



MARATHI SAINT POETRY: ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Literature is believed to be an artistic expression of the thoughts and ideas, passions and emotions and experiences and actions of the human life. It is very closely related with the day-to-day happenings of the life and times of its creator. And that is why it has been there as a source of pleasure for all of us for thousands of years and it will remain the same for many future generations to come. But along with giving pleasure which is experienced by the writers and readers at psychological level, literature also has social, political, religious and spiritual functions. The literature can be considered as a true reflection of personal, familial, social, political, religious and spiritual conditions in which the writer lives and his reactions to those conditions. It is with this belief that the present paper attempts to study Marathi saint poetry with special reference to the poetry of Saint Tukaram and bring out the relationship between the society and Tukaram's poetry. It is seen that Tukaram observed various evil customs of his time and reacted against them through his poetry. Therefore, his poetry can be considered as his protest against the prevalent socio-religious customs.

INTRODUCTION:

It has been a well-established fact that literature is not created in a vacuum. It is a product of various socio-political forces of its own time as well as of the past. It is influenced by the cultural traditions of the writer's own country and also those of other countries with which the writer might be familiar. Similarly, the society may also get influenced by its literature. It means the relationship between the literature and the society is reciprocal. Therefore the study of literature in isolation can become lopsided. Such a study will provide misinterpretation of a work of art and mislead the readers in reaching to its correct understanding. It is with this belief that the present paper attempts to study Marathi saint poetry with special reference to the poetry of Saint Tukaram and bring out the relationship between the society and Tukaram's poetry. It is seen that Tukaram observed various evil customs of his time and reacted against them through his poetry. Therefore, his poetry can be considered as his protest against the prevalent socio-religious customs.

EARLY 17TH CENTURY MAHARASHTRA:

Tukaram, a saint poet of the 17th century India, has a unique place not only in Marathi literature but in world literature. He is the outcome of the peculiar economical, social, cultural, political and religious conditions of his times. Politically India was under the rule of Muslim Invaders who had appointed local people as the office bearers and collecting different types of taxes. These Kings and their officers were not at all concerned with the welfare of the common people. The poor farmers were being exploited by charging high taxes. The conditions of these people were dependent upon their profession of farming, which itself was dependent upon rain. Soon these people were forced to borrow money from the

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local money-lenders to pay the taxes. These money-lenders used to exploit them by charging high interest rates. Religion of the time was under the influence of various rites and rituals. At social level, the four-varna system was at its peak. Even during the times of Tukaram only two varnas - Brahmins and Shudras - were in existence. Brahmins considered themselves to be superior to all other castes. Thus the common man was politically, socially and economically exploited. They had no any other alternative but to follow these traditions blindly.

TUKARAM'S AIM BEHIND WRITING HIS POETRY:

During such a tense social and political conditions Tukaram was born and brought up. He observed these conditions very closely and minutely. He lived initial years of his life as a trader and farmer and got the first hand experiences of the suppressive circumstances in which the society was forced to live. The religious, economic, and social exploitation of the common people made him very sad. Even in his personal life, Tukaram was made to suffer a lot of hardships which had emotionally broken him and virtually destroyed everything in his life. The long and devastating famine of 1630s accompanied by the prevalent evil customs of the times made Tukaram realize that he has to do something to uplift his people. These oppressive conditions made him express his disapproval of them. Such an exploitation, exclusion, oppression, segregation and injustice to his people led Tukaram to its natural consequence, i.e. 'protest'.

PROTEST: ITS NATURE:

As per the dictionary, 'protest' means 'a statement of dissent' or 'disapproval'. When a person or a group of persons is physically, mentally, economically, politically or socially oppressed, the concerned person or the group expresses a note of dissent or disapproval and raises his voice of protest against it. Protest is born when a man decides to get rid of his exploitation and acts accordingly. It means that to express his protest one has to disapprove his circumstances and act accordingly to correct or reform those circumstances. In this connection, Narendra Mohan writes:

“The foundation of protest is laid when man becomes conscious of his rights and for their attainment puts himself body and soul into the struggle...” - Narendra Mohan in 'Protest and Literature'

There are various means of expressing protest, chiefly violent and non-violent. Violent protest includes civil disobedience, fasting, dharana, procession in silence or shouting slogans and being surrendered to be imprisoned. Violent protest includes stone-pelting, firing, bombing, and destroying public property. The history of mankind is itself a proof of many violent and non-violent protests. The time of Tukaram was also not exception to these protests.

