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Feministic Approach of Saint Poetess of *Varkari Sampradaya*: An Appraisal

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Abstract

Feminism seeks not to divide genders but to empower women to progress alongside men, challenging social inequalities and asserting women's autonomy, identity, and equal rights across all spheres of life. Its core aim is to transform gender-biased societal mindsets and patriarchal structures, promoting an egalitarian society. In *Maharashtra*, the *varkari* sect embodies values of humanism, liberty, and gender equality. Amid periods of moral decline, the teachings of *varkari* saints offered ethical direction. Notably, female saint-poetesses of the *varkari* tradition, from the 13th century, used devotional literature as a tool to resist social injustice and advocate for women's dignity. Their spiritual and literary contributions provided a progressive voice in a deeply patriarchal society and continue to inspire today. This paper evaluates the role of these saint-poetesses in furthering women's emancipation, highlighting how their legacy aligns with feminist ideals and remains vital in ongoing struggles for gender equality.

Keywords: *Female saint poetess, Liberty, Equality, Reverence, Gender or Class discrimination, Egalitarian society, Bhakti Movement, Mystic*

Introduction

Feminism does not mean separating women from men and establishing an independent domain for women. Rather, it encourages women to recognize their own strength and walk alongside men in the journey of progress. Feminism rejects social disparities between men and women. According to the Webster dictionary, 'Feminism is the belief in political, economic and social equality of women and men.'¹ Feminism is not merely about advocating for women's rights; it is about establishing a distinct identity for women. It encompasses women's position in the family, her right over her own body, and struggle for equality in political, social, educational, and other spheres of life. The purpose of this ideology is to change the mindset of the society built upon gender inequality. Thus, the core objective of feminism is to dismantle the patriarchal politics that places women in a secondary position. Simone de Beauvoir in her work "The Second Sex," expresses feminism as follows, 'gender is a social construct rather than biological reality. She proposes that women are characterised as "the Other," secondary to men, and their oppression is the result of societal construction.' Her feminism underpins freedom, individual agency, and the need for women to become subjects rather than objects, in their own lives.

Feminism has rejected both the subjugation and the deification of women, striving to recognize and reassess their identity as human beings. The objective is not to take power out of men's hands which would not bring changes in society rather destroy the very notion of this kind of power. This ideology is fundamentally rooted in humanism and equality. Feminism respects and acknowledges every woman as an individual being. It emphasizes the dignity of a woman's individuality, all forms of liberty and equality. Feminist movement is not just about women's rights rather it is an effort to change men's mindsets. It also focuses on the complex rela-

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>

tionships that exist in society in the form of gender discrimination, race, class, and caste on both theoretical and practical levels. Thus, Feminist ideology is not only limited to Western societies but also found in the writings of social reformers of the 18th and 19th centuries in India; who tried to expose the reality of the women passing through the societal exclusion especially the deprivation of education. During the medieval times, women were allowed to express her thoughts on a spiritual level openly. Indeed, the reality of women's status before the arrival of the British in India was astonishing.

In India, Saints and great leaders especially from Maharashtra ((one of the Indian states located at western coast) played very important role who advocated feministic principles like gender equality and women's liberty over a century such as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Principal Gopal Krishna Agarkar, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and others. Dr. Ambedkar, the advocate of social justice, states that, 'I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.'² For Mahatma Gandhi feminism is an inseparable bond connecting every woman in the world. Mahatma Phule was the first thinker who had a belief that to destroy the patriarchal structure of the society, women need to be educated and empowered and he practically applied this in his thought and action being real *karmayogī*³. The feminist movement in India acknowledged that it is difficult to separate fight for women's liberation from the struggles of other oppressed and marginalized groups or class as both experiences' oppression.

In India orthodox Hindu society not only denied lower castes and women. The Bhakti movement stands out as one

² Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: *Writings and Speeches* series, Volume 3, published by the Government of Maharashtra.
http://drambedkarwritings.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Volume_03.pdf

³A *karmayogi* is one who controls his or her senses with the mind and performs actions (*karma*) without attachment to the fruits or results of action. Swami Vivekananda, *Thoughts on Gita*, 5th Edition, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 1963, 978-81-7505-033-4. Cf. Puradkar Rina A. Pitale, "Saint Jnaneshwar: A Spiritual Leader of Varkari Sampradaya (Sect) of Maharashtra; a Retrospection", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 15, 2024, pp. 93-102 <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38174>

