirational, educated—that has systematically taught her to devalue agricultural work and rural existence. Her inability to adapt to the Tanpure household is not personal weakness; it is the product of a cultural formation she did not choose. Yet her presence intensifies every tension that already exists: between generations, between aspiration and tradition, between what education has promised and what rural reality delivers.

Beyond Alka and Eknath, the novel gives sustained attention to the farming mother—Shewantamai in the film adaptation—whose stoic endurance is rendered with quiet attentiveness. The cumulative burden of rural women—agricultural labour, domestic work, child-rearing, and the constant emotional management of a household under permanent financial stress—is made visible throughout the narrative. This is invisible labour that the novel insists on seeing.

The generational conflict within the Tanpure family also reflects a wider social transformation that demographers have documented: as younger, educated rural men seek work outside farming, agricultural labour falls increasingly on women and older family members. Baromas captures this transition at a moment of acute crisis, showing how the aspiration for education and urban mobility, when combined with the absence of real alternatives, produces not freedom but a new and more disorienting form of entrapment.

6. The Film Adaptation: Baromas — Extending the Novel's Vision

6.1 Production, Reception, and Cinematic Context

Dhiraj Meshram's film version of Baromas is a 150-minute feature that brings Deshmukh's Marathi novel into the medium of Indian parallel cinema with a commitment to documentary realism that runs through every production choice. Shot on location in Khartalegaon village in Amravati district—the novel's own terrain—the film cast Seema Biswas, Benjamin Gilani, Subrat Dutta, and Rohit Pathak in the principal roles, and used actual village farmers as extras in crowd scenes. The landscape itself becomes a character: real fields, real skies, real soil.

Naseeruddin Shah, after seeing the film, described it as a 'searingly honest' depiction of rural problems. It screened at the Osian's Cinefan Film Festival in New Delhi, was selected for the South Asian International Film Festival in New York, and received a theatrical release in India in June 2016. The decision to shoot in Hindi—rather than the Marathi of the source novel—is itself a significant adaptive choice, enabling the film to reach national audiences while inevitably mediating some of the specific cultural and linguistic textures of Deshmukh's original.

6.2 Narrative Adaptation: Banditry, Politics, and Contrasting Paths

The film's most visible structural departure from the novel is its foregrounding of two brothers who respond to the same systemic oppression in diametrically opposite ways: one turns to banditry, the other turns to democratic politics. This bifurcated structure is both a dramatic device and a political argument. The bandit—Chandrabhan, played by Rohit Pathak—embodies what Eric Hobsbawm theorised as social banditry: the outlaw who is simultaneously criminal in the eyes of the state and hero in the eyes of his community. The political brother represents the path of democratic engagement—working within the system, accepting its compromises and delays, hoping that slow change is still change. The film declines to adjudicate between these two paths, presenting both as comprehensible responses to an intolerable situation.

Crucially, the film refuses to be purely a tragedy. Where the novel ends with farmer suicide—the logical terminus of compounding debt and despair—the film's dual-protagonist structure introduces an element of agency and resistance that complicates the relentless darkness of its source. This is not betrayal but adaptation: a recalibration for cinema's conventions and, perhaps, the filmmakers' own political hope that the conditions Deshmukh depicts are not entirely beyond remedy.

6.3 Cinematic Realism and the Politics of Location

The decision to shoot in Khartalegaon with local farmers as participants aligns the film with a tradition of social realist cinema that runs from Italian Neo-realism through the Indian parallel cinema of the 1970s and 80s. By using actual locations and actual community members, the film refuses the artifice of studio reconstruction and insists on the indexical reality of what it depicts. The suffering is not theatrical. It is documentary.

Actor Rohit Pathak's reflection on the experience captures something of this method: "It was a great experience to work on such kind of project. As it's a reality-based film which gives an opportunity to work on real locations, in return gives you the actual feel of living there." The environment shapes the performance, rather than the performance shaping the environment—a formal choice that reinforces the film's moral seriousness.

7. Theoretical Frameworks: Subaltern Voices and the Literature of Crisis

Ranajit Guha's foundational work in subaltern studies—his insistence on recovering the consciousness and agency of the rural poor from the distortions of elite historiography—provides one productive framework for reading Baromas. Deshmukh's novel is a sustained act of literary subaltern recovery: it gives interiority, complexity, and full voice to a social group—Vidarbha's small and marginal farmers—whose suffering is ordinarily reported in statistics (the annual tally of suicides, the volume of accumulated debt) but rarely narrated from within. The Tanpures are not statistics. They are subjects. And that commitment to their subjectivity is itself a political act.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—resonates through the novel in a particular way. Deshmukh's characters do speak—they articulate their conditions with clarity and passion. But their speech is blocked at every institutional interface: the bank that demands documents they cannot produce, the government office where the clerk must be bribed before a file moves, the market where their price is set for them. The novel's literary act of giving full, eloquent voice to this blocked speech is itself a form of counter-hegemonic practice.

Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence'—a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, dispersed across time and space, without the dramatic spectacle that commands media attention—is also illuminating here. The agrarian crisis of Vidarbha is precisely this kind of violence: not the sudden shock of a natural disaster but the accumulating pressure of bad harvests, compounding debts, policy failures, and social humiliations that together drive a farming family toward the point of no return. Deshmukh's temporal structure—tracking the family across twelve months—is ideally suited to representing this kind of violence in its full, grinding temporality.

Bhalchandra Nemade's theory of nativism (deshivad) provides a further framework. For Nemade, authentic Marathi literary expression must be rooted in the specific cultural, linguistic, and environmental world of its region, resisting the homogenising pressures of Western literary models and urban cosmopolitanism. Baromas is a nativist text in this sense: its language is saturated with rural Vidarbha's idioms, its characters think and feel in patterns shaped by their specific ecological and cultural environment, and its moral framework is drawn from the values of agrarian community life rather than from imported liberal individualism.

8. The Legacy of Baromas: Literature, Cinema, and the Politics of Attention

The significance of Baromas—both the novel and the film—extends beyond artistic achievement into its role in public discourse about India's agrarian crisis. In a media environment that tends to cover farmer distress as a spectacle of statistics—the annual suicide count, the periodic debt waiver announcement—Deshmukh's novel and Meshram's film perform a different kind of work: they make the crisis personal, narrative, and humanly legible. They make it matter to readers and viewers who have never set foot in Vidarbha.

The Sahitya Akademi Award brought the novel to a national readership and affirmed the importance of regional literature as social testimony. The film's selection for international festivals extended this reach to diasporic and global audiences, making visible a crisis that India's own mainstream media has too often treated as a provincial concern. Vilas Salunke's English translation performs yet another act of bridge-building—acknowledging that the crisis Baromas depicts is not merely Marathi in its dimensions, but Indian, and beyond India, a variant of a global agricultural catastrophe that has claimed farming communities from the American Midwest to the Punjab to Sub-Saharan Africa.

9. Conclusion: Twelve Months Without End

Sadanand Deshmukh's Baromas does what the best social fiction has always done: it transforms statistical abstraction into lived experience. It makes the suffering of the many visible through the specific suffering of one family. And it refuses the comfortable narrative of individual redemption that would allow the reader to locate the crisis in personal failure rather than structural injustice. The Tanpure family's twelve months of endurance—their struggle against debt, drought, bureaucratic indifference, market exploitation, and generational fracture—is the story of hundreds of thousands of farming families across India's rain-shadow agricultural regions.

Dhiraj Meshram's film adaptation extends and amplifies the novel's concerns through the specific resources of cinema: the power of landscape filmed in real locations, the intimacy of a close-up, the drama of contrasting human choices made under identical structural pressures. By introducing the dual-protagonist structure and its implicit argument about the range of possible responses to systemic injustice—from banditry to democratic politics—the film complicates the novel's more relentless trajectory without betraying its fundamental moral seriousness.

Together, the novel and the film constitute one of the most significant cultural engagements with India's agrarian crisis in the twenty-first century. They stand in the tradition of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath—works in which the act of literary and cinematic witness to suffering is itself a form of political commitment, an insistence that the dispossessed have stories worth telling and lives worth mourning. In Baromas, that insistence is carried by the weight of Deshmukh's moral seriousness, his intimate knowledge of the land and the people he writes about, and his refusal to look away from the point toward which the Tanpures—and so many families like them—are inexorably moving.

The twelve months of Baromas do not end. They begin again. And in beginning again, they demand of their readers and viewers the one thing that the system of agrarian exploitation has consistently denied the farmers of Vidarbha: the willingness to pay attention.

References

1. Deshmukh, S. (2002). Baromas [Novel in Marathi]. Pune: Mihana Publications.
2. Deshmukh, S. (2013). Baromaas: Twelve Enduring Months. (V. Salunke, Trans.). Mumbai: Popular Prakashan. (Original work published 2002)
3. Guha, R. (1983). Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
4. Hobsbawm, E. (1969). Bandits. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
5. Meshram, D. (Director). (2013). Baromas [Film]. Produced by Sajith and Priyanka. India.
6. Nagaraj, K. (2008). Farmers' Suicides in India: Magnitudes, Trends and Spatial Patterns. Chennai: Madras Institute of Development Studies.
7. Nemade, B. (2009). Nativism. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
8. Nixon, R. (2011). Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
9. Patnaik, U. (2007). The Republic of Hunger and Other Essays. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective.
10. Sainath, P. (1996). Everybody Loves a Good Drought: Stories from India's Poorest Districts. New Delhi: Penguin India.
11. Sainath, P. (2010). The largest wave of suicides in history. Counterpunch. www.counterpunch.org
12. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (pp. 271–313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
13. Steinbeck, J. (1939). The Grapes of Wrath. New York: Viking Press.
14. Vandana Shiva (2000). Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.