



Sant Tukaram

[Sant Tukaram](#) was born **Tukaram Bolhoba Ambile** was born in the years around 1608 and lived most of his life in Dehu, a town close to Pune in Mahārāshtra, India. Kumar, Munshi, Kincaid and Parasanisa, consider him to be of the Kunbi Maratha or agricultural tillage caste or vaani. He wrote poems of fierce social criticism.

One of his Abhangs has the beginning: “**Good you made me a Kunbi, Otherwise I might have died an arrogant hypocrite**”, and is an attack on Brahmin hypocrisy.

An emerging Dalit critique argues that Vithoba was seen as a Bodhisattva and **Sant Tukaram** saw him as one. **Sant Tukaram** has explored the traditions of meditation although this is not a Varkari (Vithoba-worshipping) tradition. His life and writings are intensely debated. (Buddhism in India, Challenging Brahmanism and Caste, Gail Omvedt, 2003)

Sant Tukaram (तुकाराम) (c.1608 – c.1650), also Shri Tukaram, and colloquially referred to as “Tuka (तुका), was a seventeenth century Marathi poet Sant of India, related to the Bhakti movement of Maharashtra.

Tukaram was a devotee of Vitthal (a form of Lord Krishna), the supreme God in Vaishnavism. He is especially revered by the Varkari community. **Tukaram’s poetry** is widely recognized as the climactic point of the Bhagawat tradition which began with Namdev.

Born the son of a **family and traders**, **Tukaram** was innocent of worldly ways, and was often cheated and humiliated in dealings with the public. His dramatic misadventures as an unworldly man are a favorite topic for story tellers. After being visited in a dream by Namdev, and Lord Vitthal himself, **Tukaram began to write abhangas (religious poetry)**.

His religious activities antagonized the Brahmin, who persecuted him. The Mantra Gita, a translation of the Bhagavad Gita in the abhanga form, interpreting the Gita from a Bhakti perspective, is ascribed to Tukaram, as well as over 4,600 abhangas (religious poems). **Tukaram emphasized a life of devotion to God and loving service to mankind over the performance of religious rites and ceremonies.**

His Life

Most of the information on the saints of Maharashtra comes from the biographies written by Mahipati in the 1700s, called Bhaktivijaya and Bhaktivilamrit. Scholars assign various dates to **Tukaram’s birth**; the most frequently assigned dates are 1568, 1577, 1608 and 1598 C.E. There is less debate over the date of his death, 1650 C.E.

Tuka, or **Tukaram, was born in Dehu**, very close to modern Pune city in Maharashtra. His father, barely literate, was a small trader or peddler. His family were successful grain sellers and farmers of the Maratha community, pious and charitable by nature, who worshipped the family deity Vithoba of Pandarpur. **Tukaram was married at the age of fifteen**, but lost his wife Rakhumabai and a son to starvation in the famine of 1629.

His second wife, Jijabai (also called Avali), was a capable but worldly woman who could not understand or appreciate her husband’s spiritual aspirations, and took to nagging. **Tukaram fathered six children**, including three sons, named Santu or Mahadev, Vithoba and Narayana. After the death of his first wife and son in the famine, **Tukaram lost interest in the life of a householder**. Though he did not quite forsake his family, he was unable to maintain his second wife and his children, and was ultimately reduced to penury and bankruptcy, besides being stripped by the village of his position as mahajan.

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After his father died, **Tukaram** is said to have destroyed the records of loans he had made to the poor, and waived the debts. Tukaram was innocent of worldly ways, and was often cheated and humiliated in dealings with the public. His dramatic misadventures as an unworldly man are a favorite topic for Keertankars (reciters and story tellers in praise of God).

Tukaram spent much of his time in contemplation and study of the works of Jnaneswar, Namdev and Eknath, famous saints of his native land. He received spiritual guidance from a guru, Raghava Chaitanya, in a dream. On another occasion, it is said that he was visited in a dream by Namdev, and Lord Vitthal himself, and was informed that it was his mission to compose abhangs (religious poems). After a period of contemplation in isolation and severe austerity, he began to write poems, inspired by his devotion for Lord Vithoba (Vitthal), the family deity.

In **composing abhangs, Tukaram** incurred the wrath of the Brahmins, who believed themselves to be the only true custodians and interpreters of religion. Not only did he dare to impinge upon this prerogative, but he wrote in Marathi rather than Sanskrit. According to legend, the local Brahmins compelled him to throw the manuscripts of his poems into the river Indrayani, and taunted him with the observation that if he were a true devotee of God, the manuscripts would reappear.