of India's earliest intersectional movements. The central principle of it emphasized devotion to God and sought a direct, personal connection with the divine, often bypassing the intricate rituals prescribed by Brahmanical traditions. Moreover, the movement strove to make spiritual practice accessible to all, especially women and marginalized communities who had long been excluded. In doing so, it not only transformed spiritual expression but also challenged the social boundaries of gender, caste, and class, promoting a more inclusive spiritual path. In *Maharashtra*, the *Varkari* sect or *sampradaya*, promotes humanistic values, liberty, gender equality, principle of inclusiveness which demonstrate a real liberal perspective that need to be valued even today where there is full of discrimination everywhere, thus, their teachings become more significant. When moral values in society were declining and social distortions were emerging, the spiritual and ethical philosophy of *varkari* saints need to be reuttered for rejuvenation of the social fabric. The role of female saints in the *varkari sampradaya* needs to be acknowledged, they raised their voices against social exploitation, through their writings especially through their *abhangas* from 13th century onwards like *Mahadamba*, *Kanhopatra*, *Nagi*, *Bahinabai*, *Nirmala*, *Bhagu*, *Venabai*, *Muktabai*, *Janabai*, and *Soyarabai* made their contribution. Most of these female saint poetesses, except a few exceptions, most of them did not belong to upper-caste society, which is very important fact to keep in mind. But still they followed the path of devotion and acquire liberation by themselves without the support of patriarchal society and rigid customs. They sought a rightful place within their orthodox religious traditions and wrote high-quality poetry despite being deprived of formal education. Along with spiritual lenses, their compositions also challenged the male-dominated society. Their works reflect independent, reflective thinking, the courage to question rigid traditions, and a rebellious nature that shook patriarchal mindsets. These female saint poetesses, broke the constraints of their time and produced remarkable literary works that

remain significant even today. The *varkari sampradaya*, with its philosophy of “rejecting all forms of discrimination,”⁴ provided a space for women who had been marginalized in social and spiritual spheres, allowing them to become important part of the mainstream devotional movement. This research paper tries to evaluate the role and contribution of these saint poetess belonging to the *varkari sampradaya* (sect) in Maharashtra during medieval period till date for the upliftment and emancipation of women. This *Bhagavata Sampradaya* grants equal rights and liberty to all men and women belonging to different caste, class and religion. As a result of it, women actively participated in the Bhakti movement, which rejected all kinds of caste, class, and gender discrimination. Not only did they engage in it, but they also claimed that God had immense grace upon them.

Saint poetess Janabai of 13th Century

Varkari Sampradaya not only emphasized divine grace but also wholeheartedly acknowledged the abilities and equal rights of women. Women’s literary contributions have been accepted acknowledged even today, the hymns (*Abhangas*) of *Muktabai* and *Janabai* are recited in religious discourses and sermons. The female saints of the *Varkari Sampradaya* used their devotional hymns (*abhangas*) to advocate for women’s equality and upliftment. Saint *Janabai* says...

*"Do not be saddened by being born a woman,
Sages and saints have accepted me."*

*"The veil from my head has slipped onto my shoulders,
Now I shall walk freely in the bustling marketplace."*

*"With cymbals in my hands and a veena on my shoulder,
Who now can restrain my heart?"*

⁴ ‘भेदाभेद भ्रम अमंगळ’ Neurgaonkar S. K., Shri ‘Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath’, *Abhang* 21 Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskrutik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978

"I have set up my abode in the marketplace of Pandharpur,

O people, anoint my wrists with oil!"

*"Jani says—O Lord, I have become fearless,
I have set out for Your home, O Keshava!"⁵*

She contributed more than three hundred poems or *abhangas* of which focus on everyday domestic chores and today also in the villages of *Maharashtra* many women sing these *abhangas* while performing their daily chores. Her hymns (*abhangas*) reflect an assertive and rebellious form of feminism. Her verses reflect on the limitations placed upon her due to her status as a servant (*dasi*) of Saint *Namadeva* who taught her to read and write. The themes that are consistently woven throughout her poetry vividly expresses the relentless and exhausting nature of domestic work and the constant struggle she faces being a woman. It was *Janabai* who shaped the widely accepted image of '*Lekurvālīya Vitthala*'⁶ (the motherly figure of Lord *Vitthala*; incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*) who cherishes all devotees like children. Her journey, from servitude to literary and spiritual prominence, attests to the inclusive nature of the *varkari* tradition and its open acceptance of women and oppressed classes. In contrast to the commonly melancholic narrative of womanhood expressed in phrases like '*A woman's life is a tale of suffering*', *Janabai* takes a remarkably optimistic stance. She does not lament being born a woman; rather, she embraces it with pride, saying:

⁵ 'स्त्री जन्म म्हणोनी न व्हावे उदासा साधू-संता ऐसे केले जनी॥ डोईचा पदर आला खांद्यावरी । भरल्या बाजारीं जाईन मी ॥१॥ हाती घेईन टाळ खांद्यावरी वीणा । आतां मज मना कोण करी ॥२॥ पंढरीच्या पेठे मांडियेले पाल । मनगटावर तेल घाला तुहमी ॥३॥ जनी म्हणे देवा मी झालें येसवा । निघालें केशवा घर तुझें ॥४॥' Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, "Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1", The Feminist Press New York

⁶ 'लेकुरवाळ्या विठुरायाची' 'विठु माझा लेकुरवाळा । संगें गोपाळांचा मेळा ॥' Ra-hirkar Gopal Sankar '*Sakal Sant Gathā*,' 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari Press Pune.

