

**VOICES OF MARGINALITY: THE POETRY OF SAINT KANHOPATRA AND
JANABAI**

Dr. M. L. Jadhav
Professor,
Department of English,
Shivaji University,
Kolhapur

The impact of the literature of Saints *Sant Sahitya* on the social conscience was inevitable in the medieval period and it sustains in its charm even today. It is written in a variety of forms such as *Ovee*, *Bharud*, *Abhang* etc. and is enjoyed by a majority of the people in rural India through concerts and recitals organised at various religious and cultural celebrations. It deals with multiple themes of mundane affairs, experiences and offers as a critique on the follies and frailties apart from the hilarious appeal to the Almighty. This literature also could be treated as an everlasting treasure of love, compassion, knowledge and a perennial source of values we need to cultivate for the betterment of mankind in its multitude. Naturally then it's no wonder if it holds the imagination of millions of people irrespective of the categories of caste, creed, religion region and gender. The traditions such as *Varkari*, Jainism Sufism, *Natha*, *Mahanubhava*, Buddhism, *Sheivism* etc. have left their indelible impact on the mind of the people of India.

The eminence of this literature lies in the fact that it teaches us to transcend the agony into joy. It teaches us how to transform ourselves from our materialist affiliations and think of the truth about life in its totality, which, in Derridian sense does not lie at its (the totality) centre but elsewhere. *Sant Sahitya* creates within us a sense of belonging and passion for life where it ceases to be superficial and craves for the welfare of others. It gives us an insight into our selfhood, the innate self and elevates us above everything that is worldly and temporal. It fills us with infinite joy and ecstasy and makes us capable to endure hatred, procure love, distribute joy and share the agony of the agonised. The 11th, 12th, 13th and the 15th centuries were wonderful period because most of the religious cults and traditions except the Buddhism and the Jainism, had their beginning and culmination during these centuries. There was an encounter between the old and the new social order that was to be wrought against the backdrop of orthodox religious practices where there was no place for universal human values. Most of the Saints have recorded their existentialist angst and anger through their literatures.

The galaxy of the luminaries in the *Varkari* Tradition in Maharashtra apart from Dnyaneshwar, Nivrutinath, Muktabai and Sopandeo includes Tukaram Maharaj, Sant Namdeo, Eknath, Sant Chokhamela, Gora Kumbhar and many others. Apart from this, the other traditions emerging from the states like Karnataka such as the *Veersheiv* (Sheivism), Jainism and Sufism, emerging from Northern States have contributed a lot to enrich this form of literature. The genre Literature of Saints (*Sant Sahitya*) is treated as alternative literature and it doesn't appear on the agenda of the major academia of Indian Literary scholarship. It is unfortunate and agonising because no literature can exist without social context. Saints, through their writings have contributed in building the apparatus upon which the creative writers of today depend for their materials. The academia, as it seems, is unaware and oblivious of its importance and relevance in the wake of multicultural boom which is being imported from the West and imposed upon the psyche of the Indian youth invariably in order to corrupt rather than to correct them morally.

The majority of *Sants* belong to the communities that were socially outcast, downtrodden and marginalised on account of their cast and profession. There had been a tremendous impact of the social segregation on the basis of the so called Four *Varnas* on the mind of the Caste Hindus. Naturally, therefore, those who belonged to the lower strata and wanted to worship the same God worshipped by the Caste Hindus, were not allowed to do so only because of their lowly origin.

The *Sants* wanted to protest against this segregation but they did not know as to whom with they should record their grievances although they knew how to voice them. There was no democracy then, and the monarchy was too narrow to accommodate and redress the grievances of the downtrodden because it was also led by the essentialist political ideology where there was no room for the commonplace citizenry. In a situation like this they thought that it was only the God, the Almighty, who would listen to them and redress their grievances. The *Sants* like Tukaram and Chokhoba could offer to be bold enough to protest against this order and rise almost like a warrior asking people to come up with a weapon to fight against injustice if the situation demanded. In one of his *abhangs* Tukaram says,

Nahi tari deu kasechi langoti
Nathalachya mathi hanu kathi.

(If pleased, we will sacrifice everything for the sake of goodness, But if challenged by a Villain, will defeat him with a *lathi*)

In one of his *abhangs* Chokhamela says,

*Uus donga pari rasa nove donga
Kay bhulaliasi varalia aanga
Nadi dongi pari jal nove donge
Kay bhulaliasi varalia aanga
Chokha donga pari bhava nohe donga
Kay bhulaliasi varalia Ranga.*

The above *abhang* could be paraphrased as follows,

*The sugarcane is zigzag but the juice of it not so
Chokha may be ugly to look at but his devotion is not so
The river may be zigzag but the water is not so
Chokha may be ugly to look at but his devotion is not so.*

Thus, the male saints could afford to be aggressive but the women folk since they were fated to suffer the pangs of gender discrimination could do little about it and wanted to assert it provided they were given a chance. The situation of those women who belonged to the downtrodden community was more precarious than those who belonged to the cast Hindu community.

