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**TUKARAM'S
TEACHINGS**

S. R. Sharma

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K. M. MUNSHI

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आ नो भद्राः कृतवो यन्तु विश्वतः ।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, I-89-1

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BY

S. R. SHARMA

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S. R. SHARMA



1964

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

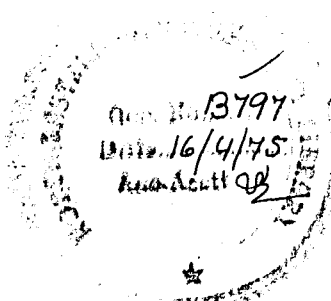
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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Bhavan's Book University volumes had rare success. About a million and a quarter volumes have been sold in about eleven years. However, there is an insistent demand for the stray volumes which the Bhavan has issued from time to time at a lower price. In order to meet this demand, it has been decided to issue the new One-Rupee Book University Series side by side with the Book University Series.

I hope this new One-Rupee Series will have the same good fortune which the other Series had, of being useful to those who are interested in the fundamental values of Indian Culture, and of reaching out to a wider audience.

Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
Chowpatty Road, Bombay-7.
Vijaya Dashami
September 28, 1963

K. M. MUNSHI

INTRODUCTION

During the four centuries that elapsed between the advent of Dnyanadeva and the exit of Samartha Ramadas, Maharashtra was blessed by a galaxy of great saints whose role is not appreciated by those whose eyes are focussed merely on the political history of the times. This betrays an inadequate understanding of the forces that were at work during the period, behind the pyrotechnics of war and politics. But the makers of Maratha History knew the sources of their inspiration better than we at this distance are aware of. It is often wrongly stressed that the saints were too other-worldly to care for what the worldly minded monarchs and warriors fought for and achieved. But we have to remember that they were times when men and women all over the land valued religion—their inherited way of life—more than anything else. The invaders (from Ala-ud-din Khalji to Aurangzeb) were, therefore, regarded more as a menace to our culture-cum-religion than as mere political adventurers. The common people were fired with a zeal to counter that challenge, not for the defence of their earthly possessions only; they also fought “for the ashes of their fathers and the temples of their gods.” Thus a deep-rooted instinct (may be in the “collective subconscious”) made Dnyanadeva write his immortal *Dnyanesvari*: an elaborate exposition of the *Bhagavad Geeta*—the most stimulating inspirer to *Karma-Yoga* for more

than earthly ends. This trend culminated in Samarth Ramadas preaching, in his *Das-bodh*, the pragmatic philosophy of *Maharashtra Dharma*. In Tukaram, who is the subject of this essay, we have a contemporary of Ramadas, considered as the most docile of saints—an antithesis of the *Samartha*. But Tukaram too speaks of the constant 'war we wage within and without':

रात्रंदिन आम्हा युद्धाचा प्रसंग ।

अंतर्बाह्य जग आणि मन ॥

To understand the fullest implications of this cryptic citation, it is necessary to go into the whole Teaching of Tukaram as revealed in his life and *Gatha*.

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1. LIFE

Tukaram's life is as instructive as his *abhangas* collected in the *Gatha*. The details of his career are mostly gathered from Mahipati's *Bhakta-Leelamrita*, composed about a century and a quarter after Tukaram's mysterious disappearance in 1650 A.D. The precise year of Tukaram's birth is still uncertain. But 1608 is generally accepted as probable. Samartha Ramadas too was born in that year.

The place of Tukaram's birth was Dehu (near Poona) where his ancestral house still stands. Vishvambhar who was a contemporary of Saint Namadeva (d. 1350) was the earliest known ancestor of Tukaram, according to Mahipati. The family was noted for the great number of devotees it produced. Vishvambhar himself resembled Namadeva in his simplicity and ardent faith. They were all *Varkaris* or pilgrims of Pandharpur (by vow) and never failed to visit the Abode of Vitthala regularly—especially on *Ashadhi Ekadasi* which was held most sacred. Like Tukaram later, Vishvambhar felt like a fish out of water if illness prevented him from going to Pandharpur.

