

Tukarama as a Rebel against the Socio-religious Rigidity of the Middle Ages

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Abstract:

Maharashtra is known as the land of saints, owing to its rich tradition of spiritual leaders. Although there are many sects in Maharashtra, the *Varkari* sect has a special influence. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when the tradition of Vitthala devotees, known as *Varkaris*, originated. However, it was the writings of Dnyaneshwara, particularly the Dnyaneshwari gave this tradition a clear shape and philosophical identity. The essence of the statement, 'Dnyaneshwar laid the foundation...' described by Bahinabai, comprising Dnyaneshwara, Namdeva, Eknatha, and Tukarama, refers to the tradition of Vitthala devotees. Tukarama is considered the most prominent among the saints of Maharashtra. Hence, it is essential to study the life and times of Saint Tukarama to understand him properly. In this study, an attempt will be made to bridge the chronological gaps in Saint Tukarama's biography. Apart from this, the research paper will evaluate several past biographies of Saint Tukarama, from Mahipati's 'Bhaktileelamrut' to Sadanand More's 'Tukarama Darshan'. How did these biographers present the image of Saint Tukarama? Some of them distorted the image of Saint Tukarama on account of not being a Brahmin and composing in a language other than Sanskrit. The present paper will expose the wrong and prejudiced views of several thinkers who didn't accept the universality and greatness of Saint Tukarama.

Keywords: Saints, Devotees, *Varkari*, Life, Biographers, Biographies.

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The Main Sources of Sant Tukarama's Life:

The primary source of information about Saint Tukarama's life story is his autobiographical abhangs. Another authentic source of information about Tukarama's life is the biographical incident found in Bahinabai's poetry. Bahinabai, the last poetess of the *Varkari* tradition and a contemporary of Tukarama, holds a unique place in Marathi history. Bahinabai's autobiography is not only a vital source for understanding her own life but also an authentic source for Tukarama's biography.

Additionally, some researchers have attempted to write his biography. Among them, Mahipati, Arjun Keluskar, L.R. Pangarkar, P.M. Lad, Dr. S.D. Pendse, W.S. Bendre, Dr. A.H. Salunkhe, Dr. Balchandra Nemade, Dr. Sadanand More, etc., have made an effort to write a research-based biography. Based on the biographies written by the aforementioned authors and researchers, it is possible to gain an understanding of his life story. There are abundant resources available to learn about Tukarama's life. Mahipati's biography of Tukarama is considered one of the earliest. Mahipati's "Bhaktavijaya" (1762) and "Bhaktalilamrut" (1774) were written 113 and 125 years after Tukarama's death, respectively.

This significant time gap highlights the potential challenges in reconstructing an entirely accurate historical account of Tukarama's life. Mahipati Tarabadkar, born in 1715 in the Ahmednagar district, considered himself a disciple of Tukarama, claiming that Tukarama had initiated him as a disciple through a dream vision. A gap of 100-125 years is sufficient for the creation of many legends around the life of a saint like Tukarama. The oral traditions and stories can evolve, often blending fact and myth, making it challenging to separate historical fact from legendary accounts.

Tukaram's Date of Birth:

There is a disagreement among historians about Tukarama's year of birth, with four possible years being 1568, 1577, 1608, and 1598. As generally accepted, Tukarama was born in 1608 and ascended bodily into heaven in 1649. The challenge of verifying historical information about Tukarama's life is due to the time gap between his disappearance in 1649 and Mahipati's writings in 1774. Mahipati's accounts in *Bhaktalilamrita* and *Bhaktavijaya* are significant sources about Tukarama's life. The lack of clarity on his sources raises questions about the accuracy and reliability of the information, as Mahipati does not give the slightest hint as to where he obtained his information regarding Tukarama's life.

"With regard to the date of Tukarama's birth, there is a difference of opinion, some Marathi authorities holding it to have taken place in 1598, others in 1588, while other



schools hold to 1577 or 1568. We, however, may adopt the traditional date of 1608 based on Mahipati's record, until better available evidence points to the contrary. This means that Tukarama Bolhoba Ambile was born the same year as John Milton.”¹

The Contemporary Socio-Political Situation:

