



The Making of a Revolutionary Poet-Saint: Rereading the Struggles of Tukaram

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Abstract:

Tukaram (1608-1650) was a multi-faceted personality that incorporates a Poet, a Saint, a Philosopher, and a revolutionary. His journey from a common man to a poet-saint is not an accidental phenomenon. He had undergone many trials and tribulations in the early part of his life such as untimely death of his parents, brother's asceticism, a great famine, a loss in business, wife and child's death, heretical charges and trial, injunction to destroy his poetry. But he was a man of great optimism who had understood the meaning and purpose of life through contemplation and meditation. He realized that life is nothing but an amalgamation of ups and downs, happiness and unhappiness. After the realisation of people's plight, Tukaram freed them of debt by throwing the loan documents of his share into the river Indrayani. It was the turning point of his life as a revolutionary human being and emancipator of have-nots. This paper endeavours to study the life journey of Tukaram from a common man to a great poet. It also attempts to highlight the crisis and adversities he had undergone throughout his life.

Keywords: Abhanga, Gatha, Kirtan, Shudra, Vedas.

Introduction

The urge to explore hitherto uncharted incidents and struggles of the Tukaram's life is the need of an hour today. Studying Tukaram's life and poetry is in itself an endeavour of great significance which keeps us guided as a lighthouse. His revolutionary poetry keeps inspiring people towards the service of humanity. His popularity as a saint poet has prompted critics and scholars to critically analyse his works. The 20th century especially saw a surge and urge to study saint-poet's life and Poetry. The first half of it was dedicated to translating Tukaram into foreign languages especially in English. Nelson Fraser is a prominent name with three volumes



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of Translations to his credit. Whereas in the second half some scholars if not all studied, analysed, reinterpreted Tukaram`s life in new ways.

The Translation of Tukaram`s first and the earliest biography *Bhaktlilamrit* (1774) into English by the then officer Justin Abbott remained unexplored for scholarly and critical study ever since it was done in 1930. The book sketches the entire life story of Tukaram stretching it up to the unimaginable limits and focussing too much on spiritual aspects of the poet`s life. The hagiography has certain limitations, yet can be considered for critical study as Mahipati has truthfully recorded some of the important facts of poet`s life. The authenticity of the hagiographical documentation was challenged by some modern biographers like V. S. Bendre, Dilip Chitre, Sadanand More, Kishor Sanap, Gail Omvedt, Sudam Savarkar, and many more.

They break away from their predecessors in many ways and posited Tukaram in a larger context. J. R. Ajsaonkar questions Mahipati`s renderings of miracles as, "I would not however expect the reader to believe in the truth of each one of them [miracles]. I am not prepared to accept the authenticity of every one of them" (x-xi). A paradigm shift came in with writers like Bhalchandra Nemade and A. H. Salunkhe, who based their analysis to one of the truthful sources that are Tukaram's own words. Regarding Mahipati`s renderings of poet`s life Bhalchandra Nemade argues, "Mahipati does not give the slightest hint in his voluminous work as to the sources of his information regarding Tukaram`s life" (14).

Other biographers were mostly biased who reduced Tukaram to only a miracle man, completely ignoring, knowingly/unknowingly, the socio-cultural aspects of his poetry. The struggles of Tukaram are completely misinterpreted by many scholars. His life and teachings hitherto kept unexplored due to two obvious reasons. Firstly, he was born a Shudra¹; secondly, he challenged the caste hierarchy and encroached into the domain of the religion by writing poetry. According to a modern translator, "One of the obvious reasons why Tukaram`s life is shrouded in mystery and why his work has not been preserved in its original form is because he was born a Shudra, at the bottom of the caste hierarchy" (Chitre xv).



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The caste hierarchy, a social rogue can be better understood in Tukaram's case thus. Being a Shudra, he had no right to write poetry. By taking up poetry writing as his career, he chose to be a revolutionary poet who challenged the authority of the then supreme class Brahmins. The paper proposes to investigate hitherto unexplored struggles of Tukaram and can be held as a small attempt in clearing some shreds of clouds around his personality.

