

Tukaram: The Saint Poet With Social Vision

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Tukaram (1608-1649) is an illustrious saint in the tradition of Namdeo, Dnyaneshwar and Eknath. Of the three Dnyaneshwar and Eknath were born in the caste which had an access to learning. In spite of lack of such background, Tukaram, by working hard, acquired the skills which contributed in making him a great saint and poet. We do not see a person of his stature in Varkari Sampraday after him. Varkaris believe that he occupies the position of a pinnacle of the temple of Sampraday. This view is incontrovertibly accepted by all in the Sampraday. In Pandharpur it is believed that worshipping the pinnacle of Vitthal temple with folded hands is equivalent to actually touching the feet of the God. Tukaram is said to be the pinnacle because in his writings we find the secret of teachings of his forerunners, he had digested the teachings of his predecessors like Dnyaneshwar, Namdeo and Eknath and gave expression to it in his abhangas in proportionate and coherent words. It is said that those who are well acquainted with the majesty and essence of his speech can do without getting introduced with the writings of the above three. In this sense there is a practice of calling him a pinnacle of the temple of Bhagwatdharma.

A glance at an incident in his biography would help us to understand him better to a greater degree. He belonged to the family of moneylenders. Several of his generations were engaged in this business. At the age of twenty he went to the Bhambanath hill and meditated seriously there for seven days. It is said that there he had a divine vision. After this he came back to the Indrayani river flowing by his village, Dehu. He called his brother there with all the notes of the loans disbursed. When the brother brought the notes he divided them in two parts, gave half of them to his brother and drowned the notes of his own share into the water of the river. Only after having done so, he went back home. Salunkhe interpretes this incident as, “ His first act after having divine vision was of distinctly social meaning. It means that the divine vision he had was not only of obscure, profound or spiritual nature, it was genuinely of the nature of life’s vision through alert and compassionate observation of the social condition. The meditation he undertook on the Bhambanath hill was not about spirituality but it was about how to eradicate injustice in the society and how to engender true morality in the society. It is clear that after the divine vision he turned towards worship of God was also not of spiritual nature but had a social meaning.” (Salunkhe 1999, 14-15) He submerged the documents not because he wanted to renounce the world. Contrary to that he lived a domestic life till the end. Rather he immersed the papers to show a high moral comportment. It is a revolutionary act which indicates that he had given up covetousness which is an obstacle in the way of Bhakti. He himself became free of doing injustice to those people. Thus with the help of this act he demonstrates that one can lead a domestic life and still be free of craving. There is one more reason for his not becoming an ascetic, we observe this through his compositions. He states, disgraceful life in which one depends on a begging bowl should burn and adds that God should disregard such people forever. (Tukaram 1. 1410) The statement demonstrates his dislike for depending on others, so he abstained from being an ascetic.

Though Salunkhe interprets Tukaram’s inspiration as social, there is a definite touch of detachment to all worldly things. This leads him to harsh self-searching. Basically his family had a tradition of worship of Vitthal, so he turned towards it. Then he gives up family, farming and business and retires to the Bhambanath or Bhabdara hill where he meditates in seclusion. While trying to have a dialogue with the universe he started incessantly chanting the name of Vitthal for purification of mind. He started enjoying the company of Yogis, Fakirs, holy men and such people. (Nemade 2007, VIII) This indicates that the divine vision he had was not only of social nature but was spiritual also.

Tukaram believed in true Bhakti, at the same time he expressed his dislike for some forms of worship existing during his time. He launched a severe attack on ostentatious religious customs being observed by people. Some people shaved their heads and believed that they had got rid of their sins by doing so. To those he says that sins do not reside in hair

but their habitation is in passions and desires in one's mind and if one does not abandon them, shaving head is futile. In contrast to this some grow long matted hair as the symbol of their religious devotion. To them he says that this is also in vain, one does not become a holy man by growing long hair. He adds that even the fox has a similar appearance, if growing hair had made a person a holy man, the fox would also have become a saint. He does not spare people doing hypocrisy in the name of religion and delivers a striking blow to those who renounce the world, celebrates, heretics and Shaktas. While telling the real Bhagwatdharma he intends that people should be able to recognise hypocrisy going on in the name of religion. He did this work outspokenly as well as uncovetously. His style was unyielding and at times blunt so it gave a shock to religious beliefs existing during his time. Though his statements seem firm outwardly they were saturated with deep compassion aimed at the wellbeing of the masses.

Tukaram's popularity started growing, people thronged to attend his Kirtans. This was, perhaps, owing to discarding the priestly class which claimed to mediate between devotees and the God. People also started accepting him as a Guru though he had no such aspiration. He did not establish monasteries like Ramdas. Still he was being called 'guru' by some. Among them was Bahenabai, an illustrious woman saint, who emerged at the end of the era. She was the most prominent among his disciples. Kacheshwar Brahme and Niloba Pimpalnerkar were also his disciples. Brahmins were already annoyed because of his teachings. When they saw that he has some brahmin disciples they were infuriated. How can a Shudra become a guru of a Brahmin? What right does he have to Propound his sarcastic opinions about noble religious principles and condemning the upper casts? How does only he know the meaning of the Vedas? Were some of the questions that vexed them. They started criticising him, started torching him. They dragged him to court. Nemade states " Effects of Tukaram's teaching were visible and the means of survival of Brahmins, who earned their livelihood with the help of superstitions started getting affected adversely. Due to this Tukaram's daily survival also became difficult, Bahenabai writes in her autobiography that so much harassment he had to bear at the hands of Brahmins inflamed with the feeling of revenge. (Nemade 2007,X) The notebook of his poems were drowned in Indrayani river by his opponents.

