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Representation of Sacred and Social in Marathi Bhakti Poetry Translated into English

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of sacred and social themes in Marathi Bhakti poetry translated into English, focusing on the abhangas of four saint poets: Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, Sant Bahinabai, and Sant Janabai. These poets, through their simple yet profound verses, focuses on spiritual devotion with social critique. The analysis explores how their abhangas reflect personal spirituality while challenging societal norms, such as caste discrimination and gender inequality. Sant Tukaram critiques rigid social hierarchies in "What is pure, what is impure?", while Sant Namdev expresses divine inclusivity in the abhanga "The Lord Embraces All, without Discrimination". Sant Bahinabai expresses sacred longing in "As a Fish Out of Water" by capturing her intense devotion, while Sant Janabai portrays Vitthala as a nurturing guardian in "Vitthala, My Guardian". By addressing universal issues and sacred devotion, the selected abhangas offer insights into the social and spiritual dimensions of the Bhakti movement. This study emphasises the relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions on equality, inclusivity, and spiritual practice.

Keywords: Bhakti, Abhanga, Sacred, Social, Sant

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Introduction

Bhakti poetry is a form of poetry which was emerged through the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement in India was originated in the southern part of the India in the sixth century and gradually spread to the rest of the subcontinent. In Hinduism, 'Bhakti' is a mystical devotion to god. The *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of God, fifth to second century BCE) was the first text to use the term 'Bhakti'. The word 'Bhakti' derives from the Sanskrit root 'bhaj' which means 'to share, to possess', and bhakti poetry is an intense way of sharing in the divine.

As this research project is based on Marathi Bhakti poetry translated into English, it is important to know the Marathi Bhakti Poetry in Maharashtra. Marathi Bhakti poetry is a tradition of a religious poetry. It was emerged in 13th century, when Sant Dyaneshwar wrote a Marathi commentary on the Bhagavad Gita called 'Dyaneshwari'. This commentary became the foundation of Bhakti ideology in Maharashtra. Bhakti movement in Maharashtra contained both spiritual as well as social aspects. Marathi Bhakti poetry is in the form of 'Abhangas'. Abhangas were written by various Sants who were completely devoted to God 'Vitthal'. The temple of Vitthal, the deity of Pandharpur, who is seen as incarnation of Krishna, was served as the focal point of Bhakti cult in Maharashtra.

The Bhakti poets, including Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, Sant Bahinabai, and Sant Janabai, focused on social and sacred aspects because these two aspects were deeply connected to the realities of their time. They all were underprivileged to express openly. Abhangas were only way to portray their daily experience as abhangas were very familiar to common masses. They lived in a society marked by strict caste hierarchies, gender discrimination, and other forms of inequality. Through their poetry, they sought to challenge these injustices while also expressing their sacred devotion to God. The sacred theme reflects the poets' devotion to God, which was often personal and emotional. They believed in creating a direct connection with the divine, free from the control of priests or rigid rituals. This devotion offered a path of spiritual liberation accessible to everyone, regardless of caste or gender.

The social theme highlights their desire to address societal issues and promote equality. Through simple and relatable language, they critiqued caste discrimination, the mistreatment of women, and other social evils. Their work spread the message of inclusivity and equality by making spirituality accessible to marginalised communities. By combining sacred devotion and social reform, these poets created a powerful movement that continues to inspire discussions on justice and spirituality today. Their work portray a type of devotion that is accessible to everyone which goes beyond the divisions of caste, gender, and social status. By using simple language, imagery and metaphors, their abhangas reflect not only a sacred love for God especially Vitthal but also a strong voice for social change.

Hypothesis

Through the devotional poetry which is also known as Abhangas, Bhakti poets (Saints) not only expressed the meaning of true sacred devotion but also challenged the social hierarchies of their time by focusing on caste and gender. These abhangas served as a medium for both personal spiritual expression and social reform. It also portrayed that sacred devotion of poet was inseparable from their social activism. These two major themes reveal a deliberate strategy by the poets to promote a vision of an ideal society which is grounded in spiritual values.

