

## Bhakta Tukaram - A Mystical Social Reformer

Dr. Maria Goretti Gonsalves

Principal, Vidya Bhavan College of Commerce, 20 Solapur Road, Bhairoba Nalla, Pune, (M.S.) India

### Abstract

Tukaram is a medieval saint from Maharashtra, who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Born into a low caste *shudra* family he faced many trials in life, but eventually rose to great heights of mysticism and holiness. He worked for justice and reformation of society during his times. Even though he lived many centuries before us, his life can inspire us in a quest for mysticism combined with social involvement. This paper is an attempt in studying the life of this great Indian saint and offering him as an example for us to emulate in our modern times. It examines the life of Tukaram, his mystical experience that leads him to write beautiful poems and his engagement in reforming the social structures of his times

**Key Words:** Search for Meaning, Mission, Mysticism, Social Justice, Social Reform.

### Introduction:

The story of Tukaram is a story of a common man who had a liberating experience of God which led him to his mission and eventually to work for the good of others.

This paper will consist of three parts ending with a conclusion. The first part will give necessary information, highlighting the background of the early life of Tukaram; his family origin and his search for meaning in life amidst his suffering and challenges. The second part explains his God experience which generates a consciousness of his life mission. The third part interprets him as a social reformer.

### 1. Early Life Of Tukaram

#### 1.1 Family Origin

Tukaram was probably born in 1608 to Bholhoji and Kanakai in a little village of Dehu close to Pune. They were Shudras by caste and were from Kunbi Maratha or agricultural tillage caste or vaani. Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur was their family

deity and they had also constructed a temple of their own dedicated to Vithoba.

Tukaram's family belonged to Varkari tradition (Marathi - meaning "a pilgrim"). It is a Vaishnava religious movement within the bhakti spiritual tradition of Hinduism. They worship Vithoba (also known as Vitthal), the presiding deity of Pandharpur. The Varkari movement includes the worship of Krishna in the form of Vithoba and a duty-based approach towards life emphasising strict moral behaviour.<sup>i</sup>

Tukaram's father was a shop-keeper and a money lender. He was also an officer who superintended the trade for the village and collected taxes from its shopkeeper. His family enjoyed a high social status and was well-to-do economically.<sup>ii</sup> The early death of his parents and the renunciation of worldly life by his elder brother Savaji, the responsibility fell upon Tukaram as the role head of his extended Hindu family at a fairly young age. Tukaram married a second time as his first wife was chronically ill. He had six children and had

to raise a younger brother as well. As he was well acquainted with his father's business, success showed to the business and it flourished. He became prosperous with abundance of cattle and crops. His family became rich and contented.

### **1.2 Tukaram Encounters a Series of Tests**

Before he was twenty-one, Tukaram encountered misery where he had to witness a series of deaths of his loved ones including his mother, his father, his first wife, children and sister –in-law. In 1629 there was a severe famine of in which he lost his wife and this was a devastating experience for Tukaram. In the same year there was flood that destroyed the crops which was followed by a totally dry monsoon in the year 1931. His business failed totally. After this terrible experience Tukaram lost all urge to lead a householder's life. He showed no interest in farming or the family's trade. It reduced Tukaram first to penury and then to the final humiliation of bankruptcy. He was unable to repay the debts he had incurred and the village council stripped him of his position as Mahajan and passed strictures against him. He incurred the displeasure of the village Patil (Headman).

<sup>iii</sup> He writes,

*“I was greatly afflicted by the world. My parents passed away. The famine used up my wealth and took away my good name. One wife of mine died crying for food. I was tormented by this grief and grew ashamed of myself.*

### **1.3 Tukaram's Search for Meaning in Life**

These series of traumatic events in his personal life made him pose agonizing questions to himself. What is human

existence? Why are these tragedies? Why this suffering? As his suffering grew intense he turned to God with his unswerving faith. He began to spend most of his time in the shrine of Vitthal or its precincts, singing songs composed by earlier poet saints in praise of the deity.<sup>iv</sup> Here he begins the captivating story of his soul.

