



CONTRIBUTION OF MAHARASHTRIAN MYSTICS IN PIONEERING BHAKTI SAMPRADAYA

Dr. Kiran Save

Research Guide

Kirti Narayanrao Mardikar

Research Scholar

D.T.S.S. College of Commerce, Malad(E), Mumbai-400097

Abstract:

India has a rich cultural background of the Bhakti movement in medieval Hinduism which brought all strata of society together under one umbrella known as Bhakti, the only means of salvation or liberation. From the sixth century to till date Bhakti sampradaya has worked as a guiding light to the common people who strive for mental peace and liberation from their miseries of life. Since the sixth century, these mystics from Bhakti sampradaya have been guiding and attracting people through their poems and teachings. In the south, we can see works of Alwars, Shaiva Nayanars and in the north Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Smartism, Shaktism, and many more. Sant Meerabai's contribution to Bhakti Sampradaya is not unknown to anyone. Similarly, the case with Sant Kabir, Sant Lad ded; a woman mystic from Kashmir, and there are many more to name. At the same time in Maharashtra, this Bhakti movement flourished prosperously. Yadav's era in Maharashtra was considered a very important time for literature. This was the period when the important literature of Bhakti Sampradaya was written by great poet mystics of Maharashtra. Shree Mukundraaj, Sant Shree Dnyaneshwar, Swami Chakradhar, Sant Namdev, Sant Muktabai, Sant Tukaram, and Swami Ramadas, there are so many men and women mystics who gave their valuable contributions in enriching Bhakti Sampradaya with their literature and teachings as well. Their writings touched on all the dimensions of life like society, economical necessities, politics, sentimental aspects, self-development, upliftment of others, knowledge of Self and Ultimate Reality, and liberation from all the dualities of life.

Keywords: Maharashtra, Mystics, Bhakti Sampradaya, Sant, Literature, Culture, Liberation.

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Introduction:

When India was struggling to be free from the tyranny of caste discrimination, unemployment, untouchability, and unsensible rituals, Bhakti Sampradaya emerged as a ray of hope for the common people. Though our rich scriptures have all the solutions to our human problems, their interpretations were trapped by Brahmanical rapacity. At this time Bhakti Sampradaya gave assurance

about a society where anyone can pray, worship, and adore God irrespective of their caste and creed. In the 12th century, there was a rise of Varkari Sampradaya which was one of the sects in the Bhakti Movement. This Varkari Sampradaya was known for worshipping Vitthal, the deity of Pandharpur. The scholars from this Varkari Sampradaya are known as 'Sant'. Some of the names who have great contributions to enriching Varkari



literature and legacy are Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Nivruttinath, Sant Muktabai, Sant Namdev, Sant Janabai, Sant Chokhamela, Sant Soyarabai, Sant Bahinabai Pathak, Sant Tukaram, Sant Gadgebaba, etc. there are so many. They all have written on almost every aspect of life. Everyone tried to give zest of divine knowledge in the scriptures which was not easily available to the common people of the society. Their writings and teachings touched many dimensions of human life as social, political, spiritual, mental, interpersonal relationships, business, trades, ethics, reasoning, metaphysical as well as mystical.

Social Contribution of Varkari Sampradaya of Maharashtra:

When we are considering the social contribution of Sant of Varkari Sampradaya in the Indian social reformation contest we must mention the all-time great work of Sant Dnyaneshwar that is 'Bhavarthdipika' also known as 'Dnyaneshwari' which is a vernacular commentary of 'Bhagwat Geeta'. He is considered one of the founders and guiding light of the Varkari Sampradaya. He has included knowledge of Upanishads, Bhagwadgeeta, the Yoga Vasishtha, The Siva Sutras, Advait Vedanta of Shankaracharya, and his insights to create a spiritual lighthouse called "Dnyaneshwari". This Dnyaneshwari is one of the finest mystical works of all time. It consists of vernacular poetical explanations on the path of karma, Jnana, and Bhakti marg. He gives a beautiful explanation of Shree Krishnas Slokas through easy examples in commonly understandable language. Through his "Amritanubhav," he is throwing light on Shiva and Shakti and their Oneness. Through his "Changadevapasasthi" and "Haripaath" he gives knowledge of Triputi and the importance of prayers to God. He brought about a spiritual renaissance in Maharashtra which gave hope to common people that even they can walk the spiritual path without deep diving

into scripture. He highlighted the power of prayer through his writing from which layman came to know that even he can achieve the greatest spiritual state just by walking on a simple Bhakti path. He says about the power of prayers that