*"Do not despair for being born a woman;
Saints and sages have blessed me as one."*⁷

Saint *Janabai* not only accepts her womanhood openly but also finds spiritual fulfilment within it. This perspective continues to inspire not only to women belonging to the *varkari sampradaya*, but also allows them to blend devotion with self-acceptance till date. Many of her *abhangas* reflect and expresses her dissatisfaction she faces due to discrimination as women. She condemns this injustice openly in patriarchal society and also encourages other women to raise their voices too. She try to instil the value of self-awareness among them, by urging them not to lose hope simply because they are born female. She envisioned that the divine Lord is assisting her in everyday chores. She did not see tasks like grinding grain, fetching water, booming or braiding hair as exclusively feminine work. Instead, she imagined the male deity, Lord *Panduranga*, Lord *Vitthala* performing these tasks as well.⁸ She found freedom and power in her life through bhakti. In one of her abhang she says, Lord *Vitthala* becomes not only a woman but a serving woman, the lowest within the lowest caste.

*'Jani has had enough of Samsara
but how will I repay my debt?
You leave your greatness behind you
to grind and pound with me.
washing me and my soiled clothes,
proudly you carry the water
and gather dung with your own two hands.
O Lord, I want*

⁷ 'स्त्री जन्म म्हणोनी न व्हावे उदास! साधू-संता ऐसे केले जनी!' Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, "Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1", The Feminist Press New York.

⁸ *'Jani sweeps the floor the Lord collects the dirt, carries it upon his head, And casts it away. Won over by devotion, The Lord does lowly chores! Says Jani to Vithoba, how shall I pay your debt?'* (Abg- 1373, p.g.196), Sakal Sant Gathā, Gopal Sankar Rahirkar, 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari press pune.

place at your feet
*says Jani, Namdev's dasi.*⁹

Oh! Lord, you become a woman; this perspective planted the seeds of gender equality in every household during the 13th century. Therefore, if the men in Maharashtra contributing or extend helping hand to household chores and revered the women, one could argue that the moral foundation was laid by saint *Janabai* centuries ago.

Marathi saint literature writer Tara Bhavalkar states that women hold a significant place in the *varkari sampradaya* as well as her contribution has enriched the saint literature. Most importantly, all of them revered Lord *Vitthala* as their dear companion. Different relationships were formed with Lord *Vitthala* sometimes as a mother, as a father, a friend, or a brother. This deep connection with Lord *Vitthala* is beautifully expressed through the hymns of the *varkari* saints. One of the important observations is that they perceive their revered deity, Lord *Vitthala*, in a feminine form. Lord *Vitthala* is often called as "*Vithu Mauli*" (Mother *Vitthala*). Nowhere such example is found where a male deity is perceived and worshipped in a feminine form. The qualities of compassion and maternal affection seen in the image of Lord *Vitthala* allow devotees to see him as a nurturing, caring and loving mother. Just as a child demands attention from his mother and feels restless without her, devotees of *varkari sampradaya* also experience a similar longing for Lord *Panduranga*. Even Saint *Dnyaneshwar*, a founder figure in this tradition, is addressed as *Māuli* (mother). Even everyone in this sect affectionately refer to each one as *Māuli*, underscoring the *sampradaya's* deep association with feminine divinity and maternal love.

Every year, millions of *varkari's* undertake annual pilgrimage (*vari*) to *Pandharpur* in Maharashtra. Just as men leave their homes with enthusiasm for this month-long journey during *ashadi vari*, woman also participate in it with equal zeal. Given the familial responsibilities placed upon

⁹ Susie J. Tharu, Ke Lalita, 'Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present Vol. 1', *The Feminist Press*, New York.

women, it is indeed a challenge for them to stay away from home for such an extended period. However, in *vari* we come across a large number of women accepting and overcoming this challenge, demonstrating their unwavering devotion and strength. *Sant Tukaram* has aptly described a woman who is deeply entangled in household responsibilities with the words, 'The procession is heading to *Pandharpur*, but she has only reached to the doorstep.'¹⁰ However, according to the teachings of saints, many women have accepted the path shown by the saints of *Varkari Sampradaya* as an unwavering path to attain spiritual realization while simultaneously managing their household duties i.e. without renunciation of the worldly responsibilities. When we take into consideration what might be the reasons behind this, it is evident that the philosophy of *varkari sampradaya* encourages large-scale participation of women in the *Vari*. In fact, compared to other states in India, Maharashtra rank first in such movements and reforms advocating for women's rights and freedom at familial, social, and cultural levels. A significant portion of the credit goes to the philosophical and ethical values of *varkari* tradition.

