



REVISITING SANT TUKARAM AT THE PINNACLE OF BHAKTI TRADITION: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Savita Chavan

Assistant Professor,

Smt P.N. Doshi Women's College, Ghatkopar, Mumbai

Abstract:

The Bhakti movement was a religious movement occurred in medieval Hinduism that tried to bring religious reforms to all layers of society with the help of devotion to attain salvation. The Bhakti movement started regionally around numerous gods and goddesses, with some sub-sects which consisted of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism. This movement guided in local or regional languages soas the message to percolate to the masses. Many poet-saints encouraged the movement, embracing a wide range of philosophical stands ranging from theistic to atheistic. This movement empowered the growth of vernacular literature pan India. Sant Tukaram (c.1608 – c.1650) is a special contributor to this tradition. The paper aims to decipher his multifarious contribution to the growth and advancement of this powerful tradition and leaving behind great legacies for the future generations with strong message of devotion with salvation .

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Sant Tukaram (c.1608 – c.1650), colloquially known as 'Tuka', was a seventeenth century Marathi poet Sant of India, related to the Bhakti movement of Maharashtra. Tukaram was a devotee of Vitthal (a form of Lord Krishna- its temple is situated at Pandharpur in the Solapur district of Maharashtra), the supreme God in Vaishnavism. He is especially revered by the Varkari community. Tukaram's poetry is widely accepted and celebrated as the climactic point of the *Bhagawat* tradition which began with Sant Namdev. he Bhakti movement strengthened those at the bottom of Indian society and promoted the growth of vernacular or aboriginal literature. The Bhakti movement started in the southern portions of India, particularly Tamil Nadu, between the 7th and 12th centuries, and gradually spread to the northern belt by the end of the 15th century. In

South India, there were two major groups of Bhakti saints: Nayanars (Shiva Devotees) and Alvars (Vishnu Devotees), who advocated devotion to God as a way of salvation while rejecting the austerities preached by Buddhism and Jainism. The majority of their poems and works were on the devotional relationship between the devotee and God. They spoke and wrote in vernaculars such as Tamil and Telugu so that ordinary people could read and recite them. In Bhakti tradition, the presence of a priest was not required. This immensely increased the popularity of their movement.

The term 'Bhakti' originates from the Sanskrit word 'bhaj' which means to share, participate in, or be a part of. Unlike sensual love, Bhakti is spiritual and expects total devotion. Bhaktism arose as a result of several reasons. Hinduism had by then grown exceedingly



ceremonial, at the same time the caste system had taken prominence. Both Jainism and Buddhism advocated rigorous asceticism and were plagued by a lack of support. The Sufi movement, on the other hand, was gaining popularity due to its egalitarian beliefs and ease of prayer. People were searching for a way to satisfy their emotional and spiritual needs. These reasons supplemented the rise and expansion of the Bhakti tradition within Hinduism. Bhakti saints opposed established religion and advocated for several changes.

The two Schools of Bhakti

The Bhakti saints were separated into two schools based on how they perceived God. One school of thought envisioned God as formless, except traits or qualities. This school of thought is titled as the Nirguna School of Philosophy. The Saguna School, on the other hand, followed that God had a particular form, character, and positive attributes and that the god shows himself in incarnations such as Rama and Krishna.

Reasons for the Rise of the Bhakti movement: Historical Context:

Blind religious practices, unreasonable rituals, caste system and societal strict rules against humanity enquired for a new movement. An ordinary human being was looking forward to a flexible religious practices with minimal rituals if needed. The common man was in search of a simplicity of explanation of traditional knowledge. The milieu was struggling to receive a new way of social worshipping.

Kirtan and Sant Tukaram:

Tukaram promoted kirtan as a form of bhakti singing and dancing to be achieved collectively. For him Kirtan is a special kind of worship to the god. The beauty of kirtan lies in creating the path of salvation to many at one time. Kirtan is a Sanskrit word meaning narration of a religious story with the help of music and chorus wherever needed.

Vedanta Philosophy and Sant Tukaram:

A deep influence on the philosophy of Sant Tukaram is seen by Sant Namdev, Dnyaneshwar, Kabir, and Eknath.

Much of his philosophy is based on Vedanta though it lacks a concrete footage. He upholds the Vedanta theory of Indian scholars Madhvacharya and Ramanuja.