Since Tukarama's era predates Shivaji's time, studying the social and political conditions of that period becomes essential. The period from the Yadava era to Shivaji's time is often characterized as a dark age due to Muslim rule, and historians seem to have paid relatively little attention to this era. Tukarama was born in 1608, a time when the entire northern India up to the Tapi river was under Mughal rule. Bidar and Varhad had also been incorporated into the Mughal Empire. Jahangir and Shah Jahan further conquered the state of Ahmednagar in 1636. The Mughal advance was halted by Bijapur and Golconda. As a result, South Maharashtra became a battleground. During this time, the majority of Marathi people worked in the field. If a military army entered the fields, it would trample the standing crops. After the fall of Ahmednagar, this region was divided between the Mughals and Bijapur. After the downfall of the Nizamshahi of Ahmednagar, Shahaji Raje Bhonsle went to the Adilshahi of Bijapur. Within a short period, he established himself there. His main base at Thanjavur was renowned throughout India. Shahaji Raje's influence was so great that while Shah Jahan was known in the north, Shahaji was the name that echoed in the south. Tukarama's birthplace, situated between the Bhima and Nira rivers near Pune, came under the rule of the Bijapur kingdom. Although the entire Maharashtra region was under Muslim rule, the Marathas had significantly weakened the violence of these foreign invaders. The Marathi language was used for administrative purposes, and the revenue system was also in the hands of the Marathas. The local revenue officers acted as representatives of the Muslim rulers, and they directly caused hardship to the people while implementing the ruler's policies. However, the states of Golconda and Bijapur proved to be strong opponents of the Mughals. Eventually, Golconda succumbed to Mughal pressure and agreed to pay tribute to Shah Jahan. Bijapur then became the sole target of the Mughals. Even after Shivaji established his rule in 1646, Tukarama's region remained a battleground for the Marathas, Bijapur, and the Mughals. When Shivaji emerged, Muslim rule dominated Western India, and Muslims were viewed as foreigners and destroyers.

The teachings of saints helped spark a religious revival among the peasants. Moreover, the saint-poets played an extremely crucial and creative role in the evolution of the Marathi language. Due to the influence of Vaishnav saints, the so-called Shudras in this region tried to liberate themselves from the inferior social status prescribed by ancient religious scriptures. The social restrictions prescribed in religious scriptures

were binding on all Hindus. The struggle for freedom was necessary not only in the political sphere but also in the religious domain. Consequently, alongside the rise of Maratha power, a group of saints and prophets emerged in the social sphere. These individuals came from all castes and classes, high and low. They included Marathas (Kunbis), tailors, gardeners, potters, goldsmiths, maidservants, and many outcastes. This highlights the emergence of a diverse group of spiritual leaders from various backgrounds during the rise of Maratha power, reflecting the social and religious dynamics of the time. These saints were from all social strata and devoted themselves to spreading awareness throughout the country based on the revolutionary principles of brotherhood and monotheism. These saints in India exposed the hollowness of Brahminical dominance, rejected ritualism, and broke the Vedic monopoly of the educated class. They rejected Sanskrit and adopted the vernacular language. They minimised idol worship and the significance of polytheism, instead encouraging all devotees to worship a single deity, Pandharpur's Vithoba. The strict monotheism of Muslims had a profound impact on Hindu saints. In Maharashtra, when saints began teaching that Ram and Rahim are one, this influence deepened, promising people liberation from caste distinctions and ritualism. The saints' philosophy inspired people to believe in unity through human love and devotion to a single God. Shivaji Maharaj established Swaraj (self-rule) while embracing the cultural and geographical context of India, particularly the Marathi style. Due to this, Swaraj never witnessed atrocities on people of other religions, interference in their faith, or forced conversions. Communal riots were a phenomenon that emerged and persisted during the British era. Maloji Raje considered Sheikh Mahammad as his guru and gave his children names like Shahaji and Sharifji, reflecting Sufi influences.

Shivaji Maharaj too respected and honored saints and sages of all religions, including *Pirs and Fakirs*. Dehu, the birthplace of Tukarama, was part of Shivaji's *jagir*. All this history unfolds before the eyes of Tukarama, in his own region. Tukarama had, and still has, a significant influence on the common people of the Maval region. He preached the principles of *Kshatriya dharma* (warrior ethics) to the masses, instilled loyalty in the soldiers, and outlined the guiding principles of guerrilla warfare (*Ganimi Kawa*). Shivaji Maharaj held Tukarama in high esteem, not only due to his saintly nature but also because of his valuable contributions. Tukarama's family inherited the *Kshatriya* tradition. His ancestors, Hari and Mukund, sons of Vishwambhar Baba, had sacrificed their lives in battle against enemies. Tukarama's abhangs reveal the intricacies of trade, money lending, and agriculture, and provide detailed descriptions of battles and war strategies. In the Government *Gatha*, abhangs from 1062 to 1072 are specifically known as "*Paikache Abhang*" (soldier's abhangs). Through these eleven abhangs, Tukarama imparted valuable lessons to the native warriors of Maval, directly related to warfare. He advised them to abandon serving corrupt rulers driven by greed and instead adopt a life of soldier hood based on sacrifice and dedication to a noble cause.