The tradition of making sacred texts accessible to the masses, initiated by Saint *Dhyaneshwar* and later carried forward by Saint *Eknath*, was continued by saint *Bahinabai*. *Bhagavata Sampradaya* granted women the freedom to claim this right, which is a significant aspect of its inclusive nature.

Saint poetess *Muktabai* of 13th century

Muktabai, a revered mystic poetess and a prominent figure of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, was the younger sister of the 13th-century saint *Dnyaneshwar*, founder of bhakti movement and saint *Nivruttinath*. She made an eternal mark on the area's literary and spiritual landscape. She

¹⁰ 'आवा चालली पंढरपुरा, वेसीपासुनि आली घरा' (Abhang 4199) Neurgaonkar S. K. Shri Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath, Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskrutik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978

has contributed 41 *abhangas*. In *Marathi* language, "*Mukta*" means freedom, she represents freedom from rigid Brahmanical (upper class) traditions and societal constraints, encouraging a path of deep, personal devotion beyond conventional norms. Thus, Generations after generation continue to be inspired by *Muktabai's* life and poems or *abhangas*, which transcend beyond space and time. Saint mystic poetess Muktabai's teachings underlines the universality of devotion. She supposes that the path to God transcended all religious boundaries, and ceremonial rituals. Her *abhangas* praised the oneness of all living beings and the divine presence that exists within each soul. Her *abhangas* speaks to the divine through the lens of love and devotion. She employs rich metaphors and vivid imagery to portray the soul's deep longing for union with the divine. Her verses convey the joy and bliss that arise from this spiritual connection, touching the hearts of her listeners and awakening a deep sense of reverence and inner realization. She endured exclusion and discrimination, yet rose above it to become one of the most revered and enduring Bhakti saints in *Maharashtra*. Her writings reveal a profound compassion for the marginalized and oppressed. She used her *abhangas* to challenge social injustices and the rigid norms of her time. Her heartfelt *abhangas* showcases the ethical values; empathy, equality, and justice, offering hope and a voice to the common people. Her *abhangas* became a beacon of comfort and strength for those striving for freedom from societal limitations.

In the face of adversity and societal discrimination, she remained unwavering in her spiritual path. She endured opposition from conservative religious authorities who viewed her progressive ideas as a threat. Yet, her steadfast devotion and profound faith carried her forward, establishing as a symbol of courage and perseverance. Her messages of love, unity, and acceptance offer guidance in a world often divided by conflict and exclusion. Her *abhangas*, are kept at high pedestal due clarity and deep insight, continue to inspire people from all strata's. Thus, a timeless truth that surpasses religious and cultural barriers the divine essence that exists within every soul. They are not merely poems but vehicles

of divine communion, enabling individuals to connect with the eternal.

She authoritatively instructed saint *Dnyaneshwar* and pointed out the arrogance of Saint *Namdeva*. At the same time, she was aware of her own independent identity and did not hesitate to call herself a "free-spirited woman," without any sense of shame or inferiority. She writes,

*"I am the daughter of the True Guru, with devotion as my only kin.
Though a woman, I remain unattached.
I have cast away the sari of worldly life,
Along with its ornaments—nose ring and bangles."*¹¹

Saint poetess *Muktabai*, at the age of seventeen or eighteen became the spiritual guide or guru of *Hathayogi Vateshwar Changdev*, who was eighty-year-old. She was also the spiritual guide of *Visoba Kechar*, who later became guru of saint *Namdeva*. Saint *Muktabai* is known as 'Adishakti' or 'Adimaya'. *Muktabai's* verse, "An ant flew to the sky and swallowed the sun. Another wonders a barren woman had a son" reflects a powerful challenge to the prevailing norms. This spirit of bold resistance is what sets *Muktabai* and other women of the Bhakti movement different from the mainstream.

This highlights that women in the *varkari sampradaya* were granted not only the right to devotion but also the authority to guide others. They reject the gender discrimination as well as age-based hierarchies from its very inception time. Saint poetess *Muktabai* even contributed to lay the foundation of this Sampradaya; when saint *Dhyaneswar*, distressed by the social humiliation he faced, hesitated to step forward, it was saint *Muktabai* younger sister of saint *Dhyaneswar* who encouraged him by saying, "Open the doors!"¹² and de-

¹¹ 'मी सद्गुरुची लेक भाव एक। बाई मी निःसंग धांगडी फेकिली प्रपंच लुगणी। नाकी नखकडी॥' Gole Ravindra, 'Abhang Setu', Maharashtra Rajya sahitya ani Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai

¹² 'ताटी उघडा ज्ञानेश्वरा' https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette

fined sainthood in the process. She states that ‘A yogi is of pure heart and endures the insults of the people, you are a saint.’¹³ Thus, she advised that saints must remain calm like water, even when the world turns into a raging fire, stating:

*"The world has become fire;
Saints must remain cool like water."*¹⁴

Through such words, she established a guiding principle for saintly conduct. She thus, stands as a powerful symbol of the spiritual authority granted to women within the *varkari sampradaya*. Saint *Muktabai*'s spiritual authority was accepted not merely because she belonged to a so-called high caste, but she proved it with her abilities and potentials as we have discussed earlier. Government has released postal stamp figuring her.

