

Bhakti as Protest¹

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Chokhamela was a fourteenth century untouchable saint poet of western India. He belongs to a community of devotees called the varkaris whose traditions and forms of worship are still alive in practice today in an almost unbroken continuum from the late thirteenth century. This paper is an introduction to his life and work and his location in the contemporary dalit movement.

129

Chokhamela: His Life and Poetry

The bhakti movement, though largely associated with medieval India, begins in a recognizable movement with the Alvar saints of the south somewhere in the ninth century CE and goes in a seemingly random and arbitrary fashion across the subcontinent, different regions and communities catching incandescent fire from previous movements; till, as it is sometimes observed, it blossoms into the satyagraha movement across the whole country under Gandhi. It was a wave of social, religious and spiritual enquiry. This deeply spiritual and democratizing movement is characterised by the emergence of many religious communities and groups revolutionary in spirit in almost every region of the country. Perhaps the new spirit was a result of an exposure to a more egalitarian religion-Islam, which the Muslim invasions had made possible. The bhakti movement was a questioning of the orthodox and repressive brahminical understanding of Hinduism and as such made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious aspirations, emphasizing devotion and love, not knowledge as a means of salvation. In a newfound burst of confidence it relocated the bhakti marg, the way of devotion, in the pursuit of salvation. In Maharashtra (the Marathi speaking western region of India) this democratizing devotional passion seems to have mainly precipitated the varkari community in the thirteenth century.

The varkaris are devotees of Vitthal, affectionately known as Vitthoba,

¹ This paper is based to some extent on the introduction to my translations of Chokhamela, *On the Threshold: Songs of Chokhamela*. New Delhi, The Book Review Literary Trust, 2002.

the deity at Pandharpur, a small town on the banks of Chandrabhaga, a tributary of the river Bhim. Not much is known about the history of the temple: when it was built or who built it. But there is a poignant story about how Vithoba came to stay at Pandharpur which attests to the mysterious nature of spiritual experience. Vithoba, the god himself came to see Pundalik, a sage from the neighbouring state of Karnataka, well-known for his extreme piety and goodness. Pundalik, who was devoted to his parents, was attending to their needs when Vitthal appeared. Throwing a brick for the god to stand on, for Chandrabhaga was in spate, Pundalik promised to return after finishing his work. He never managed to come back; and Vithoba is caught in stone, hands on hips, standing on a brick, endlessly waiting for his bhakt. The story, the image, the river and the sands evoke a powerful magnetic response, and year after year, thousands of varkaris make a pilgrimage on foot to have a darshan of the god. In fact to be a varkari is to make this pilgrimage at regular intervals, not alone, but amongst a community of pilgrims belonging to various castes-high and low, and hailing from different parts of Maharashtra, all converging towards Pandharpur singing the abhangs-the hymns which the saint-poets of this tradition wrote. Varkari literally means one who makes the to and fro journey, the vari. For the fifty odd saint-poets belonging to this tradition, drawn from almost all castes of the region of those times, the abhang is the most important medium of comprehending, reaching and expressing the sense of divine mystery and joy; it is also the means of articulating injustice. It is a modification of the folk verse form-the ovi- which is traditionally the form for women's songs. Like the dohas of Kabir which bear his signature in the last line, the abhang too is signed off by the poet composing them. Abhangs are sung by entire groups of people, even today, when on foot on the yearly pilgrimage to Pandharpur.

The fascination that Vithoba holds for these saint poets stands out, clearly illuminated by the story of Pundalik. The story reverses the normative understanding of the divine: divinity here waits endlessly for the bhakt, the devotee; it is this divine lack, in a sense, which empowers the varkaris' sense of overwhelming devotion. In a curious fashion and unlike the luxuriant descriptions of godheads in Hinduism, Vitthal is identified not by a myths and stories surrounding him, but by stories about the saint poets. The mythology of Vitthal is in a sense the mythology of the saint poets. He is given shape and form and

substance by the devotion of the varkaris: by himself he is almost quality-less. The physical image of the god too is unlike most other images in Hindu iconography. He stands arms akimbo without the terrifying arsenal carried by the many-armed Hindu deities. Though Vitthal is a swaroop of Vishnu, not an avtaar, he is identified sometimes with the child Krishna and is called, oddly enough for an image in black stone, Panduranga, which means the white one, and which is the name for SHIVA.

