
The Politics of Devotion: How Sant Tukaram's Abhangs Challenge Social Hierarchy

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Abstract-

The paper analyses the Abhang literature of Sant Tukaram (1608–1649) from a socio-political critical perspective, contending that his devotional poetry expresses both spiritual equality and a profound challenge to the caste-based social structures of seventeenth-century Maharashtra. Bhakti traditions are often praised for their focus on personal devotion, but Tukaram's work goes beyond religious feelings. His Abhangs challenge Brahminical authority, question ritualism, raise the value of everyday work, and present a vision of moral equality that shakes up caste ideology. Utilizing Subaltern Studies, Dalit literary study, and Bhakti studies, this paper positions Tukaram as a poet whose devotional voice transforms into a political tool—challenging orthodoxy, redefining holiness, and proposing a concept of “spiritual democracy.” The study shows how Tukaram employs metaphor, satire, humility, and moral exhortation to criticize power systems by closely analyzing several of his Abhangs. It also shows how he models a different moral society based on compassion, humility, and devotion.

Keywords: Sant Tukaram, spiritual equality, Bhakti traditions, Abhangs, Subaltern Studies, Dalit literary study, Bhakti studies, etc.

Introduction-

Many people in Maharashtra think of Sant Tukaram as the most important Varkari saint-poet. His Abhangs, which are written in basic, easy-to-understand Marathi, have a lot of emotional depth, intellectual insight, and moral clarity. But Tukaram's poems go beyond their religious themes; they question the basic ideas behind the caste system, ritual purity, and religious rigidity. His poetry is based on the real lives of the farming and craft communities of Dehu, and it shows the social tensions and unfairness of his time.

The Bhakti movement in India promoted personal devotion (bhakti) as a path to salvation; nevertheless, academics contend that Tukaram's involvement is explicitly political (O'Hanlon 657). His focus on inner purity rather than ceremonial performance, his critique of surface religious authority, and his advocacy for the marginalized position him within a history of vernacular resistance. His poetry frequently articulates the perspective of a subaltern community member—neither Brahmin nor royal—whose voice questions dominant narratives.

This study contends that Tukaram's Abhangs embody a “politics of devotion” that beyond mere spiritual expression and critiques the socio-political framework of his era. Through these lyrical interventions, Tukaram contests caste hierarchy, attacks ritualism, raises the dignity of laboring bodies, and cultivates an egalitarian culture that foreshadows contemporary critiques of caste oppression.

Tukaram's Poetry in Its Social and Political Context

Tukaram lived during a time when society and politics were changing, the economy was bad, and the caste system was strong. In the 1600s, Maharashtra was run by complicated feudal and Brahminical systems that gave value based on caste birth instead of moral merit or human dignity. Ritual purity controlled who could go to temples, learn, and be a part of the community. Tukaram's community, which was mostly made up of farmers and traders, was not under Brahminical control but was above Dalit

communities. From his point of view, he could criticize caste without completely abandoning Hindu tradition.

Tukaram was a member of the Varkari movement, which stressed humility, group singing, pilgrimage, and dedication from within. Scholars point out, however, that it was also a place where people from lower and middle castes could speak out against things (Zelliot 91). Tukaram's Abhangs provide a moral lexicon that questions the validity of societal order and says that all souls are equal in front of Vithoba.

Devotion as Social Critique: Disavowing Ritual and Orthodoxy

One of Tukaram's strongest criticisms is of ritualism and the fact that Brahmins have a monopoly on sacred knowledge. He says:

“जाती विचारून देव देतो का?”

"Does God provide depending on caste?"

This rhetorical inquiry goes straight to the heart of Brahminical theology. Tukaram's assertion that heavenly grace transcends caste identification contests the notion that Brahmins have sole access to God. His Abhangs frequently say that real devotion comes from being honest, kind, and humble, not from knowing how to do rituals:

“मन पवित्र झाले / तेथे देव जाणे.”

"God lives when the mind is clean."

In Subaltern Studies, Tukaram undermines ritual authority by transferring spiritual legitimacy from the social elite to the moral subject (Guha 43). His poetry weakens the symbolic force of ceremonial purity, which has long been used to justify the caste system.

Tukaram's critique is not vague; he calls out hypocrisy directly:

“पोटार्थी भक्ती करिती / ते कशास पावे?”

"What will those who worship for their own benefit get?"

These lyrics show the societal purpose of his devotion: to take away the symbolic power of people who use religion to gain power. Tukaram redefines spiritual practice as an anti-ritualistic, egalitarian endeavor.

Caste and Moral Equality: A Vision of Spiritual Democracy

Tukaram's Abhangs always say that God sees all people as equal. This viewpoint creates a kind of spiritual democracy, where dedication is a way to show that everyone is morally equal.

He says:

“आळविले देवा सर्वा ठार्या / नाही कुणी कमी अधिकीं.”

"I call out to God, who is in everyone; no one is better or worse."

These sentences deny the assumption of inherent superiority, which is what the caste system is based on. This perspective corresponds with Ambedkar's assertion that the Bhakti movement constituted a preliminary challenge to caste-based devaluing, albeit not substantially dismantling caste (Omvedt 112).

