

Saint Tukaram

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("A preacher who has a commission from God need not invite people to hear him. He possesses such irresistible attraction that people come to him of their own accord. People of all classes, even kings and autocrats gather round him. Does the magnet say to the iron: 'Come near me?' That is not necessary. Because of the magnet, the iron rushes to it. He the preacher, with divine commission may not be a scholarly person. But do not conclude from that, he has any lack of wisdom. Does book-learning make one wise? He, who has a commission from God never runs short of wisdom. That wisdom comes from God. It is inexhaustible.")

(Sri Ramakrishna)

To the earnest seeker of God, the lives of saints always stand as the milestones guiding his way. These saints coming from different modes of life, struggle to attain the Supreme Reality and after their attainment - some of them give expression to their experiences in beautiful poems.

Although the final realisation of all the mystics is nearly the same, they come to that by different routes. Thus, the study of the lives of mystics form a very interesting subject, very beneficial in shaping our lives in proper setting.

The town of *Pandaripur* is an important place of pilgrimage, attracting large crowds every year. One main reason for this is that it is associated with the lives of many great saints of Maharashtra. Of these Tukaram is one, whose life sketch and '*Abhangas*' are widely read.

His life is a beautiful illustration, where birth, education and wealth do not have anything to do with God-realisation. Born and bred up in a very poor, low-class family, he was not conversant with many scriptures. But still by his absorbing love for God, he could enter the high realms of spirituality.

Not far from Poona is a village, *Dehu*, where Tukaram was born. His ancestors were Kshatriyas of a lower order, considered as Sudras.

Agriculture and trade were their chief occupations in life. Their devotion for *Vithoba* of Pandaripur was very great.

Finding it very difficult to go there often, one of his ancestors built a small shrine in their own village and introduced the Lord's worship there; visiting Pandaripur only when it was convenient. Tukaram followed this trend of life of his ancestors and got this traditional religion as a patrimony.

He says:

"I have inherited this practice of going on a pilgrimage to Pandaripur from my ancestors. I recognize no other pilgrimage and no other vow. My only vow is to make a fast on the Ekadasi day and to sing the name of God. I shall utter the name of God, which is verily what will last the end of time".

Tukaram's father Bolhoji was a petty trader and had three sons - Savji, Tukaram and Kanya. When Tukaram was of thirteen years, his father died. Savji had no taste for worldly life and so the management of the shop fell on his younger brother. Being a very simple child and inexperienced in worldly affairs he could never manage his business well.

Two years later he was married first to Rukhmabai and since she was sickly, he married again. The name of the second wife was

Jijabai. So, even at a tender age he had to maintain a family. Once when he was on the verge of bankruptcy, his second wife, Jijabai, secured a loan for him and set him up again. For some time, everything moved on smoothly, and Tukaram went out to different places and made good profits.

One day while he was returning home after selling his wares, he met a party of people dragging a person, who was crying piteously. When he saw Tukaram, he began his tale of woe, *"Sir, look at my pitiable condition. I was a prosperous merchant. By a sudden mischance I have lost all and these people to whom I am indebted are dragging me to the prison. I beseech you to save me from their clutches."* Tukaram, who had always a loving heart, was moved by the condition of the man and immediately gave away all the money in his hand, without any security. He returned home empty-handed.

Shortly after this a famine broke out and Tukaram who was always on the verge of a collapse was badly hit. He did not get even one proper meal a day and his first wife died of starvation and a few days later his son also passed away.

It is interesting to note here, that in spite of all these calamities and a series of sufferings, Tukaram was able to maintain an even attitude. He had read the lives of some Maharashtra saints and books on religious subjects. The noble words he had read came to his rescue in these days of woe.

Added to this, one night he had a dream, in which he got initiation. He narrates his dream as follows:

"I imagined I met him (the Master) on the way to the river for the holy bath. He placed his hand on my head and asked me to give him some ghee for his meals. Unfortunately, being in a dream I could not give it to him. An obstacle having thus apparently risen, my spiritual teacher hastened away. He told me of his spiritual lineage as that of Raghava Chaitanya

and Kesava Chaitanya. He told me his name as Babaji and gave me the Mantra, 'Rama, Krishna, Hari', for meditation.

