



THE DEVOTIONAL POETRY OF SAINT TUKARAM

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Abstract

Warkari sect has enriched the cultural tradition of Maharashtra. Saint-poets in this tradition have composed verses to praise and worship Lord Panduranga. Saint Tukaram was a major saint-poet of the warkari sect. This paper is an attempt to understand the central concerns in the poetry of Saint Tukaram. It is divided in three parts. In introductory section, information related to the warkari tradition of worship is presented along with references to major warkari saints. The second part focuses on autobiographical elements in Saint Tukaram's poetry, while the third section discusses some general concerns in the poetry of Saint Tukaram.

Key words: Abhangas, Deity, Kirtan, Warkari

Introduction

Saint Tukaram has become immortal in the devotional tradition of Maharashtra. He belonged to 'Warkari' sect which flourished in medieval Maharashtra. Lord Panduranga of Pandharpur is the chief deity of the warakris. It gained mass popularity under the leadership of Saints like Dnyaneshwar, Eknath, Namdeo, Tukaram etc. These saints composed devotional verses in praise of Lord Panduranga, hence they were known as saint-poets. These verses are known as 'Abhangas'.

Miracles and incidents related to Lord Vitthal were common in life of the warkari saints. They led a very simple life. Spiritual and devotional activities of these saint-poets left a lasting impact on the cultural tradition of Maharashtra. Every year in the month of 'Ashadh' according to the Marathi almanac, devotees undertake a pilgrimage on foot to seek the blessings of the Lord of Pandharpur. It is a major event in the state. Large gatherings of the devotees march to the sacred place. On their way

they sing the verses written by saint-poets of the warkari tradition.

Among the major saint-poets, Saint Dnyaneshwar composed the **Dnyaneshwari**, Saint Eknath wrote **Eknathi Bhagwat** and Saint Tukaram composed many sweet abhangas' in praise of the Lord. The **Tukaram Gatha** is a compilation of abhangas by Saint Tukaram. His abhangas are widely recited and sung among the general public. Simple, illiterate and rustic people recite his verses and know the wisdom contained in them. They are sung in 'kirtanas' and similar religious gatherings. The poems of Saint Tukaram are sweet, have depth of meaning, and flow with love for the God. Such is the charisma of his 'abhangas' that they have survived for centuries in spite of attempts to destroy and drown them by his haters. According to a legend Saint Tukaram was asked to drown his poems in the river Indrayani. They were miraculously restored from the river unharmed.

Films based on life of Saint Tukaram were made in Kannada, Hindi, Telugu and Marathi

languages. Fraser and Marathe have published translations of the poems of Tukaram between 1909 and 1915. Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre have separately published selective translations of Tukaram's poetry. Chitre received the translation prize from the Sahitya Akademi for his translation of Saint Tukaram's poetry entitled **Says Tuka**. Irina Glushkova in her 'Give me back my Blanket!:Varkari Saints Striving for their Bodies (Metaphor and Metonymy in the Construction of Divinity)' has dwelled upon the dimensions of the metaphor of 'Blanket' in the devotional Marathi poetry of saint-poets like Dnyaneshvar, Namdeo, Tukaram and others. Similarly Tukaram's poetry is the subject of some other studies also.

This paper aims to understand the central concerns of Saint Tukaram's poetry. It is based on English translations of his verses by Dilip Chitre. All the poetic references given below are from the text **Says Tuka-I**. Focus of the paper is the devotional poetry of Saint Tukaram hence, the translation related aspects will not be considered. Saint Tukaram in his lifetime experienced many hardships. His transformation to the status of a Saint was a gradual process. So initially the poems reflecting the events in his life are considered.

Autobiographical elements in the poetry of Saint Tukaram

Saint Tukaram's life can be divided into three phases. First phase is when they were a prosperous family of the region. The second phase includes the period of famine and the sad happenings in Tukaram's life. Phase three is his gradual transformation into a Saint and the final mysterious disappearance. Some of these events are reflected in his poems.