Varkari Sampradaya and Sant Tukaram:

Varkari is a person who performs a vari ie a religious journey (exclusively on foot) to Pandharpur on auspicious Ekadashis namely Ashadhi and Kartiki to be more specific. Varkari is a sect or a sampradaya connected specially with Maharashtra. Vitthal is the deity solely worshipped by varkaris. This group strictly shuns addictions like alcohol and tobacco. Varkari celebrates his or her annual journey to Pandharpur. Varkaris in this pilgrimage carry the saints' padukas in a special palenquin from Samadhi to Pandharpur. During the journey, Ringan and Dhava events are organised. It is believed that Sant Jnaneshvar started this custom which was followed by great reverence by Sant Namdev, Sant Eknath, and Sant Tukaram and many more bhakti saints.

Abhangas and Sant Tukaram:

Abhanga is a special kind of poetry composed in praise of Vitthal, also known as Vithoba. The word abhanga means from a non-ending or non-interrepting process of devotion towards god. Whereas the Bhajans highlight the inner journey of the soul. Abhangas are more lively expressions with direct communication with God and listener. Abhanga is a form of the ovi. Abhangas are sung by Varkaries during pilgrimage (Vari) to Pandharpur. Marathi *bhajans* are composed of *naman* and *Roopancha*. Naman means invocation to god while Roopancha means description of specific beauty of god via personificati. Finally, Bhajans provide a spiritual message to follow while lweading a short human life. There is a long tradition of bhajan singers for Abhangs like Bhimsen Joshi, Kishori Amonkar, Suresh Wadkar, Ranjani, Gayatri, Jitendra Abhisheki and Sudhir Phadke.

His Literary Contributions:

The Mantra Gita, a translation of the Bhagavad Gita in



the abhanga form is ascribed to Tukaram. It is an interpretation of the Gita from a Bhakti perspective. Another work ascribe to him is the Ghata, a collection of 4,500 abhangas. Gatha temple in Dehu, near Pune Maharashtra, is one of two local temples that mark the legacy of Tukaram. His poetry is carved on its wall. Tukaram composed Abhanga poetry, a Marathi genre of literature which is metrical (traditionally the *ovi* meter), simple, direct, and it fuses folk stories with deeper spiritual themes. Tukaram's work is known for informal verses of rapturous abandon in folksy style, composed in vernacular language, in contrast to his predecessors such as Dnyandeva or Namdev known for combining similar depth of thought with a grace of style. In one of his poems, Tukaram self-effacingly described himself as a "fool, confused, lost, liking solitude because I am wearied of the world, worshipping Vitthal (Vishnu) just like my ancestors were doing but I lack their faith and devotion, and there is nothing holy about me". *Tukaram Gatha* is a Marathi language compilation of his works, likely composed between 1632 and 1650. Also called *Abhanga Gatha*, the Indian tradition believes it includes some 4,500 *abhangas*. The poems considered authentic cover a wide range of human emotions and life experiences, some autobiographical, and places them in a spiritual context. He includes a discussion about the conflict between *Pravritti* – having passion for life, family, business, and *Nivritti* – the desire to renounce, leave everything behind for individual liberation, moksha.

Books and Translations:

Mahipati who is a biographer from 18th century has compiled the lives of various Bhakti movement sants, included Tukaram. Justin Abbott has translated Mahipati's treatise. Fraser and Marathe have translated and published more than 3000 poems by Sant Tukaram from his Gaatha in three volumes. They tried to offer a comparison of Tukaram's philosophy and theology with by then Christianity. Deleury, published a metric French

translation of a selection of Tukaram's poem in 1956. Arun Kolatkar published, in 1966, six volumes of avant-garde translations of Tukaram poems. Ranade has published a critical biography and some selected translation. Dilip Chitre -a wellknown bilingual poet has translated writings of Sant Tukaram in his work with the title *Says Tuka which* brought him the *Sahitya Akademi* award in 1994. Daniel Ladinsky also has translated and published some of Sant Tukaram's poems. *One Hundred Poems of Tukaram* is a published book by Chandrakant Kaluram Mhatre which includes selected abhangas by Sant Tukaram .