It is said that Tukaram then commenced a fast-unto-death, invoking the name of God; after thirteen days of his fast, the **manuscripts of Tukaram's poems** reappeared, floating on the river. Some of his detractors became his followers; and over the remainder of his life, Tukaram acquired a reputation as a saint.

Final Days

In the forty-eighth year of his life, in 1649, **Tukaram disappeared.** There is disagreement about Tukaram's final day. Some say that he informed his wife early in the day that he was going to Vaikuntha (the Divine Abode), and his wife laughed at him. He went up the hillock and waited for Vithoba. By that time, news had spread around Dehu and people had gathered around the hillock, waiting for the Divine event.

From eyewitness accounts, a large vehicle appeared from the skies and Vithoba emerged. Eyewitnesses rushed to Tukaram's home and informed his wife that Tukaram was on his way to Vaikuntha, the Abode of God. His wife ran toward the hills, only to see him take off in the Viman (flying vehicle). Modern devotees still gather at the hillock and sing his praises. However, Starr offers the suggestion that he was probably murdered because of his successful reformist activity, which had agitated the Brahmins, and that his followers hid the body and spread the rumor that he had gone to heaven in a heavenly chariot. **Tukaram's son Narayana was a great bhakta like his father.**

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Works

Though **Tukaram** was not a great scholar like Jnanadev, Ekanath, or Vaman, and his formal education had not gone beyond reading and writing, once he turned to a spiritual life, he educated himself by reading several Marathi works on Puranas and philosophy, having a number of Sanskrit books explained to him, and by attending performances of kirtan and readings of Puranas. The Jnaneshwari and the Bhagwat of Ekanath formed the solid basis of his poetry. The depth of his knowledge of the world and of human nature is evident from the hundreds of topics dealt with in his abhangs, which provide a vivid picture of the state of society, religion and the nation at that time.

Tukaram wrote in a special verse form called abhanga, a run-on couplet of three and a half feet, with the first three rhyming. He was unrivaled in the use of this poetic device, and others have practically left it alone after him in a tacit acknowledgment that nothing more can be done with it.

As was the tradition, he also added his signature, [Tuka Mhane](#) (तुका म्हणे) or “Tuka Says,” at the end of each verse. Besides the Abhangs, Tukaram wrote a quantity of other verse in a variety of forms, such as shlok, arati and gaulani. He also wrote some verse in Hindi. The present form of the language of **Tukaram’s poetry** does not appear to be the original one. Several **abhangs written in Tukaram’s own hand** differ considerably from the abhangs printed in the traditional collection, but are the same as those found in the manuscripts written by **Tukaram’s cymbal-player, Santaji Teli Jagnade**, indicating that Tukaram himself wrote in his rustic fashion, and later Rameshwar Bhatt or some other disciple must have given it the form that is found in the traditional collection.

Words are the only Jewels I possess

Words are the only Clothes that I wear

Words are the only food That sustains my life

Words are the only wealth I distribute among people

Says Tuka Witness the Word He is God

I worship Him With my words

The Mantra Gita, a translation of the Bhagavad Gita in the abhanga form, is ascribed to Tukaram. It is an interpretation of the Gita from a Bhakti perspective. Another work ascribed to him is the Ghata (Traditional Collection), a compilation of 4,500 abhangas, but it is believed that Tukaram composed many more during his lifetime. A number of abhangs known to have been composed by him were not published in “Traditional Collection,” and the authorship of some of those in the collection is attributed to Tukaram’s brother Kanhoba.

[Tukaram’s poetry](#) has remained popular until this day. No other Marathi poet, medieval or modern, has been so universally appreciated. Several of his lines have become household sayings. **The British Government in India gave Tukaram the unique honor of officially publishing the first authoritative collection of 4,607 of his abhangs works in 1873. Since the Government compilation, more than twenty-five editions of Tukaram’s abhangs have been published.**

Though Tukaram has been credited with being the single most influential figure in the history of Marathi literature, the body of scholarship on Tukaram outside Marathi is rather small. The only nearly complete translation of Tukaram into English, entitled The Collected Tukaram, was attempted by J. Nelson Fraser and K. B. Marathe, and published in Madras by the Christian Literature Society (1909-1915).