We can now look at the saint poets themselves, at their lives and how their hearts turned in devotion to Vithoba, at the untouchable saint poet Chokhamela in particular whose life captures the paradigmatic ambiguity of Hinduism: its liberating intellectual and spiritual plurality on the one hand and its unethical and unjust social praxis on the other. His is perhaps one of the first (if not the very first) marginalised voices in Indian history. There is very little in the way of a recorded history of Chokhamela's life. The figure who looms out of the mists of the last seven centuries takes shape from legends and fleeting references to seemingly real life situations in his own poetry and that of the other saint-poets of his times. Chokha was a mahar, one of the lowest in the Hindu hierarchy of castes, and as such his duties too seem to have involved, like others in his situation, tasks menial in nature. Mahars, as other untouchables, are considered outcastes- not a part of the social fold at all: their identity in society is shaped through a series of negations. Perhaps it is important, at this juncture, to stress the difference between the lower castes who form the fourth varna or category in the Hindu society of four varnas (of which the upper three are considered the superior twice-born categories), and the outcastes, who form the unnamed fifth varna, and are not reckoned as a legitimate part of society. The mahars were thought to be impure because traditionally their task was to perform all the tasks relating to the cleaning of the village; they were untouchable because their touch or even proximity was considered polluting; their very identity was formed of these negations. Generally, an outcaste was not paid; he was expected to live off the leftovers given by the upper-castes. He was denied education, knowledge of the scriptures, access to the facilities of the village such as the use of the well, and crucially, he was forbidden entry into the temple. These denials, especially the last, are important preoccupations in Chokha's poetry.

Chokhamela then was an untouchable saint of this tradition; that he

wrote poetry at all is a matter of astonishment. Amongst his contemporaries are the important figures of Jnaneshwar, the late thirteenth century revolutionary brahmin philosopher and saint-poet, with whom the varkari tradition really begins and Namdev, the lower-caste rebel saint and poet, a tailor by profession, under whose wide and generous understanding of spirituality blossomed many saint-poets largely drawn from the lower and marginalised ranks of society.

Presumably Chokha's spiritual leanings were given direction by Namdev: Chokha acknowledges him as his guru in many of his poems. He seems to have been instrumental in recognising Chokha's devotion and getting him as far as the great doors of the temple at Pandharpur, but either even Namdev lacked total conviction, or the brahmin priests, who loom large in Chokha's poems, thrust him out unable to countenance the 'untouchable' mahar polluting the divinity. Chokha's habitual place seems to have been at the outer doors of the temple, on the threshold. His poems quite simply and humbly refer to his standing there, quite without self-pity and certainly without rancour. This literal and symbolic stance of the saint-poet and the quietude in the voice are devastatingly moving. It may perhaps be noted that there exists a body of well-known stories, orally handed down for generations, narrating incidents from his life. It is quite probable that the poems have fed the stories and that these have acquired colour and depth over the years. However, there seems to be an individual voice and personality in the collection of his abhangs—numbering over three hundred—that is real and authentic. It is the quality of this voice and the stories around the person that have to serve in place of documented history. It is interesting to see how the poems merge into legend so that in the popular imagination of the varkaris the two exist in a seamless continuum.

One may perhaps examine an instance of how myth and poem weave into each other. A well-known story goes like this. One day Chokha was standing at the door of the temple from morning till late in the evening, somewhat hopeless and unusually cast down. Towards nightfall, the priests locked up the doors and went away. As Chokha stood there, still and lone, Vitthoba himself came out, exclaimed in distress to see Chokha patiently waiting, embraced him, led him by the hand to the innermost sanctum, where he lovingly held him to his breast. The night was spent in the union of the bhakt with the god, after which Vitthoba playfully removed his tulsi garland (a garland made of basil seeds which the

Varkaris wear as a mark of their identity) and put it around Chokha's neck. When the day dawned, he led him out of the temple, still with the garland. Chokha, in a state of bliss after this vouchsafing of divine love, lay down on the sands of the river in a trance. At the temple the priests discovered that Vitthoba's gold necklace had disappeared and remembering that Chokha had been at the temple doors last, went into transports of rage over the fact that the temple and diety were polluted and the necklace stolen. Search parties found Chokha still dazed and uncomprehending, but with a gold necklace around the neck. He was punished; tied to the bullocks and about to be dragged to death but for the animals who stood their ground, despite the whip lashing them. The story ends with Vitthoba revealing himself to the entire company, holding the bullocks by the horns.

The poem, however, dramatises Chokha's plea to Vitthoba in the midst of his humiliating position. The incensed priests lashing the whip, the bullocks, the crowd of people are frozen in the background, a silence is drawn on the flurry of activity; what is voiced are Chokha's anguished words to his god. The poem makes no mention of Vitthal's public revelation; it nevertheless makes an ambiguous reference to a secret shared between them.

