

Tukaram

Tukaram or “Tuka” as he refers to himself in his poems, was a great Bhakti poet from the first half of the 17th century (Fraser & Marathe 1). Scholars have placed his date of birth to be around 1608 CE and his death or disappearance in 1649 CE (Abbott i). His home was in a village called Dehu, near the Indrayani river (Abbott i). In the modern world Dehu would be by the modern city of Pune in north-western India (Abbott vi). Tukaram was born into the Sudra caste and was of the “Kunbi” sub-caste, who were mainly as farm laborers (Dharwadker 92). Tukaram was fortunate however since his family was financially secure unlike many others of the Sudra class (Dharwadker 92). Despite his class Tukaram became a poet of legendary status.

Tukaram adopted a spiritual lifestyle in order to achieve *moksa*, which is freedom from rebirth and *karma* (Abbott vii). Scholars have said that he sought to achieve Videhi which is where the individual is completely consumed by a god, which includes their body along with all earthly desires (Abbott vii). Despite his fame Tukaram's life is shrouded a great degree of uncertainty since all texts credited to him are devotional texts that were written nearly 125 years after his disappearance and are based from the texts of Manipati (Abbott I). It is unknown if the records of Tukaram's life and deeds are historically accurate since much of the data we have is from devotional texts.

As a poet Tukaram composed a multitude of poetry. He composed them in a specific style known as *abhangs*, which is a type of poem that has a specific metric composition like the Shakespearian iambic pentameter; however, this form of poetry is usually in praise of a deity (Fraser & Marathe 1). He did not write exclusively religious poetry; for instance, *The Rich Farmer* or *Dagadacya Deva* deals with a wealthy farmer, who while affluent does not cultivate virtues such as piety, generosity or patience (Tukaram 94). Many of Tukaram's poems are either social criticism that deal with living *dharmically* or are devotional in nature. The devotional poems are often from the

perspective of a lower caste man like the author was, and usually plead with the gods in an up front manner that tries to make sense of life's mysteries (Dharwadker 93).

Scholars have managed to determine that Tukaram composed 1300 *abhangs* of the nearly 4600 *abhangs* attributed to him (Dharkwadker 92). Many of the *abhangs* are believed to have been written by Tukaram's brother or followers and attributed to him posthumously (Fraser & Marathe 4). The majority of the *abhangs* were originally composed in the Marathi language with a handful composed in Hindi (Dharkwadker 92). Scholars today have not been able to piece together any chronology for compositions of the poems (Fraser & Marathe 3). Throughout Tukaram's *abhangs*, no spiritual ideal or *tantra* is touted as superior, although some scholars have drawn parallels between his proposed lifestyle and Buddhism (Fraser & Marathe 4). The majority of Tukaram's poems end with a short aphorism in regards to the subject of the poem. The aphorism is either headed or closed with two words "Tuka says." Despite the wide range of topical matter in his poetry, Tukaram is considered one of the greatest of his time and is regarded with respect by all different castes (Fraser & Marathe 3).

Tukaram's early life was financially secure, however, the beginning of his life was filled with hardships. His older brother became a renouncer and left the family after his wife's death (Dharwadker 92). Tukaram was forced to take over his older brother's responsibilities (Dharwadker 92). At thirteen years old Tukaram was married to a girl named Rukmabai who had severe asthma and later took a second wife by the name of Jijabai (Dharwadker 92). Tukaram's parents died when he was at the age of seventeen and he was forced to support his family (Dharwadker 92). A famine struck India from 1629-1631 and during this disaster his first wife Rukmabai and eldest son perished (Dharwadker 92).

All was not lost however since during the famine he became religiously awakened (Dharwadker 92). He became a devout follower of Vitthala of Pandharpur from the Vaisana pantheon [Vitthala was an avatar of Krsna] (Dharwadker 92). At this point he retired to a mountain known as Bhambanath and meditated. It was here that Krsna appeared before him in serpent form (Abbott 83). Some deemed Tukaram mad, and when he returned to his family his business fell apart (Abbott 94). According to

devotional texts his wife who had become sick of living in poverty attempted to murder Tukaram, however, he cursed her with boils and she relented (Abbott 228).

After Tukaram's awakening he began to gather a great number of followers during the next 15 years (Dharwadker 93). Tukaram's initial fame among the people was due to the skill of how he presented his *bhajana* and *katha* works (Fraser & Marathe 1). A *bhajana* is a hymn in praise of deity while a *katha* is a sermon regarding the contents of a sacred work that has hymns inserted into it (Fraser & Marathe). Despite his vast popularity, Tukaram's criticism of Hindu rituals and social mores are cited for the causing outrage among the Ksatriya and Brahman castes (Dharwadker 93). Devotional texts, by contrast, note that his miracles were actually the cause of the unrest among the upper castes (Fraser & Marathe).