Saint poetess Vithabai of 13th century

The inclusion of women from lower castes among the community of saints underscores how gender plays a role in shaping the identity of a sampradaya. One such woman was forced into marriage despite her lack of interest, leading to mistreatment by her in-laws and husband. During the 18th century, saint poetess *Vithabai* left her oppressive husband and found solace in Lord *Vitthala's devotion*. She fearlessly tells her husband:

*"Your authority extends only over my body,
You hold no power over my soul!"*¹⁵

A verse attributed to *Vithabai* vividly captures the experience of a young girl being coerced into sexual relations, likely with an older man: ‘My husband pulls me into a secluded place in order to enter into sexual relation. He brutally as-

¹³ ‘योगी पावन मनाचा, साही अपमान जनाचा’
https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette

¹⁴ ‘जग झाले वन्ही संती सुखे व्हावे पाणी’ https://abhangvani.com/sants/sant-miktabaai/sant-muktabaainche-abhang#google_vignette

¹⁵ ‘तुझी सत्ता आहे देहावारी समज, माझेवरी तुझी किंचित नाही’
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

saults me in the midst of the night when he drags me there.’ According to Tara Bhavalkar, such an unvarnished and truthful portrayal of a sexual encounter by an Indian woman is rare. She argues that the verse’s bluntness adds to its authenticity and reflects the suffering endured by these saint-poets. However, such references to sexual violence or domestic abuse might also serve to highlight the householder dimension of the *varkari* tradition. These narratives not only reveal the challenges faced on the spiritual journey by these saint poetesses being women but also affirm that still the path of spirituality remains attainable and meaningful.

Saint *Soyarabai* saint poetess of 14th century

Saint *Soyarabai*, the wife of *Dalit* (untouchable) saint *Chokhamela*, and saint *Nirmala*, sister of saint *Chokhamela* both belongs to the so-called untouchable community, voiced the injustices faced by their community through their *abhangas*. *Soyarabai*’s *abhangas* depict the bold and even radical tone. With the support of their families, both saint poetesses pursued spiritual liberation through devotion to Lord *Vitthala*. Though *Soyarabai* composed many verses, only sixty-two are known today. In her *abhangas*, she expresses her anguish and dissatisfaction with God for the suffering imposed on the untouchable community. She often referred to herself as "*Chokha*’s *Mahari*." Her poetry or *abhangas* consistently revolves around the hardships of the marginalized and their unwavering devotion to the divine. Themes of unity and the embracing of difference are powerfully articulated in her work as follows:

‘All the colours have merged to be one. God of colours himself is coloured in this colour.

The distinction between I and You have eliminated upon seeing the Lord of *Pandhari*

There is no place for discrimination. Anger and Lust too have disappeared.

Though you are embodied you are formless. I see you in constant state of meditation.

There remains no difference between the spectator and the gaze, says *Chokha's Mahari*.¹⁶

One of the most oppressive customs women endured was the taboo surrounding menstruation, which led to their exclusion and humiliation. Saint poetess *Soyarabai* was among the first voices to challenge this custom or practice. She courageously raised her voice and took a firm stance against menstrual taboos, making a powerful declaration in her verses, rejecting the notion that menstruation made women impure. She strongly condemned menstrual taboos, questioning the purity associated with bodily functions:

*"They call it bodily impurity,
Yet the soul remains pure and wise.
If bodily impurity is born with the body,
Then who remains truly pure?"*

She further challenges the notion of menstrual impurity by highlighting its biological necessity:

*"Without menstruation,
Nobody is ever created in this world."*¹⁷

This reflects a scientific understanding of human birth while questioning societal taboos she possesses being illiterate and untouchable. The pain of oppression experienced by

¹⁶ 'अवघा रंग एक झालारंगि रंगला श्रीरंग। मी तूण गेले वाया पाहता पंढरीच्या राया॥
नाही भेदाचे ते काम पळोनि गेले क्रोध काम। देही असोनि विदेही सदा समाधिस्त पाही॥
पाहते पाहणे गेले दुरी म्हणे चोखियाची महारी॥'
https://shabdyatri.com/literature/awagha-rang-ek-zala-meaning/#google_vignette

¹⁷ 'देहाचा विटाळ म्हणती सकळ। आत्मा तो निर्मळ शुद्ध बुद्ध॥ देहाचा विटाळ देहीच जन्मला। सोवळा तो झाला कवण धर्म॥ विटाळावाचून उत्पत्तीचे स्थान। कोण देह निर्माण नाही जगी॥'
https://www.santsahitya.in/soyarabai/dehasi-vital-mhanti-sakal/#google_vignette

marginalized women also depicted in her *abhangas*. Similar kind of expressions are found in the *abhangas* of saint poetess *Bhagu* from the *Mahar* caste (untouchable community), emerging through her compositions.