Kanhopatra and Janabai wanted to follow the path of *Bhakti* not because of the fact that they were told to do so by somebody or by their parents. It was not even because of the extreme passion for spirituality inhibited in them was a gift of divinity. They had to turn to divinity because of the kind of contemporary social reality they had to face. Women then were treated as a commodity, a means to satisfy the basic needs of a family and an end for the perpetuation of progeny by means of an agency known as marriage. They were not supposed to participate in religious ceremonies in its full capacity. Certain rites and rituals were to be performed by men and the role of women was to assist them and stay at the backyard or in the kitchen taking care of the domestic cores, and looking after children. They had no voice of their own. They had to be always on the margins and live a life of neglect of all kinds i.e. physical, emotional and psychological. There are various grounds on the basis of which the women's subjugation and marginalisation could be categorised i.e. depending on the constraints and the social practices and conditions in vogue during the specific period in history. Looking at their marginalisation it is painful to realise that it was comprehensive, multilayered and multidimensional. The major dimensions were social, spiritual and spatial. The social dimension includes the entire societal framework and focuses on human aspects such as demography, religion, culture, social structure/ system based on the hierarchy of

caste, class, ethnicity and gender. It also refers to economic status pertaining to the access to resources and the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality and social injustice.

While analysing the poetry of Kanhopatra and Janabai I would like to focus on the social and the spiritual dimensions of their marginalisation and would take up a few of their *abhangs* (poems) for a detailed analysis.

Kanhopatra, daughter of Shyama, a courtesan of Mangalwedhe was a 15th century Marathi Saint Poetess. Apart from Kanhopatra, Mangalwedhe is also the birthplace of a famous varkari Sant from a backward cast who is referred to earlier and Sant Damaji Pant still one more famous devotee of the Lord Vitthala.(Pande: 2004:109) Shyama being a prostitute, was not sure as to who must be Kanhopatra's father. She suspected allegedly that it must be Sadashiv Malgujar. She had training in the art of Dancing from her mother and became a talented dancer and singer. Her beauty was simply wonderful and attracted the attention of many men. Her mother wanted her to visit the King of Bider but Kanhopatra flatly rejected her proposal and decided to devote herself in the *Bhakti* of the Lord. She was forced to get married but Kanhopatra longed to marry a man more beautiful than her. Tara Bhavalkar states that Kanhopatra's marriage was forbidden because it was not socially acceptable for a daughter of a courtesan to marry(Steven:1996:165). Kanhopatra spent her childhood lavishly in the lap of luxury in a palatial house of her mother Shyama who enjoyed the special favours of the King of Bidar. Several maids were there to take care of her but because of her caste and the profession of her mother she was looked down upon by the village community.

Kanhopatra was honoured by the *Varkari* cult of Hinduism for her devotion and more importantly her choice of a life of penance and abstinence. She was the most sought after lady for her wonderful beauty and power of self restraint and self-respect. Little information is available on her biographical details. It is said that she was born to a lady named Shyama who was a courtesan and a prostitute by profession and had the royal patronage at the behest of the king of Bidar. Kanhopatra by the legacy of her matrilineal profession was destined to be a concubine and dancing girl at the Court of the king. Several stories and legends have passed down over the centuries that tell about her extraordinary beauty, her expertise in her profession, her adoration by the king of Bidar, her relationship with God, and finally her death at the feet of Vithoba the Lord, in the shrine of Pandharpur. It is said that she was

offered a seat of honour and a royal patronage by the Badshah of Bidar, the king of Bahamany dynasty but she declined this honour and preferred a life of a Yogi.

Knhopatra is believed to have composed many abhangs. Only thirty of them are available in the form of oves. Twenty three of her abhangs are included in the anthology of Varkari saints called *Sakal Sant Gatha*.