His main antagonists were Ramesvar Bhatt, a Brahmin priest, and Mumbaji Gosavi (Fraser & Marathe 1). Ramesvar Bhatt ordered Tukaram's exile and had all his books thrown into a river. In the devotional texts one of the first miracles to occur after his awakening was the books' miraculous recovery nearly thirteen days after their disposal into the river (Abbott 213). Tukaram then returned from exile and Ramesvar stopped antagonizing him after this miracle occurred (Fraser & Marathe). Devotional texts cannot agree on whether Tukaram simply forgave Ramesvar for his actions (Fraser & Marathe) or cursed Ramesvar to have a tainted body that would always burn like it was on fire, a curse which took some time to recover from (Abbott 211). However, there is further disagreement on the reason for the curse, some devotional texts claim that the curse was actually placed on Ramesvar for an unrelated fouling of a ceremonial pool (Abbott 209). His other antagonist Mumbaji Gosavi assaulted him physically (Dharwadker 92). Tukaram eventually overcame these enemies and gained enough renown that a king named Shivaji invited him to reside in his palace in Raigad. However Tukaram refused the generous offer and simply advised him on how to run his kingdom better (Fraser & Marathe 2).

Tukaram's numerous miracles have been recorded in devotional texts about his life. The main

text in regards to Tukaram's deeds is Mahipati's *Bhaktalilamrita* in chapters 25-40. While Tukaram may seem larger than life to us, one must keep in mind that many of his miracles are no different from those performed by the figures of Christianity and Islam; Jesus of Nazareth and Muhammad.

According to the devotional text *Bhaktalilamrita*, there were numerous miracles that Tukaram performed during his life and some of the more notable ones had considerable effects on those around him. One of Tukaram's first minor miracles was taming a fierce dog that had killed a few local men. After taming the dog it became loyal to him (Abbott 243). Another minor miracle was creating oil for a Brahmin couple that he was visiting and whose lamp oil had run out (Abbott 265). Tukaram created an Abhang that could cure demonic possession and used it to cast out a demon from a possessed person (Abbott 248). Tukaram changed a well of brackish water in fresh water for a village (Abbott 263). Tukaram also apparently could raise the dead (Abbott 266) and turn iron into gold (Abbott 265).

Devotional texts also record numerous instances when Tukaram had divine properties and was protected on numerous occasions by the gods. For instance when Tukaram was being attacked by *samnyasins* who were insulting his poetry, they stopped when he transformed into a deific (Abbott 271). The gods also intervened at numerous points in his life aside from saving his texts. For instance, when king Shivaji returned to visit him a second time, an army of Muslim soldiers attacked his village in search of the king; a deity then descended and took the form of king Shivaji and led the soldiers away, allowing the king to escape (Abbott 280).

Tukaram's death is even more enigmatic than his life. Tukaram's disappearance is often debated over since it is reputed by devotional texts that he ascended into the sky riding on the celestial avatar of Visnu, "Garuda" (Dharwadker 93). Other devotional texts claim he disappeared in a flying chariot made of light that showered flower petals on those below (Abbott xi). During his ascension he was reputedly watched over by Brahma, Visnu, and Siva (Abbott 315). Historically, however, it is not known what actually happened to him. However, there was a note found in a Dehu manuscript that said "Tukoba started on a pilgrimage' and wasn't seen again" (Fraser & Marathe 2). This note of

disappearance has been interpreted by some authors that Tukaram had been assassinated by a Brahman whom he had continuously upset throughout his life (P 2113). Regardless of his actual fate Tukaram ceased to write in 1649 CE. A final unusual detail is that unlike most other Bhakti poets Tukaram did not leave behind any monuments that are a tradition of the Marathi people (Dharwadker 93). Tukaram was a great man who has left us a legacy of wonderful poetry.

One cannot hope to understand a poet without reading some of his poetry and as such it would be prudent to include two samples of Tukaram's poetry. Therefore included here is two poems of the multitudes composed by Tukaram. The first poem is the aforementioned *The Rich Farmer* or *Dagadacya Deva* which deals with social mores (Dvarwadker 95). The second piece of poetry included is devotional, as it deals with a person wondering why the god can be so cruel even though they have devoted their lives to worshipping them.

The Rich Farmer (Dagadacya Deva)

He has vowed undying devotional
to a god of stone,
But he won't let his wife go
listen to a holy recitation.

He built a crematorium
with his hoarded wealth,
but he thinks it wrong to grow
holy basil at his door.

Thieves plunder his home
and bring him much grief,

but he won't give a coin
to a poor brahman.

He treats his son-in-law
like a guest of honor,
but he turns his back upon
his real guests.

Tuka says, curse him,
may he burn
he's only a burden
and drains the earth.
(Dvarwadker 95).

Abhang 23

Why do you not pity me
Though you are seated in my heart?
O Narayana, cruel and merciless,
I have cried on thee unheard till my voice is lost.
Why has my spirit found no repose?
The stirrings of sense never pause.
Tuka says, O why are you angry?
We know not, O Panduranga,
Whether our guilt to be over or not.
(Fraser & Marathe 13).

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Written by Garret Ford (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.