Once it so happened. But Vithoba, recognising his sincere devotion, appeared in his dream and promised to make Dehu itself His permanent (secondary) camp. Vishvambhar (as indicated in his dream) actually found an image of Vitthala with Rakhumai in the vicinity of his own house. The twin images still stand at Dehu, as installed by Vishvambhar about six hundred years ago. Dehu thus became a second Pandhari for all *Varkaris*. Alandi

2. ASPIRATIONS AND STRUGGLES

The practical utility of Tukaram's example and precept for us lies in its inspiring incentives. Tukaram began his life with no prophecy of his potential fulfilment as a spiritual guide *par excellence*, as he has been to millions ever since. He had a very normal career up to his 'conversion' in the mystical sense. Apart from Mahipati's account of his early life, the *Gatha* affords ample testimony to this. He had his full share of joys and sorrows like any of us. He married more than once, had children, carried on the ordinary business of life like others; in short, Tukaram was very human in all things he did. What he ultimately became was the outcome of his own aspirations and struggles. Herein lies his importance for all earnest seekers who aspire to reach the goal all saints point to. Divested of all mythological allusions, we have in Tukaram's life and precepts an inexhaustible store of actual experience to encourage ordinary mortals to make "our lives sublime". But it is well to remember that

The heights by Tukaram reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight:
He, while his companions slept,
Was toiling upward in the night.

The calamity of the famine and the consequent domestic tragedies were suffered by all; but Tukaram alone survived the catastrophe as an Immortal. This is significant and thought-provoking.

3. PANDHARI AND BEYOND

मोक्षासी तीर्थं न लगे वाराणसी ।
येति तयापासी अघर्षी जने ॥
तीर्यासि तीर्थं झाला तोचि ।
तेणें एक दृशणें ॥

‘To attain *Moksha* it is not necessary to go to Varanasi: He has become a *Tirtha* in himself, and all people go to him on pilgrimage. To behold him is enough’.

Tukaram started as a *Varkari* in the family tradition. But, stage by stage, he went far beyond. At first Pandharpur was his *Vaikuntha* (the abode of Vishnu). Later he realised that places of pilgrimage were in no way different from others:

तीर्थक्षेत्रें घोंडा पाणी । देव रोकडा साधु सज्जनीं ॥

‘There is but water there and stone: God is verily immanent in the *Sadhus* and sages’.

संत येती घरा तोचि दिवाळी दसरा ॥

‘The day saints come to the house is indeed like *Divali* and *Dasara*’. घरा आलें वैकुण्ठपीठ ॥ ‘*Vaikuntha* is come home to me!’

Tukaram was “born in a church”, but he did not “die in it”. He was no bird for any cage. He was free like the wind which bloweth where it listeth. Without flouting tradition, he transcended it. He was not sophisticated and cared little for conventional codes of speech and conduct. His *Gatha* contains expressions which may be deleted

4. EVOLUTION OF SAINTHOOD

Tukaram's evolution into a paragon of saints is one of the most inspiring stories in the hagiology of the world. Bahinabai in a beautiful song declares:

ज्ञानदेवें रचिला पाया ।.....तुका झालासे कळस ॥

'Dnyanadeva laid the foundation....and Tukaram became the pinnacle.'

This is the alpha and omega of the Bhagavata tradition in Maharashtra. Tukaram attained this status just as a lotus rises to the surface of the water—with its roots deep down in the lake. The legacy of Dnyanadeva, reaching down to Tukaram, was the long stalk through which the nourishing sap of spiritual inspiration flowed. Bahinabai uses another metaphor: The edifice of *Bhagavata Dharma*, whose foundation was laid by Dnyanadeva at the close of the 13th century, was raised by Namadeva in the 14th century, and perfected by Eka-Janardan in the generation preceding the birth of Tukaram. This continuity was maintained through the centuries without any change in the essential teaching. Its cardinal message was conveyed to the people at large by the varkari movement. Its pivot was the image of Vitthala at Pandharpur—standing with 'even feet' (सम-चरण) on a brick, and arms akimbo. To all appearances this is a static pose; but the position of the arms is potentially dynamic. This is truly symbolic of the lives of all the saints of Maharashtra. A brief