Saint Tukaram is considered as the successor of Saint Namdeo. This continuation of the lineage is scripted as:

"--- The grand total
Of the poems Namdeo vowed to write
was one billion,"
He said,
"All the unwritten ones, Tuka,

are your dues". (Pg 03)

Saint Namdeo during his life time had vowed to write one million abhangas in praise of Lord Vitthal. He was unable to complete it during the tenure of his life. Tukaram Maharaj as he is fondly referred had a revelatory dream in which Lord Vitthal and Saint Namdeo appeared to him. Saint Namdeo gave him the task to complete the remaining abhangas. The above lines refer to this dream of Tukaram.

Following the order Tukaram began to write poetry. Being a novice he doubted his own worth to write abhangas. In addition the subject he had selected to write was a divine subject. Only an expert in matters of God and life could dare to consider such a subject. The self doubt is reflected in the following lines:

"Have I utterly lost my hold on reality
To imagine myself writing poetry?
I am sure your illustrious devotees,
All famous poets, will laugh at me. (Pg 06)

In those days Maharashtra was hit by a severe famine. The then prosperous family of Tukaram was reduced to a state of poverty. Tragic incidents did not reduce his fate in the deity. The event of the famine finds expression in the following lines:

"Good for me God I am broke;
Good that this famine made it worse
Suffering made me think of you
And I vomited this world--- ". (Pg 44)

The word 'vomit' here refers to disentanglement from the attachments of the world. To achieve this state is a major landmark towards the spiritual destination.

The immense devotion of Tukaram angers his wife. She has to bear the responsibility of the family and children. In a playful manner he presents the angry feelings of his wife.

"--- I am tired of shooting off my mouth
At this stone-deaf man!"

Says Tuka, my wife

Just loves to curse me. (Pg. 49)

Material wealth has lost its value for him. Hunger and thirst do not affect him. In this state Tukaram is beyond the understanding of his wife who is an ordinary woman. He explains her:

“What gives me the strength to spurn all bodily pleasure?

Woman, you have become blind to the great fact.

Look at me! My hunger and my thirst have been stilled.

My disquietude has been calmed at its origin. The wealth that people prize more than their life

Makes less sense to me now than a piece of gravel ---” . (Pg. 55)

Tukaram had become immensely popular. Many became his followers. People came to listen to his kirtans. Some of his contemporaries envied Saint Tukaram. He was made to drown his books of poetry in the Indrayani river. It was a great shock to Saint Tukaram. He was grief stricken. However, the books of poetry were miraculously restored intact from the river. Saint Tukaram was very happy as God had saved him. He expresses his heart felt gratitude to the Lord in the following words:

“You kept my manuscripts safe under water.

You saved me from being damned by the public.

Says Tuka, truly, you lived upto your name”. (Pg. 197)

Apart from the autobiographical elements, there are a variety of shades in the poetry of Saint Tukaram, some of which are discussed in the next section.

General aspects of Saint Tukaram’s poetry

The poetic output of Saint Tukaram is immense. The depth of thought and its philosophical import too is great. His life was a quest to become one with his beloved deity. The different realizations he had during this journey are presented in his poems. Hence it is not just poetry that he writes, but

provides us with great spiritual advice too. In this section are presented a few aspects of the poetry Saint Tukaram.

Lord Panduranga is the chief deity of the warkaris. Saint Tukaram is mesmerized by Lord Vitthal. He loves the beautiful idol of Lord Panduranga in the Pandharpur temple. He praises it as:

“ --- Sweet basil beads

garland his neck

A yellow silk garment

girdled around his loins

I love his trance his forever stance ---”. (Pg. 69)

The desire to be with the Lord always is reflected as:

“I shall shut my life

To enclose his form

I shall feel him in my body

to worship him ---”. (Pg. 70)

In a notable comparison he presents the pain on being separated from the Lord:

“--- Parted from water,

A fish twists

Like a tortured

Tuka”. (Pg. 79)

Ego is considered as a hindrance on the spiritual path. Every seeker has to conquer his ego first in order to make spiritual progress. Saint Tukaram has conquered his ego and is more determined to meet his Lord. He has become extremely humble to receive the grace of the Lord:

“ I’ve come to your door

like a dog looking for a home

O kind one

don’t drive me away ---”. (Pg. 99)