"In Your presence, O Lord, people torment me. Then what is the purpose of my life?"¹⁸

Though this complaint is directed towards God, it's written expression sheds light on the contemporary social reality. Female saint poetess has also documented their experiences regarding their husbands. *Namdev's* wife, *Rajai*, openly questions her husband, who has renounced worldly life and become immersed in devotion to Lord *Vitthala*, *"Having tied a loincloth, you have become a renunciate. But who will take care of our household?"¹⁹* She does not stop here, she further criticizes by saying: *"You have abandoned worldly reputation and bodily attachment."²⁰*

Saint poetess Kanhopatra of 15th century

The hymns (*abhangas*) of other saint-poetesses *Kanhopatra* promotes feminist ideals. Her compositions serve as a reminder and recognition of self-identity, autonomy, and self-determination. Her bold and defiant hymns emphasize that a woman is a mature individual in her own right. The composition of saint *Kanhopatra* depicts ideals throughout her hymns or *abhangas*. During 15th century, the courtesan *Kanhopatra*, was not accepted by mainstream society, but faced no such discrimination at the doorstep of the divine. Her *abhangas* frequently portrays her struggle between her

¹⁸ .‘तुज असता मज गांजिती जन। मग काय जिणे देवा तुझे?’
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

¹⁹ ...‘लावोनी लंगोडी झालेति गोसावी। आमची ठेवाठेवी कोण करी?’
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

²⁰ ‘सांडिला लौकिक देहभाव’
<https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

profession and her devotion to Lord *Vitthala*, the patron deity of the *varkari*'s. She portrays herself as a woman totally devoted to Lord *Vitthala*, earnestly urging Him to free her from the painful chains of her profession and from the bondage of *samsara*. She expresses the deep shame she endures and her exclusion from society due to her occupation and social status. She expresses disgust for the society which adored her as an object of beauty rather than as a human being, and abhorred her profession. She recounts how she has been subjected to the desires and gazes of others. In one of her *abhangas* she states that Lord *Vitthala* is saviour of the fallen²¹; thus, urges Him to save her as well. This depicts God answers to personal devotion rather than any ceremonial ritualistic practices:

*O Narayana, you call yourself
savior of the fallen...
My caste is impure
I lack loving faith
my nature and actions are vile.
Fallen Kanhopatra
offers herself to your feet,
a challenge
to your claims of mercy.*²²

Saint *Kanhopatra*'s *abhangas* reveal her deep sense of vulnerability along with a strong resolution to 'stay pure in the midst of turbulence'. She compares herself to food being de-

²¹ पतित तूं पावना। म्हणविसी नारायणा॥१॥ तरी सांभाळीं वचना।ब्रीद वागविसी जाणा॥२॥ याती शुद्ध नाही भाव। दुष्ट आचरण स्वभाव ॥३॥ मुखीं नाम नाही। कान्होपात्रा शरण पायी ॥४॥ <https://www.santsahitya.in/kanhopatra/patit-tu-pavana/>

²² दीन पतित अन्यायी। शरण आले विठाबाई॥१॥ मी तो आहे यातीहीन। न कळे काही आचरण॥२॥ मज अधिकार नाही।शरण आले विठाबाई ॥३॥ ठाव देई चरणापाशी।तुझी कान्होपात्रा दासी॥४॥<https://www.santsahitya.in/abhang-gatha/kanhopatra-abhang/> Mulchandani Sandhya, 'For the Love of God Women Poet Saints of the Bhakti Movement' Penguin Random House India Pvt.Ltd, July 20, 2019, ISBN: 9789353055813, 9789353055814.

voured by wild animals, a very powerful and emotional expression never used by any male saints, when challenged patriarchy. she firmly believed in the unconditional grace of Lord *vitthala*. Her devotion represents spiritual egalitarianism, resonating deeply with feminist thought seeking dignity, agency, and equality in a deeply patriarchal world through the path of bhakti.