*“My life is altogether wretched. What ground of faith can I see now? Chorus: I cannot bear to hear of the world. There is none who is truly mine. Means of bodily pleasure are poison to me. Honour is a snare to me. Chorus: I cannot bear to hear of the world There is none who is truly mine. Dignity and praise a toil and burden. My soul is restless. Chorus: I cannot bear to hear of the world. There is none who is truly mine. Tuka says, I cannot bear anything. Chorus: I cannot bear to hear of the world. There is none who is truly mine. My soul was ashamed. I was deeply struck by sorrow. I did not follow the advice of my friends. I lost all interest in the world. I discerned between truth and falsehood .I did not listen to the voices of the majority. I firmly believed in the Name (of God).In my heart I held on to the feet of Vithoba”. (1333)*

### **2. The God Experience of Tukaram**

To experience intimate union with God became a passion with Tukaram and he worked rigorously to achieve it. He gave his life in loving surrender to God to build this joyful relationship. No gurus satisfied him and he took resort in the one Guru Vithoba. He writes:

*“All their discussions are merely out of their learning. None of them have discernment born of experience. The learned scholars deliver discourses.*

*However, they have no spiritual happiness. (1691)*

*How wonderful is the love of my Vithoba. God himself becomes my Guru. (Guru – teacher/guide) Chorus: He fulfils our fond desires and aspirations. In the end He will take us to Himself.*

He then beautifully describes his experience saying:

*“He stands before and behind us in order to deliver us from any affliction that may befall us. Chorus: He fulfils our fond desires and aspiration. In the end He will take us to Himself. He takes care of our well-being; He knows what hurts us. Taking us by the hand He shows us the way. Excellent is the litany of Your name. It has become our life. We employ (literally, consume) it to our heart’s content. It is easy and sweeter than amrut. (1300) I have cast down my burden. I am free from anxious care.” (370).*

### **2.1. Tukaram Experiences A Call To A Mission**

Tukaram narrates his vision which is a call to a mission:

*“In the dream, Namdev appeared with Pandurang, woke him and advised him to make devotional songs. Chorus: He told me, “I appoint you a task; write poetry.”(1320) They would not hear of any excuses. Pandurang gave him the necessary inspiration and Namdev told him to complete the one hundred crores of poems which he had intended to make and of which he had completed ninety-four crores and forty lakhs, leaving a balance of five crores and sixty lakhs for Tukaram.”<sup>v</sup>*

This vision indicates that Tukaram’s abhangas (poetry) had a divine sanction.

They express his union with God and they are the witness to his anxieties, disappointments, difficulties, aspirations, joys and woes.<sup>vi</sup>

Tukaram discerns his call and in his Abhangas and accepts his mission with obedience to his Lord:

*“What knowledge have I? What authority I have to make known this path to men? 1134. Am I not wearied, but I am afraid, what can I do in my ignorance? My chief duty is like a servant to forward my Lord’s purpose with ready obedience therefore, Tuka stands gazing on his feet, listening to his word” (1016)*

### **2.2. The Mission Consciousness Of Tukaram**

Tukaram is convinced that he has received a mission from God, and will carry out it out at all costs. And even when he feels afraid or indifferent, or when he has inhibitions, he realizes his predestined duty and mission. There is tension between his identity as a Shudra, his unworthiness being qualified and his sense of mission.

*“Helpless in every way, humble in caste (2765) I have shown men a path according to the authority I received,(538).. I will exert my authority says Tuka; whatever I take in hand shall come to pass.. I have laid down rules for men in the ways set forth to me.” (1396=IP 2067)*

Interesting to note that Tukaram uses the terms “branded slave” “a stamped servant” “sealed”.<sup>vii</sup> These expressions clearly signify his total surrender to his God Vitthal. In him he sees his source of mission; from him he draws his courage and inspiration to preach his name.

Tukaram advocated belief in one God and vehemently opposed worshipping of other gods than Vitthal.

*“Vitthal is our only God, all others are vain (683=IP 1040). He continues “they say that Shiv, Sakti, Surya, Ganapati are all one with Vishnu, it is foolish fancy to bestow Godhead on other gods” (3183=IP 700).*

A burning sense of God-given mission to his community was his concern.

*“More verbal knowledge has brought about disaster. The heart is greedy of pleasure. All spiritual means are lost. We will beat a drum in the name of devotion. Tuka says; raise a joyful shout of acclamation. In charity we declare these remedies. Or else what are we interested in? We cannot bear to see with our eyes these people in disaster. Therefore, we feel intense compassion.”(948)*

### **1. Tukaram A Reformer For Social Justice**

Justice is also seen to be the principle of Tukaram. He also spoke of reformation. He attacked the priests as they were part of the hierarchy that stood as the symbol of ritualism and legalism.<sup>viii</sup> Tukaram’s works reveal blind worship was the law; religious rites were the monopoly of the Brahmins. Inequality, injustice, discrimination towards women and Shudras had religious sanction.