Her poems depict vividly her struggle and protest against the contemporary social mores that warranted her to sacrifice the best of her virtues and morale and compelled her to live the life of a concubine to the king and to be a tool to satisfy the lust of a few courtiers enjoying the favour of the king in the name of her matrilineal profession which was imposed upon her by the society. They speak of ostracism, dejection and rejection of her womanhood as a normal lady looking forward to fulfil her dream of a happy married life. She was looked down upon because of her social status and was paid attention to by only the lusty and the lecherous people. It was quite natural then that a woman like her would think of an escape by seeking refuge at the feet of the Lord Vitthal. The following poem brings out her malady for being insecure and unprotected midst the people who are overtaken by lust and lechery. She says,

*O Narayana, you call yourself
Saviour of the fallen
My caste is impure
I lack loving faith
My nature and actions are vile
Fallen Kanhopatra
Offers herself to your feet
A challenge
To your claims of Mercy. (Sellergren: 1996: 227)*

In this poem she doesn't request the Lord to protect her, but invokes his pride for being the universal protector and throws him a challenge to keep his reputation intact as a savoir. Kanhopatra addresses the Lord Vitthal by various names such as Narayana, an incarnation of Vishnu, Shripati and Manmatha Kamdeo, the God of Love and sometimes the duo of Krishna-Vithoba, who are supposed to be the champions of the low, fallen, dejected, rejected and the destitute. In another of her poem she shows her concern for her body as it was vulnerable to the atrocities of the venturous men who were not lesser than the wild animals waiting with an irresistible instinct to devour the body of an innocent animal. The

following abhang dramatises the encounter between the killer instinct and the mechanism of resistance.

*If you call yourself the Lord of the fallen
Why do O Lord not lift me up?
When I say I am yours alone,
Who is to blame but yourself?
If I am taken by another man.*

*When a jackal takes the share of the Lion,
It is the great, who is put to shame.
I offer my body says Kanhopatra at your feet,
Protect it at least for your title. (Ibid: 228)*

According to Ranade this *abhang* was composed when she was invited by the king of Bidar and was adored by him for sexual advances. Among all other Saint poetesses the plight of Kanhopatra is very different in that she is neglected and marginalised not only by the male dominated Caste Hindu lineage but also by the Varkari Sants. Among the Saint community she is the only woman Sant who had no spiritual Guru. Being a woman from a lowly origin and a lowly profession, she was denied the right to worship. She was treated to be impure and a sinner who could never think of her resurrection through *bhakti* as other women could think of. She was also despised and teased by her *co-warkaries* and was denied to pray the same God that was worshipped by the Caste Hindus. She had no Guru and traditional support and yet she commanded great legacy and self respect combined with spiritual insight. She was born in a house where devotion was unthinkable and yet attained sainthood exclusively on the basis of her merit. She was overtaken by an intense fear of the molestation of her virginity. This intense fear was inevitably transformed into devotion through which she could materialise her safety by means of a total surrender in the service of the Lord. It (devotion) was an outcome of the injustice she was fated to endure by the circumstances around her that were necessarily hostile and incongruous to the life of a concubine she was supposed to accept. Her poetry in a way is an attempt to transcend the virtual reality into a kind of idyllic bliss with a remarkable synthesis of poetic imagination and a profound emotional depth. Her suffering is profound and moving and is also the catharsis wrought by it is equally unique.

Equally hilarious is the plight of Sant Janabai who was born in a backward family. She lost her mother and father early in her childhood. Having nobody to fall back, went to Pandharpur and got refuge in the family of Sant Namdeo, one of the prominent *varkari* poets who composed his poetry in the vernacular Marathi and propounded equality and

brotherhood. Janabai remained under his patronage and composed about 340 *abhangs* devotional songs.

Most of her *abhangs* deal with her relationship with God which was purely Plutonic and never erotic. She sees Vitthal as her mother and longs for his eternal love not only in this life but also after her death, every rebirth she might have to undergo. Her *abhangs* are still sung all over Maharashtra and a few of them also have been translated into English by scholars like Sellergren, Anjali Yardi, Pandharipande and Vilas Sarang. Unlike Kanhopatra Janabai registers her anguish with a subtle sense of humour.

The following *abhang* brings out her sense of deprivation and disadvantage she is taken by.

*Your wife and mother stay at your feet
And sons are placed proudly in front
This woman is kept on the doorsteps
No room for the lowly inside
O Lord how I want your embrace!
When will you call Dasi Jani yours. (Ibid: 218-19)*

Janabai calls on the Lord and draws his attention to His selfishness stating that He cares for only His family and neglects His devotees like her who are striving for his love and mercy. She expresses her dissatisfaction for she is being kept out of the temple because she is of a lowly origin. Several of her *abhangs* reveal as to how she was grappled by a sense of emptiness, dejection and rejection. For example look at the following *abhang*.