*If you call yourself the Lord of the fallen,
why do O Lord not lift me up?
When I say I am yours alone,
who is to blame but yourself
if I am taken by another man?
When a jackal takes the share of the lion,
it is the great, who is put to shame?
Kanhopatra says, I offer my body at your feet,
protect it, at least for your title²³.*

She is the only female saint poetess mystic whose *samadhi* (mausoleum) lies within the precincts of the temple of *Pandharpur*. As per all versions of the legend, a *tarati* tree which symbolizes the transformation have originated at the burial on the site where saint *Kanhopatra* was laid to rest. This tree is revered by pilgrims in her memory. She is the only female *varkari* saint who has attained sainthood solely on her devotion, without the support of any guru, especially male *varkari* saint, or *parampara* (tradition or lineage). This is nothing but the indication of casting off the order of patriarchy and accepting the onus to change and recreate a new society where there are no labels or borders i.e the world of co-existence and co-operation for the growth and progress of society. She was the contemporary to saint *Namadeva* and saint *Chokhamela*. According to Deshpande, *Kanhopatra*'s poetry embodies the awakening of the marginalized and the emergence

²³ Ibid पतित पावन हमणविसी आधी। तरी का उपाधि भक्तांमार्गे ॥१॥ तुझे म्हणवितां दुर्जे अगसंग।उणेपणा सांग कोणाकडे ॥२॥ सिंहाचे भातुके जंबुक पे नेतां।थोराचिया माथां लाज वाटे ॥३॥ हमणे कान्होपात्रा देह समर्पण करवा।जतन ब्रिदासाठी॥४॥ <https://www.santsahitya.in/abhang-gatha/kanhopatra-abhang/>

of female artistic expression, inspired by the *varkari* tradition's emphasis on gender equality. In the realm of devotion, only love for God mattered, no social status or background could diminish a true devotee's worth. As saint *Tukaram* affirmed, '*In this very embodied body, with these very eyes, I shall witness the bliss of liberation.*'²⁴ This philosophy applies equally to all devotees, irrespective of their caste, gender, or social position.

Saint *Bahinabai* saint poetess of 17th century

Moving beyond devotional compositions, in the 16th century, Saint poetess *Bahinabai*, who regarded saint *Tukaram* (*Shudra*, lower caste) as her spiritual mentor or guru belonging to lower caste, faced intense suffering from her husband who belongs to upper caste; brahmin. She articulates her devotion through her *abhangas*:

*"The stone is Vitthal,
Tuka appears in my dreams,
Where is the distance between the two?"*²⁵

Saint mystic *Bahinabai*, who once lamented that a woman's body was a burden, later found the strength to embrace it:

*"I have shed my shame,
Now I am fearless!"*²⁶

²⁴ 'याचि देही याचि डोळा भोगीन मुक्तीचा सोहळा' Neurgaonkar S. K., Shri Tukaram Maharajanchi Sartha Gath, Pracharya Dandekar dharmik va sanskritik vagmaya prakashan mandal, Pune-3, 1978

²⁵ '...पाषाण विठ्ठल स्वप्नातील तुका। प्रत्यक्ष का सुखा अंतरावेहोई उदंड सेवा सुख देही। साक्ष या विदेही आहे मज...' <https://bookstruck.app/book/157/9792>

²⁶ 'स्त्रीचे शरीर, पराधीन देह न चाल उपाव, विरक्तिचा' <https://marathi.indiatimes.com/-/articleshow/14514767.cms>

Such words highlight the empowerment these women gained or found in the cultural tradition of *varkari sampradaya*. Saint *Bahinabai* translated ‘*Ashvaghosha’s Vajrasuchi*’ into *Marathi*, a powerful critique of caste discrimination accessible to the common people. She proclaimed that, ‘*Bahinabai* is hoisting the flag of triumph,’ affirming her authority to interpret and speak on spiritual matters, despite being a woman. This reflects the strong self-assurance she had gained from the Bhakti tradition, which was originally established by Saint *Dnyaneshwar*.

The *vari* (annual pilgrimage to *Pandharpur*) offers women a sense of liberation beyond its spiritual and philosophical meaning. For an ordinary woman, *vari* serves a rare opportunity for freedom. It provides an escape from daily chore but more than that a chance to share joys and sorrows, and the freedom to dance, sing, and embrace everything without fear. In a world where women often endure predatory gazes, the *vari* or *varkari sampradaya* offers safety to her, revered as ‘*Mauli*’ a mother figure. More than just a religious journey, the *vari* allows woman to rediscover herself. Women belonging to this *sampradaya* resonate deeply with saintly figures, saint mystics *Janabai*, *Bahinabai*, *Muktabai*. *Soyarabai Vithabai* and other female saint poetesses who represent the everyday struggles of daily chores, societal customs they pass through. These saint poetesses used devotion as a medium of self-expression, turning to spirituality to assert their voices. This inner transformation came from the *varkari’s* ethical, spiritual, and humanistic values rooted in their tradition.