Since it was the 10th day of the bright half of Magha and the day of Guru (Thursday) I immediately accepted it with all my heart. Verily, my teacher cognisant of the aspirations of my heart bestowed on me a Mantra (Sacred words imparted by a Guru to his disciple) I loved so well and a Mantra so easy to utter.

Verily, there can be no difficulty in uttering that Mantra. By that Mantra have many, who have gone from amongst us crossed the ocean of life. To those, who know, and to those who do not know, the Mantra has served as a raft to enable them to cross the ocean of life. Verily I was put in the possession of this raft. There is no limit to the grace of God Panduranga."

This dream had a profound effect on Tukaram and he at last found a support which made him strong enough to face all troubles of life.

As we have already noticed, he had only hardships coming one after another and we do not find a single instance where the world smiled benignly on him. His wife, to whom he was no better than a worthless fool often used to tease him.

Gradually he lost all taste for business and wanted to free himself from it. Accordingly, he gave away everything to his younger brother Kanya. Now he was free from the bondages of life.

One, who thinks that the world is everything and the source of all joy, will take Tukaram as a total failure and cannot but imagine him to be steeped in misery.

But Tukaram himself sings differently,

"Well done! O Lord, Tukaram dances at Thy feet. Had I been a learned man I would have brought calamities on my head, would have scorned the

service of the saints, would have been subjected to pride and arrogance, would have gone by the way leading to hell as others have done. Greatness and arrogance would have surely taken me to Hell."

Further, he does not seem to be in the least sorry for his life's hardships:

"Life seems to me like vomit. Happy am I that my wife is a termagant. Happy am I that I have lost all reputation. Happy am I that I am disrespected by all men. Happy am I that I have lost all my cattle. Well it is that I have ceased to be ashamed among men. Well it is that I have come as a suppliant to Thee, O God! Well it is that I built a temple for Thee and neglected my wife and children."

When, one by one, his parents, wife and son died he felt that they all got salvation and that the hand of God was working behind these in order to free him from all unreal affection.

He began to sing:

"O my God, now there is none between me and Thee, creating a barrier."

The Lord out of His infinite grace wants His devotees to be drawn to Him. He will seldom allow them to get on very easily in this world. He strikes His devotee with poverty. If the devotee is granted a good wife, he will be lost in the love for her. Hence the Lord gets him a shrew. *"Verily have I experienced all these"*, says Tuka, *"why should I talk of others."*

Tukaram's wife could never understand him. His love for singing kirtans, and entertaining saintly guests used to enrage her. Tukaram says that his wife, who did not like these, would run like a mad dog towards the guests.

Gradually his fame spread on all sides. Some brahmins, feeling jealous of his popularity, began to persecute him.

One day they threw away his compositions in the river Indrayani. Tukaram was sorely shocked that his only great possession in this world, should have been destroyed like this. He composed all the Abhangas as directed by another saint Namadeva, who had appeared to him in a dream along with the Lord and asked him to compose the Abhangas. This dream had impressed him very deeply since the Lord Himself appeared with Namadeva and he was entrusted with that important work. So, he could not bear the destruction of this sacred work.

He thought that he should importune the Lord to restore his poems. He could not get any peace of mind and death appeared to be more covetable than that life. But somehow, he felt he must try and see how far the Lord would come to his rescue and so began a fast. After thirteen days the Lord appeared before him and gave him consolation and assurance.

After this vision Tuka felt repentant for having forced God to please him. He says,

“O my Lord, You followed us poor men as the shadow of the body, came near me like a youth and gave comfort to me. You showed me Your beautiful form, embraced me and comforted me.

Verily have I troubled You for nothing. Forgive me, my Lord! I shall never cause You trouble any more. I committed a great mistake because I taxed Your patience. Mean creature that I am, I shut my eyes and went on fasting for thirteen days. You saved my books from the river and protected me from the calumny of the people. Verily, have You come to save Your devotee.

Let people put a scythe against my neck, or give trouble to me as they please, but I shall never do anything to trouble You. Forgive me for what I have done before. I shall guard myself against the future.

What will You not do, O my Lord! for the sake of Your devotees, if only they are patient? I grew impatient, but nevertheless I received favour at Your hands. Nobody put the scythe on my neck or cudgelled me on my back, but still I cried for help. Compassionate as You are, You brought back my books You are more affectionate than a mother, more delightful than the moon. Your grace flows like a river. What comparison shall I find for Your qualities? You have made nectar and You are sweeter than that. I place my head at Your feet, forgive me...