The writer is the most sensitive member of his society, so naturally he speaks about the oppressive circumstances in the lives of the people in his writing and tries to correct the prevalent injustice. The writers of all nations and of all times have rendered a great service to mankind by writing about, and making the people aware of their respective oppressions. Tukaram, like all these sensitive writers, became aware of the oppressive social conditions and revolted against them.

PROTEST AGAINST SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SUPERSTITIONS:

His active participation in many of the social and religious situations of his times has made Tukaram aware that the common people were under deep influence of the rites and rituals. In fact, the Hinduism had itself turned into rites and rituals. Tukaram wanted the people to be aware of the social and religious realities of their lives and revolt against them. But it was very difficult for him to wage an open war against the powerful establishment of his times. That is why he turned to poetry and decided to use it as a kind of weapon against the establishment and also the long-established religious rites and rituals. He uses words as his weapons. In this connection, he writes:

आम्हा घरीं धन शब्दांचीच रत्ने । शब्दांचीच शस्त्रे यत्न करु ॥
शब्द चि अमुच्या जीवांचे जीवन । शब्दें वाटू धन जनलोका ॥

So he started his protest against the evil religious practices by referring to them and exposing the realities underlying them. And it is seen from his poems that while using words as weapons, he does not spare anybody. He goes on criticizing both rich and poor and high and low.

Here we have to take into consideration that Tukaram started writing his poetry with the aim of correcting the vicious social customs prevalent in his society. As a true social reformer he wanted to

reform his society. In one of his poems he has clearly mentioned his aim of writing his poems. He says:

हितावरी यावे । कोणी बोलिलो या भावे ॥ १ ॥
नव्हे विनोद उत्तर । केली रंजवाया चार ॥
केली अटाअटी । अक्षरांची देवासाठी ॥ २ ॥
तुका म्हणे खिजो । नका जागा यांथे निजो ॥ ३ ॥ ...दृ २९३१

It means Tukaram's aim was not to entertain his readers but to awaken them from a long sleep and make them aware of the abject conditions of their lives.

Protest Against Superstitions - Tukaram strongly believed that the life of common people was made miserable by the observance of various superstitions. The common people used to believe in many false things like miracles, fasting, and sacrifices. These blind beliefs of common people were exploited by some evil minded people in the society. That is why Tukaram has written about these blind beliefs and has exposed them in his poems.

While speaking about the falseness of the blind beliefs about 'being possessed' Tukaram writes:

अंगी घेऊनिया वारे दया देती । तया भक्तां हाती चोट आहे ॥ १ ॥
देव्हारा बैसोनि हालविती सुपें । ऐंसी पापी पापें लिंपताती
एकीबेकी न्याये होतसे प्रचीत । तेने लोक समस्त भुलताती
त्यांच्या स्वाधीन दैवतें असती । तरी कां मरती त्याची पोरें
तुका म्हणे पाणी अंगारा जयाचा । भक्त कान्होबाचा तोही नव्हे

In one of his poems, he has rightly asked if these possessed people claim that the God is under their control, then how is it that their own children die a premature death. It means Tukaram wanted the common people to think logically and keep themselves away from all those false Godmen.

The same has been expressed by him in following words:

नवसे कन्या पुत्र होती । तरी कां करणे लागे पती । ।
जाणे हा विचार । स्वामी तुकयाचा विचार । ।

Tukaram's very nature was that of a social reformer. All the time, he thought of his people and went on instructing them to walk on the right path. In other words, the social reformer in Tukaram always gets an upper hand to that of a poet. That is what Suhasini Irlekar points out when she writes:

" तुकाराम केवळ संसृतिटीका करूनच थांबत नाही, तर त्यापुढे जाऊन उघडपणे उपदेशकाची भूमिका घेऊन समाजाचे उद्वेगही करू पाहतो...तुकारामाच्या अभंगवाणीतून जातिवंत शिक्षकाच्या ठिकाणची कळकळ, खऱ्याखऱ्या पंथोपदेशकाच्या वृत्तीतील अभिनिवेश आणि साक्षात्कारी प्रेषिताच्या ठिकाणी आढळणारा प्रबळ आत्मविश्वास अपरिहार्यपणे प्रकट होऊ लागतो.