5. THE PATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The *Gatha*, as it has come down to us, contains well nigh 5,000 *abhangas*. "Abhanga" literally means "unbroken or indivisible". They are of all sizes and deal with all sorts of myths, legends, contexts, ideas, concepts, sentiments, and miscellaneous topics—personal, domestic, philosophical and religious. The original manuscript is not yet traced. But the available texts are from copies found in various places. There is no doubt, however that most of these are authentic and reliable, though a few of the songs appear to be of doubtful authorship. The edition published by the Government of Maharashtra may be regarded as the most dependable for our purpose here. There are various others with some attempt at classification according to the prevailing tone or topic. But Tukaram did not write like a modern composer. The *abhangas* were uttered rather than deliberately written out as 'printers' copy'. Hence we are left to ourselves to rearrange them editorially. The order must be essentially *logical* not *chronological*. "From the words of poets", Tagore observes, "readers deduce what meanings they find pleasing to themselves." This dictum is applicable to the present interpretation as well.

The Path of Enlightenment cannot be the same for all,—'all roads lead to Rome.'

आकाशात् पतितं तोयं यथा गच्छति सागरम् ।
सर्वं देव नमस्कारं केशवं प्रति गच्छति ॥

We have before referred to Tukaram's non-secta-

6. TUKARAM'S RELIGION

We now come to the core of our subject. But it is not easy to tackle it. Tukaram appears to be, like God Himself, all things to all men. His life and *Gatha* are equally enigmatic to those who try to squeeze them into a single, simple, doctrinaire formula.

Was Tukaram idolatrous? Was he a *saguna* or *nirguna* worshipper? Was he a dualist? Non-dualist? Or a paradoxical compound of both? Does he teach a world-shunning anti-social philosophy? Was he mystic? None of these queries could be answered in categorical terms. The best thing for us to do is to read the *Gatha* itself in the light of his actual life and *vice versa*: look at his life in the light of his *Gatha*.

There is no doubt that Vitthala was his be-all and end-all; he lived only for Him; he thought only of Him; he wanted to speak only of Him; his mind and heart were full of Vitthala or Panduranga. He was enamoured of the image at Pandharpur. He gloated over it and was never tired of going into ecstasies over his fascination for it. There are hundreds of *abhangas* descriptive of every feature of its form. These undoubtedly appear idolatrous. He did this not only in the initial stages, but throughout his life—to its very close. Nevertheless it is difficult to reconcile all this with what he says—not condemning, but explaining the significance of image-worship in spiritual life. His first vision of

7. TUKARAM'S MYSTICISM

Mysticism is a modern English word. Its implications are fully conveyed by the word भक्ति as suggested above, very briefly. A *Bhakta*, therefore, was a mystic like Tukaram to understand whom is not easy भक्तांचा महिमा भक्तची जाणे। says Tukaram himself. To understand a saint, one must become a saint oneself. This Sri Aurobindo calls "knowledge by identity". Tukaram understood God by experiencing complete identity with Him. The nature of this realisation is conveyed to us—so far as it is communicable in speech—in several of his *abhangas*. It is well to remember here that अभंग literally means "indivisible". The mystical experience, too, is unitary.