"Devaachiye dwari ubha kshanbhari, tene mukti chari saadhiyelya.

*Hari mukhe mhana Hari mukhe mhana, punyachi gananaa kon kari."*¹

It means, that even though we stand in front of God for a while and pray, we may achieve salvation. Only repeating his name and surrendering ourselves to him will be considered as the greatest merit.

He had contributed a lot to the social upliftment of that time. He being from a brahmin family and a so-called high-class man never believed in caste discrimination. He had followers from all the castes and classes. His Abhangas and other writings are all based on the Advaita Vedant Philosophy which is non-dualistic Indian philosophy. This philosophical school emphasizes Yoga and complete devotion towards Lord Vitthal which is Lord Vishnu's Avatar. He taught people that devotion to our favourite deity has nothing to do with caste and creed, anybody can pray, see, and know God on his/her own. Mediation of the brahminical mindset is not of use in devotion is the important message he has given to people of all strata in society. In his Pasayadaan, he prays to the Supreme God for more energy to all to perform rightful actions and respective duties and more power to eradicate evil, cruelty, and sinful thoughts from the mind to lead them to enlightenment. In this prayer, he never asks anything for himself but all his prayers are for the world. He also asks for friendship and a compassionate approach of all living beings towards each other including humans and other living beings. He asks God to enlighten the minds of people so that no sin can enter into it. He wants the world should witness the rise of the

¹ Kharat Ranganath (Ed.), Haripath- Sant Dnyaneshwar, Rahul Dharmik vanmay seva publication, Pune, 2021.



Sun of Dharma means right conduct in everyone's mind. Through his writings, he always emphasizes on being compassionate towards others. He always says through his writings that people who constantly pray, do their duties religiously, always keep calm, and always follow the moral path given by scriptures are the ones who will definitely get satisfaction and ultimate liberation. He urges people to become like those and try to cultivate these qualities for their upliftment and social harmony as well. This knowledge of scriptures he put in front of people in a simple way to understand and to follow the same. He is considered the first social reformer from Vaarkari Sampradaya. In another writing called "Haripaath", Dnyaneshwar Maharaj emphasizes that chanting God's name is extremely important to lead a spiritual and blissful life. He says that one can have ultimate liberation and eternal bliss just by chanting God's name relentlessly. This can lead a devotee to a life immersed in the blissful presence of God. Through a simple action and rightful conduct, everyone can walk the path to devotion, and then to ultimate liberation, which is the zest of his philosophy. His philosophy is for one and all. His philosophy is not merely spiritual but is very much social as well.

We have many Sants in Varkari Sampradaya who are touching and transforming lives through their teachings and writings. One of them is Sant Tukaram Maharaj from Dehu near Pune in Maharashtra. He was a true social reformer because he did not belong to the so-called upper class and still, he studied and wrote about Vedanta. He had to undergo humiliation; and insults due to giving spiritual discourse being so-called lower cast. In each negative situation of his life, he came out with immense poise and equanimity. He is considered a very sensitive poet and mystic. He wrote beautiful Abhangas on Spiritual philosophy and social equality. When he was working against caste discrimination and untouchability

through his writings at that time, some people tried to throw his writings in the river but his writings, Abhangas were so popular that they remained intact orally by his followers. He had worked against the Brahminical dominance in spirituality. According to him, everyone in the world has an equal right to devotion to God, and God is not owned by any particular class or caste. He says that the right of devotion cannot be decided by mere birth but the qualification for devotion is complete surrender to God and this can be done by anybody. He writes about discrimination in society and the true identity of humans as a 'Vaishnav' means 'God's people as; "*Vishnumaya Jag Vaishnavancha dharma, Bhedabhedabhram amangal.*