Basic Tenets of His Message:

One can enlist Sant Tukaram's basic tenets after a close study of many of his poems. Sant Tukaram suggests us to make God as the heart of one's life. He proclaims that let love for everything major or minor be the way of life. He insists to serve mankind, by visualizing existence of God in all living beings. He suggests us to cast away clothes of traditions since they create a barrier in experiencing the all pervadedness of god. He opposed traditional rituals, external shows of asceticism and exersion of austerities. He never supported spiritual attainments since they hinder the true worship. He advises to have Faith in Nature it is like a full surrender to the natural forces. He gave topmost importance to Naamjapa or the continuous recitation of god's name.

Maharashtrian Society, Culture and his Abhangas:

Tukaram's abhangs are welknown in Maharashtra. It became part of the culture of the state. Varkaris, poets and peoples study his poems. His poems are popular in rural Maharashtra and their popularity is increasing day by day. Tukaram was a devotee of Vithoba (Vitthala), an avatar of God Vishnu, synchronous with Krishna but with regional style and features. Tukaram's literary works, along with those of sants Dnyandev, Namdev and Eknath, states Mohan Lal, are credited to have propelled Varkari tradition into pan-Indian Bhakti literature.



According to Richard Eaton, from early 14th-century when Maharashtra region came under the rule of the Delhi Sultanate, down to the 17th-century, the legacy of Tukaram and his poet-predecessors, "gave voice to a deep-rooted collective identity among Marathi-speakers". Dilip Chitre summarizes the legacy of Tukaram and Bhakti movement sants, during this period of Hindu-Muslim wars, as transforming "language of shared religion, and religion a shared language. It is they who helped to bind the Marathas together against the Mughals on the basis not of any religious ideology but of a territorial cultural identity".

Mahatma Gandhi and Sant Tukaram:

Mahatma Gandhi too was influence by Sant Tukaram's humanitarian work. At his period of arrest by Englishmen, in the first half of 20th century, he read and translated Tukaram's poetry. His translation of some of his special abhangas by M.K.Gandhi published in 1930 can clarify the teachings by Sant Tukaram as follows- Saintliness is not to be purchased in shops, nor is it to be had for wandering, nor in cupboards, nor in deserts, nor in forests. It is not obtainable for a heap of riches. It is not in the heavens above, nor in the entrails of the earth below.

Tuka says: It is a life's bargain, and if you will not give your life to possess it, better be silent.

Merit consists in doing good to others, sin in doing harm to others. There is no other pair comparable to this. Truth is the only freedom; untruth is bondage, there is no secret like this.

God's name on one's lips is itself salvation, disregarding the name is perdition.

Companionship of the good is the only heaven, indifference is hell.

Tuka says: It is thus clear what is good and what is injurious, let people choose what they will.

All above 3 translations are taken from '*Sant Tukaram*', Translated by Mahatma Gandhi.

Places Associated with Sant Tukaram Today:

Tukaram Maharaj Janm Sthan Temple is situated at Dehu (Pune district in Maharashtra) his birth place . Sant Tukaram Vaikunthstan Temple is located at Dehu(Pune district in Maharashtra) from where he left for Vaikuntha. The Gatha temple preserves his 4,000 abhangas carved beautifully on its wall.

Movies and Popular Culture:

Poster of Sant Tukaram was released in 1936. A number of Indian films have been made about the saint in different languages. Movies and popular culture finds the portrayal of his works with great pride. Some examples can be considered as a silent movie on his life with the title 'Tukaram' first featured in the year 1921. Movie 'Sant Tukaram' is one more example which gained a wide popularity among the urban and rural masses. Sant Tukaram reached to Hindi, Kannada, Telugu language speakers too with the help of their language specific movies time to time in the second half of the 20th century. Receiving positioning in the issues of Amar Chitr Katha which is regarded as our nation's largest comic book is considered a high honour. Its 68th issue featured Tukaram and his saintly life and works. Balbharti had included a poem of him in school text book of Marathi subject. He was rightly honoured by the government of India by releasing a 100 rupees Silver coin in 2002 to commemorate this saintly figure.

Conclusion:

The multiferous contribution of Sant Tukaram in terms of his literary masterpieces, abhangas, kirtanas, practicing and preaching of Bhakti tradition has created a strong influence regionally, nationally and internationally. Therefore he deserves the nomenclature as 'the pinnacle of Bhakti tradition'. His impactful work was epoch-making and still imparts a constructive message to the bewildered postmodern humanity and to seek inner peace, stability, happiness, content and salvation through devotion (Bhakti).



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