Review of Literature

In Dhere, R.C. *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*. Oxford University Press, 2011. R.C. Dhere has been significantly contributed to the foundational work in understanding the spiritual meaning of Marathi Bhakti poetry. In this research, he primarily examines the religious and philosophical importance of Bhakti Movement. In this research, he explored how the abhangas represents the real experiences of the poets. His analysis provides critical insights into how Bhakti saint poets spread the real meaning of the devotion through accessible, vernacular language which made spirituality a lived experience.

Through the work, Tulpule, Shankar Gopal. *Classical Marathi Literature: From the Beginning to A.D. 1818*. Wiesbaden, 1979. Shankar Tulpule highlighted the religious significance of Bhakti poetry, particularly in the context of its historical and cultural origins. In this research he offers

insights into how the Bhakti poets, through their devotional verses, challenged orthodox Brahmanical practices and promoted a more inclusive approach to spirituality. Tulpule's analysis of the poetic forms and styles used by these saints further enriches our understanding of the artistic expressions of devotion.

Social Aspect in the *Abhangas*

What is pure, what is impure? By Sant Tukaram

"What is pure, what is impure?
Skin and flesh are the same.
None is more, none less.
God does not discriminate.
Water is no different,
Whether in well or river.
The sun falls fair and square
On earth's every corner.
Milk is of one color,
No matter the cow's color.
Clay is finally clay,
Whether as pot or pitcher.
A furnace and a flame,
Both are equally fire.
Says Tuka: Forget the container,
Are the contents poison or nectar?"
(Gokhale and Pinto,2023 p.50)

In this abhanga, Sant Tukaram tries to reflect his strong critique of social inequality and superficial hierarchies in the society of that time. Sant Tukaram through this abhanga challenges the ideas of purity and impurity, which were often used in his time to create distinction in the society based on caste, status, or wealth.

In the first lines, Sant Tukaram asks, “What is pure, what is impure? Skin and flesh are the same. None is more, none less. God does not discriminate.” Here he basically questions the common practice of treating some people as pure and some as impure, especially based on caste or social class. According to him, the skin and flesh of all people on this earth are the same, no one is higher or lower by birth than anyone else. Sant Tukaram reminds us that God does not see these differences and in God's eyes, all humans are equal. He says, “Water is no different, whether in well or river,” which suggests that water remains the same, whether it is from well or river. This same concept is applicable to humans, our original nature does not change based on our external circumstances, whether we are rich or poor, high caste or low caste. Similarly, he gives another example about the sun: “The sun falls fair and square on earth's every corner.” The sun shines equally on everyone without any discrimination.

Sant Tukaram continues to give examples to support his argument by saying, “Milk is of one color, no matter the cow's color.” Through this example he explains that colour of milk remains white, whether it comes from a black cow or a white cow. This simple analogy shows that the true essence of a person does not change based on external features like caste, colour, or wealth. What really matters is what is inside, not the external appearance.

In the final section of the abhanga he says, “Clay is finally clay, whether as pot or pitcher.” This metaphor illustrates that even though pitcher looks fancy and beautiful than pot, they are made of the same material that is clay. Similarly, all human beings are made up of the same substance, even though they may look or live differently. This further represents Sant Tukaram’s message that social divisions are baseless because we all have same origin.