The Early Burden and Calamities

Due to Savaji's (Tukaram's elder brother) lack of interest in worldly affairs, Bolhoba (Tukaram's father) handed over the command of trade and family in the able hands of Tukaram to which he responded positively. Tukaram proved his entrepreneurship quite well with utmost truth and morality. Later, after his marriage in a tender age, domestic problems entered in succession. Loss of parents, elder brother's disinterest in family business and wife (Rakhma) being an asthmatic and later one Savaji's wife's premature death, making him ascetic, made Tukaram's life worse than ever. But that could not shake the faith of Tukaram and his spirit of a responsible family man. In the words of Dr. Bhalchandra Nemade:

Thus a series of calamities cut short the happy phase of Tukaram's life and the burden of the family fell on his shoulders. As the only breadwinner of the large joint family, he did carry out the responsibilities of agriculture, small trade, and money-lending at a very young age. (16)

Around 1629 A. D., the Deccan was paralyzed by one of the worst-hit famines in the history of Maharashtra. People starved to death. Humanity dwindled. It affected all rungs of the society, the rich and the poor. Tukaram's sensitive heart melted with pity for the commoners so he opened up his store of grains for them. But the harshness of famine was so severe that it spared nobody. Meanwhile, Tukaram's asthmatic wife Rakhma died followed by their son Santu. The gravity of the situation is described by Nemade as, "The whole of Deccan was parched in the hot sun and there were no rains for two years. Rivers dried, food disappeared" (17). Tukaram



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had a resilient spirit and a philosophical mind. He took adversity as an opportunity to grow inwardly and when things got normalized, he started meditating life and its transient nature.

Realization: Spiritual or Social?

Spending a secluded life as a hermit on the Bhamnath Hill in silent contemplation shaped him as a poet and a human being. So is stated by his first biographer Mahipati. Once he stayed there for seven days and nights. After long meditation and contemplation, Tukaram decided to declass himself and sank his share of loan documents. He did not turn to Vitthal² out of frustration and helplessness. Rather he was rationally mediating over life. His faith in rationality was growing and he freed people as well as himself from the burden of debt. In support of Mahipati's documentation Ajgaonkar says,

But before doing so [ending seven days` fast], he asked Kanhoba to fetch from the house all the promissory notes that their father has taken from his debtors. "These notes," said Tukaram, "keep one thinking whether they will ever be redeemed, and make the mind uneasy; so I have decided to sink them all in the Indrayani today." Tukaram divided the money [as per loan documents] equally, and handing the one portion of notes to Kanhoba, sank his share in the river. (17)

The act of drowning loan documents and freeing debtors seemed pretty revolutionary and unprecedented in the social history of Maharashtra. This was the crucial event that developed him into a Good Samaritan of values and morals. Drowning away the promissory notes was a supreme social act in two ways. Firstly, he set free a large number of common people of debt and secondly, he respected his brother Kanhoba's decision of not giving away his share of documents. S. R. Sharma described the incident thus, "He tore up the family papers relating to his share of the patrimony, and left the rest entirely to his younger brother Kanhoba" (3). So, the realisation was social not spiritual. He became declass way before Marx and other socialists.