He has strong faith in Lord Panduranga. It is this faith which helped him come out through the personal hardships and losses. He feels God is with

us even in painful times. In the lines below he explains that when man loses all hope and all is lost, still God comes for help:

“—When you are
beyond all hope
when you call
nothing your own
be sure
God is visiting you ---”. (Pg. 109)

On his spiritual journey he is very cautious. He is careful that he does not fall prey to temptations of the world. Desire and temptation are two blocks on the spiritual path. Every ascetic has to conquer them so as to make progress. He clarifies that he won't be tempted by magical powers and bribes:

“--- When other seekers sought you, you
tricked them by giving
Gift of magical powers as bribe:
Let us get the record straight,
I'm not that sort of beggar---“

“---Says Tuka, from the outset, I expected
nothing from you So that my desire should
not become the last barrier between us”. (Pg. 118)

These lines are directly addressed to the Lord. The listener here is Lord Vitthal. Tukaram is determined to meet the Lord, without getting tempted towards any pleasure. He has achieved a state where the earthly entanglements hold no value for him now. In the same colloquial tone he explains the Lord that he will surely meet him:

“--- So far, O Hari, you have cheated millions
at this game
But I am something else, I won't let you
escape---”. (Pg. 133)

In the times of Saint Tukaram, were some fake religious men, who cheated the general public in the name of God and religion. Tukaram is aware of this religious bigotry practiced in the name of religion. Saint Tukaram criticizes such fake people through his poems:

“--- Hypocrites! They pretend such concern
for where the world is going,

Talk of self-sacrifice, which is far from their
minds---”. (Pg. 139)

Saint Tukaram has progressed well on the spiritual path. In one of the poems he explains the idea of absolute being:

“--- Absolute being is not a remembered
embrace.

It is housed in one's own awareness---”.
(Pg.155)

Tukaram has not only conquered his desire but has also mastered his ego. He has freed himself from the notions of greatness and glory. He is happy to be a simple ordinary peasant. The ordinary state, in which he is, protects him from vanity:

“Good for me God
I am a peasant
Or else I'd be
A victim of vanity”. (Pg. 165)

His devotion has brought a transformation in him. His soul is not tied to the cage of 'body' and 'desire'. He feels oneness with the trees and creatures around him. This oneness with the surroundings is reflected as:

“--- Trees, creepers and creatures of the
forest

Are my kith and kin
And birds that sweetly sing

I feast on the cuisine of Hari's lore,
A delighted connoisseur ---”. (Pg. 182)

Finally he has reached his spiritual destination. His ordeal is over. He is content with his new self. This thankfulness is expressed as:

“--- My prayers answered
my longings vanished
Now I am truly strong

It's long since I died ---". (Pg 221)

The event of death here is metaphorical. Attachment to name and identity is gone, which means death. Ego has vanished and the contemplated spiritual destination is reached. Paradoxically death has become a celebration:

"I have seen my death with my own eyes

O what an incomparable festival it was ---".
(Pg. 223)

Saint Tukaram is filled with happiness and contentment. There are no dualities in life. The quest has been completed. He now lives just to complete the remaining years of his life. This peace is reflected in the poems written in this phase of life:

" --- The world has become a form of light.

Darkness is gone ---

Says Tuka, only for the sake of life

One is still clinging to the dividing line". (Pg. 225)

Finally it is said that Sant Tukaram went to 'vaikunth' i.e heaven in a 'viman' (aerial chariot or plane) sent by Lord Vitthal. He bids farewell to people in one of his concluding poems:

" We go back to our native place.

Good-bye, God bless you.

Say, "Rama Krishna! Rama Krishna!"

Tuka is leaving for Vaikunth". (Pg. 258)

Conclusion

There are various shades to the poetry of Saint Tukaram. Some of the poems are autobiographical in nature and refer to the events in his life. They mark the progress of Saint Tukaram from an ordinary human being to a person who has become one with God. His poems are colloquial in nature. They express his love towards Lord Panduranga and also his strong determination to meet him. On his spiritual journey he has overcome ego and desire. He has become humble to receive

the grace of the deity. He guards himself from any kind of digression and temptation. He becomes happy when he gets the prize which he had sought. His faith, love and gratitude towards the Lord Panduranga are reflected in his poems.

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