Spiritual inequality and discrimination against women and Shudras had religious sanction. Brahmins had a vested interest in maintaining their monopoly and were ruthless in doing so. However, these same Brahmins had no qualms about serving foreign Muslim rulers as Diwans, Deshpandes, and Kulkarnis. Following them, people from other castes also became Deshmukhs and Jagirdars, proudly pledging their loyalty to Muslim rulers. The entire society was suffocating under an atmosphere of inequality and injustice. The saints launched a strong attack on the ritualistic tendencies, both ideological and practical. In doing so, they rejected the path of karma (ritual action) and instead advocated for the superiority of bhakti (devotion). According to them, bhakti is not a means but an end in itself, superior to karma, and a philosophy of life. Rejecting the numerous deities prevalent at the time, the saints established the deity 'Vithoba' as the central figure of

Tukarama's Life:

Tukarama's ancestor, Vishwambharbuva, was a great devotee of Lord Vitthala. The tradition of going on pilgrimage to Pandharpur was prevalent in his household. He had built a Vitthal temple in Dehu. Every fifteen days, he used to visit Pandhari. Vishwambhara's son was Hari, Hari's son was Vitthala, Vitthala's son was Padmaji, Padmaji's son was Shankar, Shankar's son was Kanhoba, Kanhoba's son was Bolhoba. Tukarama's Parents, Bolhoba and his wife Kanakai, had three sons. The three sons were Savaji, Tukoba, and Kanhoba. Like Tukarama, Kanhoba Maharaj was also a poet-saint. The Varkari tradition has included his abhangs in Tukarama's Gatha, granting them equal status. In bhajans and kirtans, Kanhoba's abhangs are sung and revered alongside Tukarama's. The elder brother, Savaji, had a detached nature, and the entire household responsibility fell on Tukarama. He was first married to Rukhumai, and Jijai was his second wife (also known as Awali), the daughter of Appaji Gulve from Pune. Many have portrayed Jijai as a quarrelsome wife. Sadanand More says:

*In Maharashtra, everyone from storytellers (Haridas) to playwrights and filmmakers has contributed to portraying Jijabai as a nagging and quarrelsome wife. Not content with this, they have also exaggerated her rustic nature and her relationship with her parental home's deities, such as Mangalai, creating a permanent source of spicy entertainment."*²

Tukarama had to face many hardships and calamities in his worldly life. He lost his parents at the age of seventeen, his elder brother went on a pilgrimage due to his detached nature, and he had to face a severe famine. His eldest son, Santu, passed away during the famine, his cattle died, and he suffered financial losses. His mind became depressed, and he became disillusioned with worldly life. In this

situation, he continued his supreme devotion to Lord Vitthala and started his spiritual practice on the Bhambnatha Hill near Dehu village. He thought he would find peace at a serene spot in the temple of Bhamnath (Shankar), which was surrounded by natural beauty. Some biographers viewed that one calamity after another made him realize that worldly life is full of sorrow. The constant stream of calamities has made his life full of suffering. Recognizing the transience of life and the uncertainty of worldly entanglements, Tukarama firmly decided to break these shackles. For others, Tukarama's fortunes didn't dwindle, but he voluntarily renounced his wealth. He rejected the traditional moneylending profession and chose a path of humanity. In Tukarama's time, the varna system was prevalent, and Brahmins considered themselves superior to others. They believed that only they had the right to study Vedas and perform rituals. Tukarama mocks this attitude, saying that being born in a high caste doesn't make one superior. He says that if he had studied the Vedas, he would have become proud and wouldn't have been able to serve others. Tukarama's abhangs (poems) are a beautiful example of vakrokti alankar (a literary device). He uses humor and irony to criticize the hypocrisy of Brahmins. Tukarama's life was a struggle against the caste system and the hypocrisy of Brahmins. He used his words as weapons to fight against the oppressors. We should understand his struggle and continue his fight for equality and justice.