Drowning Notes: A Misinterpreted Act



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The real problem in accepting Tukaram as a well off trader, who turned into a compassionate poet and a saviour of people, lies in the prejudiced portrayal of him as a bankrupt and helpless person by some authors. They have insisted constantly that Tukaram turned to God out of bankruptcy or helplessness. But the facts do not correspond with their picture. Self-contradicting views and unacceptable logic could just be refuted, if we ask ourselves a question, how could a trader be a borrower? To substantiate the point a remark of a modern scholar will be apt:

Bolhoba had inherited the office of the village Mahajan [trader] from his forefathers, Mahajans were a reputed family of traders in a village, Kasba or city appointed to supervise certain classes of traders and collect revenue from them. Tukaram`s family owned a comparatively large piece of agricultural land on the bank of the river Indrayani in Dehu. (Chitre xvii)

Tukaram as a poet is mostly underrated by almost all biographers due to two apparent reasons; firstly, they wanted to neglect one of the important and supreme acts of Tukaram, that is becoming declassified by throwing loan documents into the river Indrayani, and secondly to portray Tukaram as a meek and incompetent bankrupt person which he never was in his lifetime. Drowning of promissory notes was a well thought of action on Tukaram`s part, whereas for biographers it was an act of stupidity.

Meditation and The Birth Of Poetry

Over time, the wounds of famine started healing but scars remained. It is said that sufferings reveal the real human being latent in a sensitive and compassionate person. Tukaram realized and understood the purpose of his life. He started meditating the problems of being and becoming on the hills of Bhandara and Bhamnath. There he used to sit for a long time alone without any disturbances in the lap of nature. Reading and contemplating the verses of Namdev, Dnyaneshwar, Eknath, and other proponents of the Varkari Movement³ influenced him a lot so



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much so that later on he developed a keen interest in the poetry of saints who wanted to educate common people in vernacular tongue i.e. Marathi. Especially Namdev's poetry had a lasting effect on the young mind of Tukaram.

While reading and meditating Namdev's poetry one day he suddenly woke up to the realization and started writing poetry. He chose the same Abhanga⁴ meter for writing his verses as Namdev used to write in. Namdev's influence can be testified by Mahipati's statement, he says, "Namdev, the author of the billion verses, had composed his poetry in Marathi. Tuka committed his abhangs to memory, and repeated them as he danced" (Abbott 109). Tukaram's Abhnaga No. 1320 (231) justifies my discussion about the inspiration behind his poetry. Fraser translates:

*Namadeva came with Panduranga, and roused me in a dream!
I appoint you a task, write poetry; Do not talk of vain affairs!
Namadeva counted his verses, Vitthala kept the tally!
He told me the total he arrived at; A hundred crores!
What is left undone, you must finish, O Tuka! (40)*

Prodigious and Prolific Poet

The poetic outcome of Tukaram is prolific and extraordinary. In his short lifespan of just 42 years, he produced over 4000 verses. Researchers believe that it could have been over 8000 or so, had he not been persecuted and compelled to throw his manuscripts in the river Indrayani. Yet the number is awesome. Showering accolades on Tukaram's poetry Ajgaonkar says:

The moment we hear one of his Abhangas we fancy Tukaram himself, standing before us. Such vividness of language, such sincerity, such joy of self-expression and such authority of personal experience are rare in old Marathi poetry and utterly absent in new. (96-97)



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Tukaram possessed a supreme gift of poetic expression and description and his poems held sway over the hearts of people for more than three centuries. He had a keen eye for minute details of men and manners. Every aspect of social, religious, cultural, and what not find a place in his poetry. He was true to his experiences and the facts available in front of him. Tukaram's writing anticipated William Wordsworth's definition of poetry. One such comment establishes the point, "His poems were truly inspired and flowed from his lips as spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Belsare 8).

In those days Kirtan⁵ was a powerful medium of social awakening and mass education. Tukaram sharpened his skills and mastered the art to unimaginable degrees. In the process, he created a lot of poems instantly. One more remark about his poetic ability, "His [Tukaram's] facility grew with time and practice so that when he began to perform kirtans, he could compose the necessary Abhangas on the spur of the moment as the subject developed, which someone of his followers would take down immediately" (Ajgaonkar 33).