*“They (referring to priests) cut throat of others, there is no end to their cruelty; poor wretches, they are running the debt, they will have to taste of hell. They paint a red stone to make a god, they promise an offering to it.” (1165=IP 256).*

*“What avails a skin washed, where deceit, the worst of poisons dwells within? Keep*

*silence, o revilers, of the people; you have led astray children and widows, you sit with bowed head at places for drawing water; you nod with idle pomp. You sit telling your beads, while you think continuously of pleasures. Tuka says, this is a trade with you; whereas the name of Vithoba should be the chief thing in life.” (2628=IP 2486).*

As a social reformer, he asserted over and over again that his listeners should withdraw from worldly evils and purify their minds.<sup>ix</sup>

Tukaram was saint who was close to the common people. His definition of a holy man is worth to note.<sup>x</sup>

*“He is the true saint who embraces the oppressed and unfortunate, God is found with him”*

### **3.1 Tukaram Encounters Opposition**

Tukaram was opposed by the Brahman class. Rameshwar a priest accused him as deliberate attempt to explain the principles of the Srutis which Tukaram, as a Shudra by caste, had no right to do; he must therefore stop making poems of that sort in future, and as for the poems he had already made, they should be drowned in the Indrayani river.

Tukaram with great humility, held all Brahmins in great reverence, and therefore, he immediately brought out of his home all the poems, bound them together, tied a big stone round the bundle, and threw it into the river. Tukaram was disturbed as he felt that he been commanded by Pandurang himself to spread Bhakti among the people through the poems.

Tukaram then sat on the bank of the river Indrayani in constant prayer to Pandurang

to show him the correct path. For thirteen days he thus sat unmoved, without water, food or sleep. On the last day, one of Tukaram's followers, in a dream, saw Pandurang coming to him and telling him, "Go to the river, there you will find the poems of Tukaram floating on the surface intact". At once the man went to the river and brought to the bank the bundle of poems. Tukaram was moved by the mercy of god and delivered five poems blaming himself for doubting the world of God and for putting Him to so much trouble of having to preserve the poems in water for thirteen days.<sup>xi</sup>

### **3.2 End Of Earthly Life Of Tukaram**

The death of Tukaram remains a mystery. The popular belief is that he was ascended into heaven on a chariot of Vishnu. Some believe that Tukaram voluntarily undertook a pilgrimage to put an end to his earthly life. It is also suggested that Tukaram walked in to the Indrayani river

#### **Bibliography:**

1. Dabre, Thomas. *The God Experience of Tukaram: A Study in Religious Symbolism*: Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Institute of Philosophy and Religion, 1987. Print.
2. Lokhande, Ajit. *Tukarama, His Person and His Religion: A Religio-Historical, Phenomenological and Typological Enquiry*: Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1976. Print.
3. Nemade, Bhalchandra. *Makers of Indian Literature Tukaram*: Sahitya Akademi Publications, 2005. Print.

#### **Webliography:**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varkari>.  
[www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf](http://www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf).  
<http://vishwanathbite.blogspot.in/2010/04/tukaram.html>.  
<http://www.tukaram.com/pages/intro2.asp>.

#### **Footnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varkari>.

<sup>ii</sup> Dabre, T. *The God-Experience of Tukaram: A Study in Religious Symbolism*: (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Institute of Philosophy and Religion, 1987), 1.

<sup>iii</sup> [www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf](http://www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> [www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf](http://www.sankeertanam.com/saints%20texts/Sant%20TukArAm.pdf).

for he thought that God himself would come to take him to His divine Abode. It is also said the probability of he being murdered by his enemies.<sup>xii</sup> His bodily death is only a passage to everlasting life which he longed for a total union with God.

#### **Conclusion:**

The life of Tukaram is a journey of a common man to deep union with God and with a listening attitude to God's will which Tukaram as his disciple assumed as his life's mission. His deep longing for intimacy with God led him to work for justice and reformation in society and surrender of his own will to work for the good of others less fortunate than himself. Thus the person of Tukaram teaches us to search for God within ourselves and to work selflessly for others. He inspires us in a life of deep mysticism combined with social justice and reformation.



<sup>v</sup> <http://vishwanathbite.blogspot.in/2010/04/tukaram.html>.

<sup>vi</sup> Dabre, T. *The God-Experience of Tukaram: A Study in Religious Symbolism*:(Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Institute of Philosophy and Religion,1987), 6.

<sup>vii</sup> Lokhande, A. *Tukārāma, His Person and His Religion: A Religio-Historical, Phenomenological and Typological Enquiry*:( Frankfurt, P. Lang, 1976), 196.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>ix</sup> Nemade, B. *Makers of Indian Literature Tukaram*: (Sahitya Akademi Publications, 2005), 50.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>xi</sup> <http://vishwanathbite.blogspot.com/2010/04/tukaram.html>.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*,14.

RESEARCH CHRONICLER