*If the Ganga flows to the Ocean
And the Ocean turns away
Tell me O Vitthal
Who would hear her complaint
Can the river reject its fish?
Can the mother spurn her child?
Jani says O Lord
You must accept those who surrender to you. (Ibid:222)*

The metaphor of *Ganga-Sagar*, river-fish and mother-child relationship explicitly speaks of her striving for the kind of solace which otherwise she would not think of getting in the world where all relationships are based on selfishness. In the following poem Janabai expresses her sense of loss and longing for the grace of filial affection she could not enjoy since she had lost her parents at a very early stage of her life. The poem brings out her emotion of loneliness and powerlessness. She writes,

*Mother is dead father is dead
Now Vitthal take care of me
O Hari my head is itching
I am your child
And have no one of my own.*

*Vitthal says to Rukmini
“There’s no one to care for my Jani”
Taking oil and comb in his hands
He combs and braids my hair:
Finishing the braid he knots it.*

*I say, now please rub my back.
Jani says O Gopala,
Help celebrate the festival
Of the powerless. (Ibid: 217)*

Yet in another of her poem titled “The Grindstone” Janabai uses the grindstone as a symbol suggestive of several meanings. The grindstone then was the only means to grind the grains for flour required to prepare bread *Bhakari*. It used to be made up of two hard stone heavy chips adjusted on a shaft fitted in the ground with a wooden handle to pull the upper chip in a circular motion so that the grains poured from the hole above would get crushed and made into fine flour. In the ancient times the most tiresome job of housewives was to grind the grains. Manual grinding required great amount of energy to pull the wooden shaft and thrust the heavy chip into circular motion. A single lady could hardly do it and hence would call some other lady either from the family itself or from the neighbouring house to help her. Thus the duo would occasionally sing together songs based on popular myths and legends from ancient scriptures received from the legacy of the folk traditional narratives, sometimes these lyrics depicted intense emotional raptures of familial and filial affections. Look at the following lines,

*My lovely grindstone
How sweetly it spins
As I sing your praise
Come to me my Lord (Yardi: 2006)*

Janabai relates the grindstone as a source link to concretise her relationship with the Lord. The spinning of the wheel and singing synthesize the self with the super self. The crushing of the grains serves as the metaphor for the values of sacrifice and the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The two wooden handles stand for the world and the spirit and the five

fingers for the five senses. As the grains are churned so the senses too are led to refinement shunning the coarse and ascending to ecstatic joy. Look at the following lines,

*Twin poles of world and Spirit
are the smooth wooden handles
my five fingers grasp by turns
come to me my Lord. (Ibid: 2006)*

The grindstone for Janabai is like life that grinds her to extract its essence known as *bhakti*. She compares life with a boiling vessel with a scum in it which is cleared of its broth as man's life when put to adversity emerges with victory. In many of her *abhangs* Janabai calls on the Lord and requests him to help her in the domestic chores such as sweeping, cleaning, washing and grinding. She expresses her gratitude to him for helping her and sharing not only her disillusionment but also for becoming the lowest within the lowest caste and helping her out of her responsibilities. Thus the poetry of both Kanhopatra and Janabai signifies the social awakening. It reflects not only their disadvantageous state but also their feminine sensibility, their moral compunctiousness and self respect.

While summing up it could be said that a close study of the *abhangs* of Kanhopatra and Janabai shows that they received hardly any recognition from the people who were dominated by the upper caste religious mentality. Their poems are the turbulent voices of womanhood responding to the hostility done to them by the community for the welfare of which they craved all through their lives. One of the major impulses behind their outpour of poetic creativity was their concern over the stasis of social transformation and the complex dynamics of it. Their poetry is characteristic of their powerful longing for spirituality and the mystical experiences with God and the moral potential in it. Their voices remain distinct not only from the community of the Saints of the male progeny but from the whole lot of humanity and the community of women who in today's context need to learn and explore more into the realm of feminine sensibility and spirituality. Women are required to rethink, redefine and reconstruct the notions of the feminine, femininity and all about their feminist voices, aspirations, practices and ideology. The poems of Kanhopatra and Janabai could be studied as cultural documents reflecting the best of the feminist aspirations and the womanist selfhood capable of guiding the community of women particularly in terms of the challenges they have to face while interacting with different situations and shouldering their responsibilities at home, office and in the building up of the immunity of society to amoral, unjust practices, indiscriminate and exploitation of all kinds in the wake of the present global cultural crises.

To speak about India's cultural supremacy it must be admitted that it happens to be the crucible of various traditions, faiths and beliefs. It is the place where different cultures coexist despite the ethnic and communal unrest creating an atmosphere of mutual love and understanding. It is a land where the mystical traditions of all the religious 'isms' like Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sufism coexisted for the palpitation of divine love and universal fraternity.

References:

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