Aika ji tumhi bhakt bhagwat, karal te hit satya karaa..."²

We have one more Sant of Varkari Sampradaya who being a woman of Dalit identity raised her voice against social discrimination and also spoke about her spiritual understanding. She was the wife of Sant Chokhamela from Mangalvedha near Pandharpur. Sant Soyarabai has written beautiful Abhangas to praise her God Vitthal whom she could not visit inside the temple, being a so-called lower caste. She fearlessly wrote about caste hierarchy, discrimination in society, the Brahminical system, women's problems, interpersonal relationships, and her own requests to Vitthal. We include Dr. Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, etc while studying social reforms against caste discrimination, but this great lady, Sant Soyarabai who did not have any formal education was singing and writing against social discrimination so courageously. She was the first Sant of Varkari Sampradaya who talked about 'menstruation' which was not talked about at all publicly. Nowadays there are seminars and open forums to talk about Menstruation and problems related to it but she was talking about it through her Abhangas in the 16th century. She says about menstruation in one of her Abhangas:

² Shree Tukarambavanchya Abhangachi Gatha, Shasakiya madhyavarti press, Mumbai, 1973.



“Dehasi vital mhanati sakal, Aatma to nirmal shuddhabuddha.

Dehicha vital dehich janmala, sovalaa to zaalaa kavan dharma.”³

That means if a woman with menstruation is considered untouchable, then everyone born out of her is untouchable. Then there is the discrimination of touchable and untouchables. She was a brave and courageous young woman from a so-called lower class with a very high-class understanding of the basic principle of spirituality which is the nondualistic nature of everything in the world.

This is how Sants of Varkari Sampradaya spread the message of scriptures in a very understandable manner. Their understanding of scriptures and applying that knowledge to daily life in a very simple and practical way was beyond commendable. They have a huge contribution to social reforms that happened over centuries. They were the pioneers in social reform.

Conclusion:

These Sant from Varkari Sampradaya have touched all spiritual, social, and ethical aspects of human life. They made people believe that everyone can have a spiritual upliftment on their own. Through their writings, they spread the essence of the scriptures in very easy language. In the medieval era, north India was under foreign invasions and forceful conversions. Hindus had forgotten their rich cultural and spiritual identities and were stuck in the ritualistic aspect of religion. Kings were not protecting Dharma and were greedy for power and wealth. Hindus were busy with rituals and those rituals led them far away from original Vedic teachings. Hindus were going away from their Vedic cultural roots and eventually falling prey to the trap of forceful conversions. The society of that time was desperately in need of a ray of hope which came in the form of Vaarkari Sampradaya. The mystics of this sampradaya gave

confidence to the society that there was no need to run away from their cultural roots and that their cultural heritage was a path of salvation for them. They emphasized that devotion and actions are equally important in spirituality. They also reiterated that spirituality is for each and every one and there is no need to take birth in a particular caste to become liberated. Because of their work society of that time started paying attention to spiritual as well as social growth together under the umbrella of Varkari Sampradaya. This helped in preserving the culture and legacy of Bhakti Sampradaya in very adverse social and political conditions. These writings and discourses of Varkari Sant of Maharashtra are a very rich cultural and spiritual heritage that should be preserved and used for the betterment and growth of society. There were many more Sants of Varkari Sampradaya who had done impactful work in the field of social and spiritual upliftment but we cannot discuss it all here due to space limits. From this paper, we can understand that Maharashtrian Sants made a big contribution as a mystic and as a social reformer in the making of India. When the world is looking at India as a spiritual guide, we cannot deny the contribution of Varkari Sampradaya in leading society toward harmony.

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³ Dr. Mohite Shivajirao(Ed.), Sakal stree Sant Gatha, Parth publication,Pune, 2021.



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