“The Lord Embraces All, Without Discrimination” by Sant Namdev

“Standing on the brick the saviour of the poor

He extends both his arms to meet all

He does not see the good or bad qualities

He meets them again and again O Kashiraja

Such a kind soul asks for everyone

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He enquires about the great and small

He gives an equal darshan to all

He is standing equipoised

Nama says he likes the saints

He is standing to embrace them"

(Machve,1990 p.97)

This is a famous abhanga by Sant Namdev. He starts the abhanga by describing the image of God Vitthal standing on a brick. It signifies a humble, approachable form of divinity that contrasts with the conventional image of gods seated on grand thrones or within splendid temples. Image of Vitthal who is standing on the simple brick spread the idea that Vitthal is the God of common people and irrespective of the class, caste he is available to everyone. Namdev describes Vitthal as extending his arms to embrace "all" without discriminating between "good or bad qualities." This imagery of open arms reflects a powerful message about simplicity of God Vitthal. Vitthal's embrace does not judge based on the morality, purity, or social worth of the individual rather it reflects an unconditional love that is available to everyone.

In the next lines, Sant Namdev presens the image of Vitthal giving "equal darshan" to both the "great and the small." This emphasises his simple nature, standing with equal regard for people from all walks of life. In Indian society, the act of giving darshan (sight) is traditionally a moment of grace and blessing. Vitthal's "equal darshan" signals that each person, regardless of caste, rank, or wealth, is equally deserving of divine attention. In this moment, all social distinctions dissolve, as Vitthal, "standing equipoised," reflects the Bhakti value of spiritual unity. Namdev closes the abhanga by saying that Vitthal "likes the saints" and stands ready to "embrace them," showing that Vitthal is a deity for all those devoted to love and faith, irrespective of background. This concluding image reinforces Sant Namdev's social message which suggests that a society aligned with divine values would see all individuals as equal, with no one group privileged over another.

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Sacred Aspect in the *Abhanga*s

"As a Fish Out of Water" by Sant Bahinabai

"As a fish out of water thrashes
Her beached yearning for a distant sea,
So my heart longs for Tukaram.
The one who can bear witness
To this play of the self
Will get what I mean.
As a thirsty man pines for water
So pines the body for the soul.
Bahini says: I have heard Tukaram
I have laid my body at his feet."
(Bhagwat and Pinto,2020)

Through this abhanga, Sant Bahinabai expresses her deep spiritual longing and devotion towards Sant Tukaram by reflecting the core values of the Bhakti movement. In the starting lines of abhanga Sant Bahinabai uses metaphor of a fish "As a fish out of water thrashes" represents Bahinabai's longing for spiritual union by comparing her yearning to the need of fish for the sea. Just like fish cannot live life on that land, she also feels similar without her mentor Sant Tukaram. Sant Bahinabai's reference to "the one who can bear witness" reflects the idea that true understanding of her spiritual longing comes from experiencing it within oneself. The phrase suggests that this form of spiritual devotion is not purely an intellectual rather it is deeply felt and can only be fully understood by those who have experienced such longing. She used another metaphor of thirsty man. Just as thirst drives one to seek water with urgency, her body and soul ache for spiritual union with Tukaram. This metaphor illustrates her intense spiritual thirst, a craving that transcends the physical form and yearns for the divine.

In the final lines of abhanga, Sant Bahinabai declares that she has "laid her body at his feet," symbolising her total surrender to Tukaram. This act of devotion reveals her humility and deep

respect for divine wisdom of Sant Tukaram and accepts him as both her guide and a link to the divine.

"Vitthala, My Guardian" by Sant Janabai

"Vitthala, my guardian

Always a-swarm with children.

Nivrutti sits astride His shoulders,

Sopan holds His hand.

Dyaneshwara trots ahead of Him,

Behind, Mukta the grand.

Gora Kumbhar at His knee,

By His heart, Chokha will linger.

Bunka in the crook of His arm,

Nama holds His little finger.

Jani says: That's my Gopala

In Him bhaktas rejoice."

(Bhagwat and Pinto,2020 p.131)

In this abhanga "Vitthala, My Guardian," Sant Janabai sees God Vitthala as a protector of common people. Sant Janabai here describes the nature of God Vitthala who protect all his devotees with love and affection. She depicts an image of Vitthala as "a-swarm with children," which suggests the familial bond between God Vitthal and his devotees where devotees are like beloved children who feel safe in the presence of Vitthal. Each devotee has a different position close to Vitthal, whether on shoulders of Vitthal, at His hand, or by His heart which shows his protective nature to individual being. This image represents a sacred relationship in which Vitthala is not a distant deity, but rather a deeply personal and loving protector who gives His devotees a sense of belongingness and spiritual security.