They thrash me, Vithu,
 now don't walk so slow.
 The pandits whip,
 some crime,
 don't know what:
 How did Vithoba's necklace come round your throat,
 they curse and strike
 and say I polluted you.
 Do not send the cur at your door
 away,
 giver of everything.
 You,
 Chakrapani,
 yours is the deed.
 With folded hands
 Chokha begs

I revealed our secret,
don't turn away.

This poem is one of a few others that dramatise situations. But the entire collection communicates a range and depth of emotion that is surely of immense value. The deprivations- material and religious, that constantly hemmed him in, and the humiliations that pushed him beyond the caste boundaries evoke by turns a resigned wonder at unjust and hypocritical human constructions, a philosophic calm, despair and sometimes anguish. Some poems reveal bliss; an ecstasy of affirmation. They work towards an awareness that it is not only divine love that empowers him, but also, perhaps more importantly, *his* devotion that empowers Vitthoba. Some poems subtly play up the paradox that Vitthoba, the holiest of the holy, touches, eats with, and embraces him, Chokha- the impure outcaste, a loving favour not extended to the touchable brahmin priests. He is rarely angry, but sometimes he does strip away facades of religious humbug to expose human cruelties. Chokhamela's poetry, in short, quietly reverses normative understanding of divinity and social structure.

What about posterity? In the living tradition of the varkari community Chokha's abhangs continue to be sung, not only by the 'lower' castes but also by communities of pilgrims. He remains in popular memory and currency. But he has never received as much prominence say, as Namdev or Tukaram, other lower caste saint-poets. It is not difficult to see that his mahar identity is the main reason for the half-neglect. Where secular politics is concerned the scene changes diametrically. In the twentieth century, especially during the Indian nationalist movement and after independence, there has been a great mobilisation of the former untouchables under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar who was from the mahar community, was an outstanding leader, intellectual and scholar; it was he who framed the Constitution of free India; he was perhaps the most radical and committed leader of the marginalised. Today the erstwhile untouchables call themselves the Dalits, which literally means 'ground down'. A very significant outcome of the dalit movement, primarily a struggle for social and political empowerment, was the mass conversion of thousands of dalits (a majority of whom were mahars) to Buddhism in the lifetime of the leader. The dalit movement is a strong presence in contemporary Maharashtra, especially in

the work of a group of revolutionary writers called the Dalit Panthers. Though Chokhamela's voice is perhaps the first dalit voice in terms of interrogating the caste structure, his protest is contained in bhakti. The contemporary dalit movement could not trace the trajectory of its history from this early fourteenth poet, rejecting as it did the social and religious underpinnings of the Hindu caste structure; its vision is to claim a secular political and cultural space, uncontested by dogma. If Chokhamela's dalit identity lessens his prominence as a varkari saint-poet, his association with bhakti detracts from his dalit identity.²

It is clear that the peculiar dichotomy in which Chokha was caught within his lifetime: his outcaste identity on the one hand and his Vitthoba bhakti on the other, seems to spill over and continue down the centuries with paradoxical ramifications. This conjunction of bhakti and marginalisation is embodied in the tone of his poems. Chokha questions pollution and untouchability. Consider the following poem,

Vedas and the shastras
 polluted; puranas inauspicious
 impure; the body, the soul
 contaminated; the manifest
 Being is the same.
 Brahma polluted, Vishnu too;
 Shankar is impure, inauspicious.
 Birth impure, dying is impure:
 says Chokha,
 pollution stretches
 without beginning
 and end.

He is too intelligent not to perceive the self-interest of the powerful classes behind the façade of religion, but such instances of pure anger are rare. More typically his

² For a thorough analysis of the place of Chokhamela in the dalit movement see Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992) pp 10-14.

heart full of love seems to melt anger into understanding. His joyous belief in god is weighed by the sorrow of things; his anguish contained in quietude.

It is said that Chokha died along with other mahar labourers when a part of the fort they were helping build at the town of Mangalved collapsed on them. The legend goes that Chokha's friend and guru Namdev went to find his remains and picked up those bones that murmured 'Vitthal, Vitthal'. The bones were buried at the bottom of the steps *outside* the gate of the main temple where Chokha was accustomed to stand all day long in worship. A shrine is built there today in Chokha's honour. In a way Chokha continues to be at the threshold; from another perspective, the devotee has to visit Chokha's shrine before climbing up to Vitthoba.

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