Tukaram's claim that the divine exists equally in all bodies directly opposes Hindu tradition, which holds Brahmin male bodies as the purest for rituals. His egalitarian spiritual perspective democratizes access to the divine, allowing manual laborers, farmers, artisans, and women to assert their spiritual worth.

Laboring Bodies and the Value of Work

A key part of Tukaram's political poetry is how much he loves physical work. He often employs farming words like "sowing," "ploughing," and "harvesting" to show how much he cares. Instead of being seen as dirty or low-status, work becomes a way to connect with God.

He says:

"शेते नांगरितां नाम स्मरावे / त्यात काय अवघड?"

"Remember God while ploughing the fields; what could be easier?"

This passage makes farming work holy and suggests that spiritual practice happens in the middle of everyday activity, not apart from it. Tukaram's actions contest Brahminical doctrine, which frequently deemed laboring bodies as spiritually inferior (O'Hanlon 660). Tukaram rejects the duality that divides the holy from the profane. The laborer's body transforms into a conduit for heavenly connection. This is a major change to caste ideas, which say that certain bodies are "polluted" because of the work they do. Also, his focus on humility and service fits with a political belief in equality. By celebrating workers, Tukaram raises the status of those who are systemically marginalized.

Critique of Hypocrisy and Power: Moral Satire as Resistance

One of the things that makes Tukaram's Abhangs unique is how he uses humor to point out hypocrisy. He doesn't hold back when it comes to the privileged or people who use religion to gain social dominance.

A famous Abhang says:

"कळसाचे भजन बोलती / अंतर तुंब घाणीं."

"They talk of high dedication, yet within they are full of dirt."

Tukaram criticizes religious leaders who act pious in front but do bad things in secret. He undermines their moral authority by making fun of them.

Tukaram's critique goes beyond people to the way ceremonial society works:

"वेदशास्त्रे खूप म्हणती / परि नाही आचरण."

"They read scriptures over and over again, but they don't do what is right."

In this phrase, he disputes the idea that the text is the most important thing, saying that moral behavior is more important than knowing the text. This is important for politics because it makes Brahminical claims to power based on knowledge of sacred scriptures less valid.

Spivak observes that subaltern resistance frequently manifests through "counter-discursive strategies" (Spivak 29). Tukaram's satire serves as a method that undermines the symbolic authority of elite speech.

Community, Wari, and Collective Devotion as Agents of Social Reformation

Tukaram's impact went much beyond his poems. His work on the Varkari pilgrimage (Wari) established a place where people from different castes could come together and be together. Thousands of people strolled together during the Wari, sang Abhangs, and shared food.

Tukaram's Abhangs stress the social benefit of worshipping together:

"एकी एक जाणो / भक्त पुकारिती गोविंदा."

"Together we become one; worshippers cry out to God."

The group recitation of Abhangs was a cultural tradition that promoted equality. The authority of Brahmins was less important in these assemblies, and the voices of regular people—farmers, women, and artisans—were more important.

This embodied activity corresponds with Guha's concept of "subaltern mobilization through cultural assertion" (Guha 54). Tukaram's religious groups created a different public space where the caste system was symbolically undermined.

Tukaram's Alternative to Social Privilege: Humility and Moral Authority

Tukaram often talks about how modest, imperfect, or unimportant he is. His humility is more than just spiritual modesty; it is a political challenge to hierarchies founded on pride, power, and ceremonial supremacy.

He says:

“तुका म्हणे आम्ही पापी / परि दयाळु देव माझा.”

Tuka says, "I am a sinner, yet my God is kind."

Tukaram shows an alternative moral code by refusing to accept claims of superiority. In this code, moral authority comes from humility rather than birth rank. This challenges the idea that Brahmins are better than other people because they are intrinsically purer. So, Tukaram's humility isn't a sign of social inferiority; it's a change in moral ideals that goes against hierarchical conventions.

The Legacy of Tukaram's Critique of Society

Tukaram's challenge to societal order continues to resonate long after his death. Contemporary academics contend that he had a significant role in fostering anti-caste consciousness in Maharashtra (Zelliot 95). Social reformers like Phule and Ambedkar have welcomed his Abhangs because they saw the extreme equality in his work.

Tukaram did not explicitly advocate for the structural destruction of caste, as Ambedkar would later do; nonetheless, his poetry subverted its conceptual underpinnings. He questioned purity, criticised ritualism, raised the value of work, and made spiritual experiences available to everyone. His politics of dedication still inspire modern struggles for social equality.

Conclusion-

Sant Tukaram's Abhangs show that devotion may be a political act in and of itself. His opposition to ritualism, caste hierarchy, and social privilege manifests not via overt political discourse but through a spiritually informed criticism of inequity. Tukaram undermines the social and symbolic power of the caste system by changing what is considered sacred. His poems raise the value of work, say that everyone is morally equal, and utilize sarcasm and humility to tear down the claims of the elite to be better than everyone else. His Abhangs continue to promote egalitarian philosophy through easy-to-understand language, group singing, and the Wari's shared space.

In Tukaram, devotion is not a passive acceptance but an active resistance—a deep rethinking of how people relate to one another based on compassion, dignity, and justice. His Abhangs are still proof of how powerful vernacular writing can be in changing and questioning social ideas.

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