Rebellious and Revolutionary Spirit

Tukaram's popularity as a poet-saint started growing as he was enlightening the masses about religion and religious scriptures. The social-cultural milieu of the 17th century Maharashtra was not at all conducive for a Shudra to read and write. But he was a genuinely gifted poet who used his poetry as a weapon against the exploitation in the name of religion. He sincerely questioned the authorities and stakeholders about the true meanings of Vedas⁶ teachings. He lashes out those sham teachers who only mugged up the words in the Vedas and were unaware of the meanings in it. Tukaram boldly roars in his Abhanga No. 2266.1 (368), "We alone know the secret of the Vedas / others may carry them like a burden on their head" (Fraser, The poems of Tukaram Vol.II 270).

Shudras were not supposed to talk about Vedas and Upanishads. But Tukaram's poetry evinced the essence of scripture in the very language of men. This was out and out a rebellion.



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The rebellion of Tukaram aroused the hope that society and individual minds can be modified by constant efforts. He encouraged masses to stand against all kinds of oppression from the religious `bourgeoisie` to put it in a Marxist term. Tukaram`s writing enraged the upper-class people. Sharma observes in his book on Tukaram, “When he started composing abhangas, and performing soul-entrancing Kirtans attracting crowds, he drew upon himself the wrath of the demi-gods of the village” (4).

Tukaram`s Preaching and Jealous Mambaji

As soon as Tukaram`s fame and name as preacher started growing into the vicinity of Pune, Mambaji Gosavi became jealous of him. On the complaint of Gosavi lodged with village headman about Tukaram`s writing poetry and singing those in Kirtans villagers started persecuting Tukaram. Ajgaonkar records in his book, “Certain people grew jealous of him when Tukaram`s reputation as a preacher, poet, and saint rose. The foremost of these was a Brahman named Mambaji” (42). And the reason was very clear that he entered into their domain of being the preachers of scriptures. About the complaint and headman`s behaviour Tukaram mentions in his Abhanga No. 3881 (636), and Nemade translates:

What shall I eat now? Where shall I go?

On whose support shall I count and live in the village?

The Patil is angry, the village folk angry,

Who will bother about me now? (32)

Mambaji tried everything possible to demoralize Tukoba and stop his Kirtans. But Tukoba adamantly fought everything out with his strong determination. The Mambaji-incident served as an enhancement of Tukaram`s reputation as a saintly man and equally served to exasperate the class of people who felt humiliated and hated him. Tukaram was tortured by Brahmins and other allied of them. Their sharp arrow-like words tore up his heart. But he never gave up until his death in 1650.



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Adamant Tukaram and Furious Rameshwar

Despite Mambaji and allied's persecution Tukaram kept teaching people the essence of Vedas and Scriptures. There was a Brahmin in the town of Vagholi, named Rameshwar Bhatt. He learned about Tukaram's adamant behaviour and hatred arose in his heart. The fact that some Brahmins even started attending Tukaram's Kirtans couldn't be digested by him so he lodged a complaint to higher religious authority that Tukaram sings the essence of Vedas in his poetry and questions traditions and rituals. He complained,

Tuka, although a Shudra by caste, gives out in his poetry the contents of the Vedas. By his Kirtans, he has cast a charm over the simple-minded people, including Brahmins. In particular, the latter falling at the Shudra's feet makes us feel dying with shame. The man is undermining the importance of Vedic Injunctions, such as those, in respect of daily worship of the deity, sacrifices, etc. and is unduly glorifying the Path of devotion and repetition of God's name. If steps are not taken to nip this evil in the bud, a serious social disorder is bound to ensue. (Ajgaonkar 46)

Being born Shudra, Tukaram's making comments on Vedas and Bhagvad was heresy and a punishable crime. Later on, the same Bhatt became the devout disciples of Tukaram and even composed some poems eulogizing the Poet.