Adieu to all worldly life, which only makes one go away from God. The ripples of intellect change from moment to moment and attachment ends in dislodging us from fixity of any kind. Put an end to all my anxieties.

O God! come to live in my heart?"

It is a well-known fact that the realisation of God does not come to anyone very easily. Even great devotees, in spite of their pure and sincere prayers, pass through many agonies. Despondency, and doubt often torture them and we get some idea of this dark period of their lives from their own words. Tukaram says,

"My heart tells me that I have not known You. How can I sing of You, without Your vision? You have deceived me and made me serve, without bestowing the knowledge of You on me... But, You forget I am a Bania (business man) after all, and cannot be cheated. How can I dance and sing of God without seeing Him? I have become mad for the sight of You."

He elaborately expresses all his sufferings and talks about his warfare with the world and his mind. He felt that God was near but still far off. The mind began to run hither and thither before it settled down and it was torn to pieces by thousand and one things of the world. As days rolled on, the stage of purification came as it generally does with all saints and Tukaram could see his mind as separate from himself. He saw the numerous defects, and somehow, they barricaded the vision of the Lord.

He earnestly appealed to the Lord for forgiveness. This section of his Abhangas form an interesting reading and gives us valuable instruction.

The transformation of the personality is the keynote of all religions and it is what the mystics also pass through. Except in the cases of those, whose souls are ever-pure, who are born without any tinge of worldliness, all others have to pass through this purificatory process.

When freed from all dross, the mind becomes a perfect and clean mirror and reflects divinity in all its glory.

Tukaram passed through all the purificatory stages before he got his realisations. He sought the company of great saints, and now and then, spent days in solitude in earnest prayer. He used to say,

“O Lord, if You do not like to show yourself before me at least You can give me the company of Your devotees, who have incessant love for You. The remembrance of the greatness of the saints burn my heart. I shall offer my life as a sacrifice, if You do not grant me the company of saint.”

But still neither the company of saints nor his prayers brought him sufficient peace. He often felt like committing suicide and would cry, *“My hopes are shattered. I shall commit self-slaughter.”*

At last the happy day dawned and we shall hear of the experience from the poet's own words:

“I see God's face, and the vision gives me infinite bliss. My mind is riveted on it and my hands cling to His feet. As I look at Him all my mental agony vanishes. Bliss is ever leading me to a higher bliss. Blessed am I that my effort has been crowned with success. I have attained the desired end. My heart is set on God's feet and my mind is composed. The blessed omen has wiped off death and old age. My body is changed. On it the light

of God has fallen. I have now obtained the limitless wealth and I have seen the feet of the formless Person. I have obtained the treasure, which has existed at all times. All quarters have become auspicious. Evil itself has transformed into the greatest good. The lamp in my hand dispels all darkness."

From that day onwards, the world appeared a paradise for him and he lived in that state of blessedness radiating a joyful atmosphere. He felt the Divine joy seething through his body and his tongue ceaselessly began to chant the name of God.

The news of the greatness of this illumined saint spread far and near and reached the ears of the prince Shivaji, who was to become the famous king of the Maharatas. He felt a strong desire to hear Tukaram's kirtan and invited him to his presence through messengers. But Tukaram refused to go and sent a reply,

"My delusion and desires are at an end. They are verily the bait which death sets for us. Gold and clay are to me of equal consequence. The whole heaven has entered into my house."

This made Shivaji revere the saint all the more and he managed to go there himself and in incognito sat with other people and listened to the soul-stirring kirtans of Tukaram.

We are told of a number of Abhangas addressed to Shivaji. They are full of advice to the young prince infusing courage and strength.

"Without heroism, misery cannot disappear. Soldiers must become reckless of their lives and God takes up their burden."

These words are expressive of Tukaram's ideas regarding a Kshatriya's duty.

As years rolled on Tukaram began to have large number of disciples, who admired him immensely and to one of these disciples we are indebted for the Abhangas which number more than 4,000.

Now Tukaram's occupation was to preach devotion to God, encouraging people to chant His name.

One day, we are informed that he went to the river Indrayani, with all his disciples, singing the praise of God and when every one was absorbed in the kirtan, Tukaram suddenly disappeared.

No other information was further heard, about his passing away from this world. This famous saint was only 42, when he died in the year 1649 A.D.