In a sense all religions are mystical in ultimate experience. In their popular forms they may appear even crude in outward expression. Mysticism is to religion what fragrance is to a flower, or light is to a flame. Tukaram shared this with all other saints. He started with tending the wick and oil that fed the flame. The outcome was the light which could not have been, but for its tangible accessories in the lamp. Pandhari was the lamp, the image of Vitthala was the wick, the spirit of devotion was the oil, and the company of the saints was the oxygen that kept the flame burning. The saints were awake when the common people were either dosing or fast asleep. The visions they saw were not mere dreams or hallucinations. Their ecs-

8. TUKARAM'S SADHANA

Sadhana is spiritual endeavour, striving on the pathway to God. The *Bhagavad Geeta* is generally considered as a guide in the triple aspects of भक्ति, ज्ञान and कर्म the three strands of *Sadhana* which constitutes, according to Shri Aurobindo, "the synthesis of Integral Yoga". This *Yoga* pertains to the body, mind, and soul. *Hata-yoga* concentrates on bodily functions and their control: इंद्रिय निग्रह The mind being अंतःकरण the inner instrument—holds the key to all varieties of *sadhana*. Its regulation and discipline are of cardinal importance. When these elements—body and mind—are thoroughly subordinated to the demands of the Soul, all is well with *sadhana*. Tukaram's *sadhana* comprehended all this.

तपःस्वाध्याय ईश्वरप्रणिधानानि क्रियायोगः ।

declares Patanjali. Tukaram led a normal life of conventional piety up to the crisis of the disastrous famine which resulted in his total conversion. His only refuge and anchor then became Vitthala—the family deity. Complete surrender to Him seemed the only way. But this was not easy. So Tukaram began his *tapas* in the wilderness of Bhamgiri for fifteen days, eschewing food and drink, and challenging God to reveal Himself—with the results we have already noted. The only occasion when Tukaram had recourse to a similar penance was when his manuscripts were thrown into the Indrayani: this time for thirteen days. Beyond this he does not

9. TUKARAM'S IMPORTANCE

पवित्र तें कुळ पावन तो देश । जेथें हरीचे दास जन्म घेती ॥

'Sacred the family, and pure the land, where are born the devotees of God'. This was said by Tukaram himself with reference to the saints of all times and places. After more than three centuries his memory is lovingly cherished by millions of people beyond the cradle of his nativity. His *abhangas* are recited in *bhajans* and *kirtans*, and today broadcast on the ubiquitous radio: they continue to inspire and instruct all those whose aspirations are not confined to things that are merely a "passing show".

Christian missionaries like Rev. Abbott and Macnicol have bestowed on Tukaram encomiums that bespeak their sincere appreciation and admiration of the rustic saint of Dehu who was as practical as he was idealistic. Justin E. Abbott (who translated Mahipati's life of Tukaram into English) wrote: "The life of Tukaram is full of human interest, full of food for the moralist, full of suggestions for the idealist, and to every one an inspiration for a better and nobler life."

Nelson Fraser wrote: "Tukaram teaches his fellowmen not chiefly by what he says, but by what we realise him to have felt and experienced of aspiration, conflict and communion."

We said in the Introduction that the saints of Maharashtra were a source of inspiration to the rise of the Maratha power and the Maratha fight

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THE AUTHOR

SHRIPAD RAMA SHARMA (born, August 6, 1879, at Mangalore, Mysore State) is a History Graduate of Madras University and M.A. First Class of Bombay University. He worked for the Indian National Congress and was its Taluk Secretary for some time. Always interested in Education, he taught in the Tilak Maha Vidyalaya, Mangalore, and was Secretary to the local National Education Board. He edited the English weekly *The Mangalore Mail*. He was the Joint Secretary of the Poona Session of the Indian History Congress in 1935.

He was Professor of History in the Fergusson College from 1932 to 1954 and retired as a Life Member of the Deccan Education Society.

Shri Sharma's interest in research started with his College days when he wrote his M.A. thesis "Jainism in South India", which was later published under a Bombay Government grant as *Jainism and Karnatak Culture*.

Shri Sharma is the author also of several standard works on History and Culture, like *The Mughal Empire in India*, *The Making of Modern India*, *Maratha History Re-examined*, *Akbar the Great*, *Our Heritage and Its Significance*, *India as I see Her*, *Wisdom beyond Reason*, *Ranade: A Modern Mystic*, *Focus on Tukaram from a Fresh Angle*, and *Swami Rama Tirtha*.