Heretical Charges: The Final Trial

As per the complaint and the religious laws of the time, Tukaram was called for the trial. Tukaram defended his position but as per the rules, a Shudra didn't have any right to read and write. At last Tukaram was found guilty of heresy. The culture of the society in those times is aptly captured by one of the researchers, "For a Shudra like Tukaram to write poetry on the religious theme in colloquial Marathi was a double encroachment on Brahmin monopoly and it was seen by them as an act of heresy and defiance of the caste system itself" (Chitre xv).



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The immediate action was taken against Tukaram. He was ordered to stop writing poetry and destroy the manuscript of earlier composed ones by sinking them into the river Indrayani. Tukaram had no way out but to obey the authority. As per the order, Tukaram submerged his manuscripts into the Indrayani. To support my discussion the following statement would be helpful, “Rameshwar Bhatt, a learned Brahmin of Dehu⁷, was furious when he learned that Tukaram, though belonging to a low caste, had written a large number of poems expounding the philosophy of the Bhagvad Gita. He issued an injunction prohibiting Tukaram from writing any poems and ordering him to throw into a nearby river those already written” (Belsare 6).

By that time Tukaram`s songs were widespread. There was no single home where his Abhnaga was not being sung or recited in the vicinity of Pune. Hundreds of thousand people gathered at Dehu as they loved Tukaram and his poetry to witness this heart-wrenching incident. Many of them started singing and recording his Abhangas. But some real gems might have lost in the process and never regained in future too.

Conclusion

Tukaram`s journey from being a common trade owner to becoming one of the most revered poets of Maharashtra was never an easy one. He had to face all kinds of struggles and sufferings. The sufferings were both internal and external. He saw deaths and destruction of family and society on one hand. And at the same time, he experienced the selfish natures of humans against the backdrop of natural calamities. With his strong will, Tukaram stood the test of time and became victorious. His life and teaching will guide all the tortured souls to attain happiness in future time.

It is impossible to wipe out or eradicate the everlasting influence of Tukaram`s enchanting poems on the minds of the people of Maharashtra in particular and the world in general. The modern vogue of translating Tukaram`s Poetry into European languages is very suggestive of Tukaram`s immortal relevance for future generations as a world guru. How can



one wipe out words carved on everyone's heart? Tukaram's Gatha⁸ is flowing incessantly across the world and enriching the lives of people wherever it is being read. Tukaram is a historical and historic figure, very much rooted in the psyche of Maharashtra. Tukaram's importance in shaping Marathi literature and language can never be diminished. Nor can be contested in the coming ages.

END-NOTES

1. **Shudra** is the serving castes in the Hinduism, the fourth division of Varna hierarchy in the social structure of Tukaram's times. The four Varnas were divided into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Tukaram's Manuscripts were drowned into the waters of Indrayani as per the order of religious authorities as Tukaram was a Shudra who committed crime by writing poems and threatening the authority of upper-classes in those times.
2. **Vitthal** also called Vithoba (father vitthal) or Vithai (mother vitthal), is the idol of the God at Pandharpur (Maharashtra). The origin of the name is unknown but it seems to have come in literary usage around thirteenth century.
3. A Movement founded in the 13th century by Namdev and Dnyandev as a reaction to extreme Brahmin orthodoxy. It is the most popular sect in Maharashtra today. The movement produced great poetry in Marathi up to the 17th century. Tukaram is rightly called a pinnacle of the movement.
4. **Abhanga** is a form of devotional verse to be sung in the praise of God Vitthal (A Hindu God). Abhanga means uninterrupted, flawless poem written in a particular metrical form which has a folk origin.
5. The word '**Kirtan**' is derived from Sanskrit word that means describing a story. It is eulogizing God. Kirtan is mostly accompanied by musical instruments.



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6. **Vedas** are the four earliest Hindu Scriptures; Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. Access to the Vedas was forbidden to Tukaram because of his birth in a Shudra caste.
7. **Dehu** is the name of Tukaram's village situated on the banks of the river Indrayani near city of Pune in Maharashtra (India).
8. The collection of Tukaram or other poet-saint's Abhangas is called **Gatha** in Marathi language.

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