Trimbak Kasar, a great devotee of Tukaram, collected his Abhangas, after a hundred years of submerging, by going village to village and meeting people who had them by heart, used to sing them. (Nemade 2007, XIII) The Government of Bombay, with inspiration from Sir Alexander Grant, published a corrected edition of Tukaram's abhangas. It was edited by Vedic scholar Shankar Pandurang Pandit so it is called Gatha Shankar Pandurangi. It is also known as Gatha of Induprakash. Its first part was published in 1869 and the second part was brought out in 1873. Today over four thousand and six hundred of Tukaram's abhangas are available, the number must be much more than that. Tukaram Tatya Padwal had also collected the abhangas. In his edition there are more than eight thousand abhangas, but scholars believe that all of them are not composed by the Tukaram of Dehu. Particularly those on the Gita in it must have been composed by Tukaram brahmin from Veleshwar, near Jamkhed and some of them could have been written by Tuka Vipra. Due to similarity in their signatures they appeared in Tukaram Tatya's edition.

Tukaram was of the opinion that using poetry for subsistence or for entertainment is an indication of mean nature. Those who do pretence of aspiring to the divine truth for livelihood go to hell. (Deshpande 1982, 123) His compositions were spontaneous, written out of natural imaginative power. It is a live spring of inspiration. He had studied to know the spiritual aspect of literature dealing with divine truth. He gives credit of his being a poet to God, he also acknowledges that God had made him speak and confesses that he wrote because he could not suppress the urge to do so. There are some people who steal or borrow other's words and ideas, he condemns such people. He also condemns writing poetry for livelihood, reputation or entertainment. Along with the things stated above he was aware of the power of words. These are some of the salient features of his poetry. Most important difference between the works of Tukaram and his forerunners is that they wrote

commentaries on important religious texts like the Gita, Shrimadbhagwat, Ramayana, Mahabharat or Puranas. Whereas Tukaram does not take a text and give its exposition with sequence. His compositions are random and occasional in nature. We see a variety of themes handled in his abhangas, they are biographical, describing a sensible form of God, chanting the name of God, intimacy with God and admonition.

The Varna and caste system is central to Hinduism that is why no saint has gone ahead without expressing own views regarding it. Tukaram has also dealt with it. In one place he states that he does not consider varna or caste, in another abhanga he expresses a similar view that whoever is called the subject of God, whatever caste they belong to, they should not be judged by the standard of his caste and family. Further he asserts that he has nothing to do with the caste, he whoever chants the name of God is the blessed one.(Joshi 2008, 361) Salunkhe comments on this aspect of Tukaram's writings that, " To observe four varnas and four ashramas is an important feature of Vaidic Dharma. Rather, many times the same is known as Varnashram Dharma. There is no doubt that in this situation the views expressed by Tukaram regarding ritualism of varnashrama, from a viewpoint, delivers a severe blow to Vaidic Dharma. (Salunkhe 1999, 42) He boldly states that if a brahmin gets angry due to the touch of a Mahar, he is not a brahmin at all. Yet we find examples when he upholds it. He says if you observe Varnashrama genuinely you will attain heaven.(Tukaram 1.782) On the one hand he states that if one gives gifts to a wicked, troublesome brahmin who insults many, both, the donor and receiver go to hell.(Tukaram 1.3806) and on the other says that even though a she-ass is milchy can it have the status of a cow, around a crow's neck there are garlands of flowers, still how would he know the grace of a swan and after making such comparison finally states that even though a brahmin fails to his duty still he is excellent in the three worlds.(Tukaram 3050) This is how he condemns brahmans and also glorifies them. Declares that he has nothing to do with Varnashrama yet advocates in its favour. He also seems to be disapproving of violation of restrictions laid down on dining together. He states, listening to the effects of Kaliyuga, in future there would be intense chaos, all the four varnas and eighteen castes would dine in the same row. (Tukaram 2972) While commenting on this Deshpande says that, " In fact there is no difference in views of Tukaram and Ramdas. Tukoba is a supporter of varnashrama and he has esteemed even a brahmin, who fails to his duty, as excellent."(Deshpande 1982, 215) However listing Tukaram with Ramdas would be misrepresentation. In his works we see that Tukaram has launched an attack on Caste and Varna System which we do not find in Ramdas. Still the question remains that in his works why do we see Abhangas which support caste and varna inequality. Existence of two Tukarams, mentioned above could be accounted for this contradiction. Lokhande, referring to Pendse, states that Abhangas like 'Though a Brahmin is fallen he is excellent in the three worlds', must be either interpolated or sarcastic. He categorically states that this is not written by Tukaram at all and brings to our notice that Karkhanis also supports this view. (Lokhande 2012, 437)

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