Tukaram's poetry exemplifies his deep sense of disapproval and hatred for the false religious customs of his times. He does not hesitate to whip the followers of these customs by using very harsh words in his poems.

Actually, it seems that Tukaram strongly believed in the fact that he has to be harsh in his approach if he wants to make his people follow the right path. It is his first and foremost duty as a human being to help his fellow-beings to understand the real nature of the evil customs. In his times there were many people who used to take disadvantage of illiterate and simple-minded common people. Tukaram exposes these Godmen in following words:

ऐसे कैसे ज्ञाने भोंदू । कर्म करोनि म्हणती साधू ॥
अंगी लावूनियां राख । डोळे झाकुनि करिती पाप ॥
दावूनि वैराग्याची कळा । भोगी विषयांचा सोहळा । ।
तुका म्हणे सांगो किती । जळो त्यांची संगती । । दृ ३२४७

He says that these tricksters should be punished for their crimes. He says:

"गाजराची पुंगी तैसो नवे जाले जोगी ॥
काय करोनि पठन । केली अहंता जतन ॥
अल्प असे ज्ञान । अंगी ताठा अभिमान ॥
तुका म्हणे लंड । त्याचे होणोनि फोडा तोंड ॥ "

Here Tukaram has made it very clear that these tricksters have very little or no wisdom, but they try to show that they knew everything. According to Tukaram such villains should be punished severely.

Along with religion, Tukaram also protests against the hierarchical four-varna social structure of his times. The society of his time was divided on the basis of castes. Brahmins considered themselves far more superior and exploited the lower classes. Tukaram has expressed his deep sense of dissent against this system. He declared that all human beings were equal as they were the children of one God. He propagates the Vaishnav religion which treats all humans as equal. In this religion no distinction is made

on the basis of caste or creed. All were equal. In one of his poems, Tukaram writes:

नामधारकासी नाही वर्णावर्ण । लोखंड प्रमाण नाना जात ॥ १ ॥
 शस्त्र अथवा गोळे भलते प्रकार । परिसी संस्कार सकळ ही हेम ॥
 पर्जन्य वर्षता जीवना वाहावट । ते समसकट गंगे मिळे ॥ २ ॥
 सर्व ते हें जाय गंगा चि होऊन । तैसा वर्णावर्ण नाही नामी ॥ ३ ॥
 महापूरी जैसे जातसे उदक । मध्ये ते तारक नाव जैसी ॥ ४ ॥
 तये नावेसंगे ब्रारण तरती । केवी ते बुडती अनामिक ॥ ५ ॥
 नाना काष्ठजात पडतां हुताशनी । ते जात होऊनी एकरूप ॥ ६ ॥
 तेथे निवडेना घुरे कीं चंदन । तैसा वर्णावर्ण नाही नामी ॥ ७ ॥
 पूर्वानुवोळख तें चि पै मरण । जरि पावे जीवन नामामृत ॥ ८ ॥
 नामामृतें जालें मुळीचे स्मरण । सहज साधन तुका म्हणे ॥ ९ ॥
 दृ ३८२७

It means whoever treads on the path of Vaishnav religion is the child of one God and so equal to all others.

Tukaram believes that the superiority of a human being is determined by his virtues and not by his caste or creed. He considers virtues to be the most important aspect for a human being to climb the ladder of success in his life. That is what he emphasizes in the following poem:

आसुरी स्वभाव निर्दय अंतर । मानसी निष्ठुर अतिवादी ॥ १ ॥
 यातीकूळ येथे असे अप्रमाण । गुणाचे कारण असे अंगी ॥
 काळकूट पितळ सोने शुध्द रंग । अंगाचेच अंग साक्ष देते ॥ २ ॥
 तुका म्हणे बरी जाती सवे भेटी । नवनीत पोटी सांठवले ॥ ३ ॥

Conclusion: In this way, Tukaram uses his poems as a means to express his protest against the established religious and social structure. To him his poetry was not the means of earning his livelihood but it was an instrument of creating a strong and healthy society wherein all will be equal and everywhere there will be happiness and prosperity.

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