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Sant Janabai mentions a range of devotees around Vitthala. From well-known saints like Nivrutti, Sopan, and Dyaneshwar to other significant figures like Gora Kumbhar, Chokha, and Namdev. This inclusion reflects a key Bhakti belief, the idea that devotion erases worldly distinctions, such as caste, class, or social status, bringing all into equal closeness with God. In Vitthala's presence, each devotee is seen as sacred and deserves love and recognition, regardless of their background. This image of equality conveys the spiritual ideal that God's grace and acceptance are universal, available to a one with sincere devotion.

The final lines of the abhanga reveal joy of Sant Janabai in devotion, as she calls Vitthala her "Gopala" (another affectionate name for Krishna) and emphasises that "bhaktas rejoice" in Him. This imagery of sacred devotion tries to convey the relationship with god vitthal as a source to generate inner peace and happiness. Sant Janabai reflects this in her abhanga by portraying devotion as a celebration rather than a duty. By rejoicing in Vitthala, devotees overcome individual problems and find a shared bliss in presence of Vitthal.

Conclusion

This research has explored how the Abhangas of five Marathi Bhakti poets like Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Bahinabai, and Sant Janabai reflects both sacred and social themes. Through these poets' works, it becomes clear that their devotion to God is deeply intertwined with their critiques of the social injustices they faced. The following three key points summarise the findings of this study.

The primary goal of this research was to understand how the Abhangas represent both sacred and social themes. While the core of Bhakti poetry is devotion to God, these poets' works also offer a critique of their society. The sacred themes of divine love, equality before God, and personal connection with the divine are expressed alongside social themes like caste discrimination, gender inequality, and societal oppression. Sant Tukaram's Abhangas, for example, criticised the social hierarchies of his time, emphasising that devotion transcends caste. Similarly, Sant Namdev's poetry rejected the notion that devotion should be restricted by one's social status, thereby linking the sacred with social equality. These poets used their devotion to

challenge the structures of power and social injustice, making their Abhangas a call for both spiritual and social transformation.

Another important finding of this research paper is the role of the saints in social contexts played in shaping their devotional expressions. The personal experiences of Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Bahinabai, and Sant Janabai were deeply influenced y the harsh social realities of their time, including caste oppression and gender discrimination. These lived experiences are very evident in their Abhangas, where devotion and social critique often go hand in hand. Sant Bahinabai's and Sant Janabai's works emphasise the deep spiritual connection that defines the Bhakti tradition. Bahinabai's longing for her guide, Sant Tukaram and Janabai's vision of Vitthala as a guardian highlight the personal and emotional bond between the devotee and the divine. These abhangas demonstrate how devotion transcends worldly challenges, offering a sense of peace, guidance, and fulfillment.

Translation is also one of the main things in this research. It shows that good translations of this abhangas from their original Marathi language to English helps to cover wider audience. Translations helps to convey the powerful messages related to sacred devotion and social justice to people who don't understand Marathi. While translating these, they also encountered with challenges of maintaining real and original meaning of Marathi texts. Despite of this challenges, the global translation of these works tried best so that the messages of the Bhakti poets continue to influence readers in even today's time, especially in contexts where issues like caste and gender inequality remain persistent.

In summary, this research paper conveys the main aim of the Marathi Bhakti poetry, to change the nature of society full of societal issues through the blend of social and sacred aspect of abhangas. These Marathi saints used their devotion as a tool defend and criticise the the injustices present in their societies. Translations of these cultural themes helps to carry forward the impact of the Bhakti movement by allowing its messages to people worldwide.

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