Tukarama's Inspiration and Guru:

In Indian history and culture, the Guru is given immense importance. However, it is observed that teachers, mentors, and gurus are being treated as the same. A teacher teaches, and a mentor guides, but a guru is distinct from both. A guru is the inspiration behind a person's achievement and success. One night, he had a dream in which Namdev and Vitthala came and woke him up by tapping on his shoulder and said, Namdeva had decided to write one hundred crore abhangs, but before completing that number, Namdeva passed away. Now, you complete the remaining abhangs. Tukarama had immense respect for Namdeva, believing that Namdeva had awakened and alerted him to accept the message of the divine. Despite this, it's clear that Tukarama did not consider Namdev as his guru. Despite having immense respect for Namdev, Tukarama did not consider him his guru because he regarded Pandurang as his true guru.

Torture in Tukarama's life:

Tukarama's devotion to Vitthala and his teachings against orthodox traditions through his poetry instilled fear in Brahmins. His powerful poetic voice gained immense popularity. His spiritual approach rejected scriptural study, austerities, rituals, guru-shishya relationships, mysticism, magical practices, and offerings to Brahmins. His kirtans' rhythmic chanting and devotional songs created a mesmerizing

atmosphere, transcending material boundaries. The Advaitic themes in his bhajans fostered a sense of unity among people. With his beautiful abhangs and messages of social equality, Tukarama became a revered figure. His followers, including some Brahmins, multiplied in number. Tukarama's fame spread far and wide, attracting Vitthala devotees from distant places to Dehu to hear him. Tukarama's teachings gradually diminished the importance of Sanskrit learning, which in turn affected the livelihood of Vedic Brahmins. Their income declined, and Tukarama's steady and firm rebellion increasingly irked the orthodox Brahmins. A Shudra rebelling against the privileges of Brahmins was something that would be hard to accept in the 17th century. Some people used to tease Tukarama, still his noble nature, the enlightenment he imparted, and his impartial intellect made him revered and beloved by the masses. Tukarama continued to call out to Pandurang, but he didn't see people coming to his help. This incident occurred around 1645, when Tukarama was 37 years old. Tukarama says

“Where shall I find food? Whom shall I go to? Under whose protection shall I stay in this town? The headman here has censured the town's people; who will give me a morsel now? The people say, he has lost all sense of decency; they drag me before the court. Respectable people have brought the matter before the headman; I am a feeble creature; they have ruined me. Tuka says, their company is not good for me; I shall go now to seek Vitthoba.”³

Tukarama's Departure from the Mortal World:

The biographers like Mahipati, Ajgaonkar and Bhalchandra Nemade say that Tukarama disappeared or became invisible, and it's a mystery. He disappeared around 1650. The facts surrounding Tukarama's disappearance are shrouded in ambiguity. There are different opinions - some suggest he might have taken his own life, while others believe he was murdered by orthodox Brahmins or drowned in the nearby river. Some believe that Tukarama went to Vaikuntha. According to Bhave Sant Tukarama took Samadhi. According to Arjun Keluskar, Tukarama jumped into the Indrani River. Keluskar suggests that stories of Tukarama's ascension to heaven in a divine vehicle, with his physical body, and dropping his blanket and cymbals from above, were fabricated later. However, Keluskar's view that Tukarama took 'Jal Samadhi' is not universally accepted. Some believe that Tukarama, with his extraordinary spiritual powers, merged his body with the five elements. Poet Dilip Purushottam Chitre's opinion is that Tukarama, having expanded the boundaries of his existential awareness, transcended to a state of liberation and left Dehu village, heading north. L.R. Pangarkar, in his book 'Tukarama Charitra' (1920), believed that Tukarama disappeared with his body. In his edited book 'Tukarama Vachanamrut' (1925), Dr. R.D. Ranade agreed that Tukarama



attained Vaikuntha (heaven). P.B. Kavde, in his book 'Tukarama Charitra' (1952), suggested the possibility of Tukarama's murder. He stated that on Falgun Vadya Dwitiya, during the Holi festival, Tukarama might have been pushed into the pond or killed due to malicious intent, following the local customs of playful teasing. S.K. Joshi, in his biographical novel 'Tuka Zalase Kallas' (1960), expressed the opinion that Salomalo and Mambaji might have murdered Tukarama. The idea that orthodox elements plotted against Tukarama gained prominence through the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. Sudam Savarkar wrote a book 'Tukarama's Bodily Ascension to Vaikuntha or Murder?'. Another important aspect regarding Tukarama's death is that there is no information available about what happened to his physical body.

Conclusion:

The controversy surrounding Sant Tukarama's demise continues to be a research topic. However, beyond this debate, everyone admires his abhanga compositions, which have made a profound impact in the realm of devotion, equality, and humanity. As a saint poet, his height is extraordinary. He has earned an important place in Marathi life, and this is a testament to his greatness.

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