Conclusion

Female saints of the *varkari* tradition produced *abhangas* that deeply align with modern feminist thought, they were proto-feminist. During the *Bhakti* movement, the concepts of feminism or women’s empowerment were not explicitly articulated but their *abhangas* are loaded with immense devotion, compassion, and spiritual strength that requires for emancipation and empowerment of women. Their poetry or *ab-*

hangas challenged traditions, questioned societal norms, and redefined relationships, faith, and personal identity, breaking themselves free from the constraints of caste, class, gender, occupation, and social stigmas. Their *abhangas* reflect common notions of domestic struggles, societal oppression, existential crises, discrimination, and the balance between household chores and spiritual pursuits. Their compositions serve as guiding lights even today for contemporary women. Such rebelliousness requires immense resilience, clarity of thought, and inner strength which is seen in the *abhangas* of these saint poetesses. The voice raised by these female saints of *varkari sampradaya* was not just personal but represented the collective struggles of their social groups. Their *abhangas* were both spiritual and deeply rooted in their feminine identity. Their voices resonate even today, encouraging women to fight for their rights and not flight. Each of these mystic saint-poetesses carved a unique path to ultimate truth.

In the *vari* processions, women walk alongside men as equals, without fear of discrimination; this shows that the *varkari* tradition has preserved this spirit of equality with deep reverence. Women were never denied a place or top position in the *varkari* sect; in fact, their bond with Lord *Vitthala* was deeply personal, as they communicated with Him freely. They openly expressed and addressed their burdens and pain before Lord *Vitthala*, creating vivid poetic imagery of their struggles. The compositions of female saint poetess reflect their life experiences, emotions, and aspirations. Thus, *varkari sampradaya* grants women the freedom of self-expression, which has been instrumental in the upliftment of women. Unlike the societal norms of discrimination, *varkari's* uphold the principle that "another's wife should be revered as *Rukhmini Mata* (*Vitthal's* consort as *Rukhmini* Mother)," ensuring women's safety and dignity. Scholars like *R.C. Dhere*, *Anne Feldhaus*, *Eleanor Zelliot*, *Susie J. Tharu* acknowledge that *varkari* movement played a significant role in women's liberation, defying patriarchal norms and establishing egalitarian society.

The philosophy reflected in the *abhangas* of *varkari* saint poetess is the store house of human values and ethics. Learn-

ing of this philosophy will help to establish peace and harmony with egalitarian principles. The *abhangas* of the *varkari* saints resonate with Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, where love is understood as a commitment of the self (the "I") towards another (the "you"). In this view, true love cannot exist without recognizing the equality of all who love. One needs the presence of "Thou" to fully become "I." A person becomes truly complete not just through self-reflection, but through genuine connections with others, connections that include the entire community, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. A person's completeness is derived from his or her authentic relations with others, inclusive of the community at large, rather than from their relationships with themselves irrespective of caste, gender and religion. Among the *varkari* tradition they have community feeling where each one related by trust, faith, oneness and eternal love despite of differences. This is 'we feeling' and not 'I feeling'. It's a sect marked by acceptance and inclusion of everyone, regardless of caste, gender, or religion. Philosophy of *varkari* strongly emphasis the ontological value where humans are valued because they are humans and not because of their status or position in their life, they believe that once ontological value is lost there is loss of sense of humanitarianism in life. So, it is necessary to be preserve it. They participate with each other when they come together for singing the *abhangas*, *kirtan* and *dindi* (group of devotees collectively participate in annual pilgrimage to *vari*) or *palkhi* (papanquin which carries sacred foot prints of saints both male and female) on the way of *vari* (pilgrimage to *Pandharpur*) during *Ashadhi devashayani* and *Kartiki prabodhini Ekadashi* (Eleventh lunar day of bright fortnight) which are the major ones. They also prostrate to each other irrespective of age, caste, gender, and religion²⁷. The ideal person, according to the *varkari* saints, is one whose heart is filled with divine love upon encountering any living or non-living being the world. One of the *abhang* of

²⁷ 'एक एका लागतील पायी रे वर्ण अभिमान विसरली याति॥ एक एक लोटंगणी जातीनिर्मळ चिते जाली नवनिते॥...' Rahirkar Gopal Sankar 'Sakal Sant Gathā,' *Abhang* 1335, 3 rd edition, 1887, Jnāneśvari Press Pune.

saint *Dnyaeshwar* depicts this oneness, ‘जे जे भटे भूत । ते ते मानिजे भगवंत । हा भक्तियोगु निश्चित । जाण माझा ॥ ११८ ॥’²⁸ and ‘विश्वात्मके देवे’²⁹, which states that whole world is one family without any discrimination.³⁰

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²⁸ Dandekar S.V., ‘*Jnandeva: Jnaneshwari*’, Ed. published by Swanand, 1953, Pune

²⁹ Ibid ‘Universal God’ Chpt. 18 of *Jnaneshwari*, Pasayadana

³⁰ ‘*Vasudeva Kutumbakam*’

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