Within such a short span of life, Tukaram had the intense spiritual life of a mystic and left a monumental work; the Abhangas. These form a good source-book to study the life of the saint, his experiences and his teachings. They are very simple in language, but very deep in meaning.

We have already known the story of his realisation and now we shall try to have an idea of the message of Tuka.

Tukaram never felt the need of vast learning of the scriptures. To him sincere devotion to God was much more important.

Like all true devotees he never felt any difference between the God and His name.

The chanting of Lord's name was an end in itself.

"Sit silent, compose thy mind and make it pure, and then happiness will know no bounds, for God will certainly come and dwell in Thy heart. This will be the effect of thy long effort. Meditate time after time on God's name—Rama, Krishna, Hari. I declare that this will surely come to pass, if thou hast one-pointed devotion."

The uttering of the name of God is indeed an easy way to reach Him, says he again and again. For, he himself felt that by the repetition of the name of God, his mind became composed. The

tongue felt the taste of ambrosia, good omens appeared all around. Slowly the mind got coloured by the vision of God and he felt satisfied like one who had taken a hearty meal. Desires came to an end and words came out of the mouth as if of full satisfaction. Happiness met happiness and blessedness reigned everywhere.

A person who constantly repeats the name of the Lord, with unflinching devotion acquires immense merit, gets liberation in this very life, and enjoys untold benefits.

All our senses forget their movements, the body becomes cool and lustrous and the devotee is filled with energy.

All evils fall off and passions flee.

The repetition of the Lord's name is so sweet, that God Himself cannot know it!

"Does lotus flower understand its fragrance? Only the bee tastes its fragrance. The cow eats grass, but it is the calf which enjoys the sweetness of its milk. The oysters cannot enjoy its pearl. The devotee alone enjoys the sweetness of God's name but not He."

Besides this repetition of God's name, one is advised to join the kirtan parties.

Thereby the devotee not only saves himself but also helps others who join the kirtan.

The body should be kept sound to sing the Lord's name.

The kirtan is compared by him to a river of nectar flowing before God.

Now it will be clear to the readers what is the essential teaching of Tukaram.

He felt that devotion and devotion alone can take one to God.

"God has no form, nor any particular name, nor any place, where He can be seen, but wherever you go you see Him.

He is neither impersonal nor personal, but is beyond all knowledge.

God, cannot be attained except through love. In fact, He does not care for anything except love.

"God cares not for the sweet voice nor any attainment, but He looks at the heart within."

The love for the Lord must be so intense that the devotee cuts himself from all other attachments.

All the external forms of castes and creeds, rituals and a variety of dogmas Tukaram never liked.

Though he started his early life as a great devotee of Pandarinath his mystic experience made him see clearly the unimaginable greatness of the Lord of the Universe, and he brought out the ideas of the Upanishads, which point out the one source from which all have come and by whose lustre the sun, moon and others shine.

But still as a true devotee he liked to enjoy sugar and did not want to become sugar itself. The Lord may be formless to those who like that aspect. But for Tuka, the Lord should take a form. It is the devotion that makes God to take a form.

To sing and glorify the Lord is an end in itself and absolution is not desired by a devotee, for it cannot bring the same joy as the happiness of repeating the Lord's name.

Besides the greatness of Lord's name and kirtan, Tukaram used to speak very highly of the association with the saints.

He looked upon them as the Lord Himself in flesh and blood.

God and the devotee are like seed and tree.

Though the saint attains his identification with God, he maintains a difference for the sake of devotion.

“The Personal and Impersonal forms of God are not the two contraries but one and the same. It is the Impersonal which shines forth as the Personal by the power of devotion”, says Tuka.

The various forms of images are only helpful in the beginning but the devotee has to go beyond all these and reach the all-pervading, immanent and transcendent God.

Like all great mystics, Tukaram belongs, to the entire world and his light is available to all who require and seek it, a mission not for his country alone but for the whole world.

In such a short account of a great topic it is impossible to bring out the beauty of this great mystic, who has left behind a wealth of spiritual gems. To pick and choose from them and give a clear picture of the saint is an extremely difficult task. But an attempt has been made to give at least an outline.

In these days, when the world seems to be steeped in darkness, as in any day in eternity, it is only the light of the lives of saints like Tukaram that can show us the right path, which leads to the goal of human life.

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