

Abhang – the Immortal Composition

- K. Vrinda Acharya

“VEDAnAM SAMavEdOsmi” – declared Lord Krishna in the Bhagawadgita. The Vishnusahasranama extols the Lord with the attribute “SAMagAyanaH”. The Indian philosophical thought has always considered the path of devotion, often referred to as Bhakti Yoga, as a means to Moksha. Innumerable saints, composers, mystics and poets have sung the glory of the Lord and have thus enriched the musical corpus of India with their devotion filled outpourings. Particularly, the Bhakti movement was a historical-spiritual phenomenon that crystallised across the whole of India about 700 years ago. It was spearheaded by enlightened saint composers who exalted devotion and love to God as the chief means of spiritual perfection and gave rise to the Nama Sankeertana Sampradaya.

The Nayanars, Azhwars, Veerashaivas, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhwa among others nurtured the incipient bhakti movement, which later reached its pinnacle during the 14-16th centuries. If it was Purandara, Kanaka and other Haridasas in Karnataka, it was Tukaram, Namdev, Gnyaneshwar in Maharashtra. If it was Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal, it was Kabir, Meera, Tulsidas, Surdas in northern India.

Abhangs are a sublime form of Indian Music whose origin can be traced to the spiritual ideologies of the bhakti saints of Maharashtra. Essentially these compositions are bhajans in Marathi sung in praise of Lord Vitthala (also known as Vitthoba) of Pandhrapur. They are characterised by simple appealing tunes and meaningful words. The meaning of the word Abhang can be derived from its root “A-bhang”(that which has no bhanga or hindrance). Abhang literally translates into “that which does not stop”. There is no stoppage between the verses or the main line and the verse; an abhang does not pause until it actually ends. Abhang also means “compositions that would never be wiped off the face of the earth.” It is eternal, ever new and always full of life.



**Lord Vitthala of
Pandharpur**

Rendering of Abhangs attaches a great importance to the words, their diction, chorus singing of the Dhruv Pad (normally the second line of the Abhang) and most

importantly the Bhava aspect. The talam-beat is also specific with a Tod finale (Thirmanam).

The quintessence of Abhangs was predominantly Bhakti. They sought to lay emphasis on devotion and love towards God, in contrast to blind adherence to rituals and arcane religious practices. Besides this, individual sacrifice, non-violence, compassion, peaceful co-existence, service to humanity were the values they underlined. They preached people to cast aside the heavy burdens of caste and the subtle complexities of philosophy and simply express their overwhelming love for God. To enable even the unlettered masses to attain the highest state of devotional bliss, they are composed in simple language. Yet, they are ecstatic, lyrical and moving.

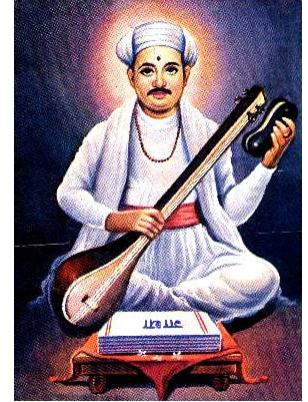
Sant Tukaram says that the greatest privilege for man is to be a bhakta and propagate Namajapa. His ardent devotion towards Lord Vitthala is evident in all his abhangs. He says “sadA mhAjhE DOLe jaDO tujhi mUrti, rakumAyIchya pati sOyariyA” meaning “O Lord Rakhumayi, I pray to you that your divine form is forever before me”. In another popular abhang,

“ghEyi ghEyi vAchE gODa nAma viThObAche
tumhigyArE DOLe sukha pahA viThAlAche mukha
tumhi AyIkAre kAn mAjhya viThObAche guNa
manA tethe dhAv ghEyi rAhe viThObAche pAy
tuka mhaNe jIvA nakO sODU yA keshavA”,

Tukaram pleads with his senses-“I always take the sweet name of Vitthoba; O eyes, comfort yourself by viewing the divine face of Vitthala; O ears, satiate yourself to the praise of my Vitthoba; O mind, do not wander here and there, surrender yourself to the feet of Vitthoba; Tuka says O soul, do not leave Keshava” This couplet is a manifestation of the epitome of Bhakti that is the essence of Abhangs.

One of the most essential qualities of a true Bhaktha is to completely surrender himself to the Lord’s feet. We come across such an elevated Bhava in an abhang by Sant Namdev, who was known to have seen the appearance of Lord Vitthala in his original form. He says

“MAjhe manOratha pUrNa kari dEvA
kEshavA mAdhavA nArAyaNA-
nAhee nAhee maja ANika sOyarA



Tukaram

na kari ou hErA pAMDuraMgA
anAthAnyA nAtha hOshitO dayALa
kitee vELO vELA prArtho AtA
nAma mhaNi jeeva hOtO kasA veesa
kalee tujhi Asa atAvaree”

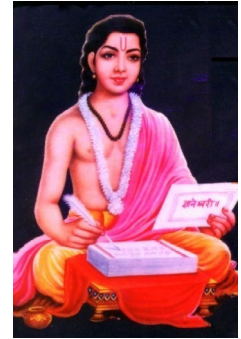
“O Lord, please fulfill my desires, Keshava, Madhava, Narayana, I have no other soul mate. Do not reject me Panduranga. Guardian of all, be kind to me, how many times should I pray to your nama says soul is so restless, I have been longing for you till now.” Namdev exemplifies the bhakti saint, a solitary soul in search for God. His collection of Abhangs called the “NamdEvAchi Gatha” includes the long autobiographical poem “TirathAvah”.



Namdev

The Abhangs of Sant Dhyaneswar (also known as Gnyanadeva) are a combination of scholarly intelligence and poetic beauty. His commentary “BhavArthadIpika” explains as abstruse a subject like the Bhagawadgita in lucid words. The following Abhang glorifies his teachings.

“ruNu jhuNu ruNu jhuNurE bhramara
sAMDeetO avaguNu rE bhramara
charaNa kamaLadaLu rE bhramara
bhOgee tU nishwaLu rE bhramara
sumana sugaMdhu rE bhOvara
parimaLa vidgadu rE bhOvara
soubhAgya suMdaru rE bhramara
bhApa rakhumA dEvivaru rE bhramara”



Dhyaneswar

Here, Sant Dhyaneswar compares the mind to a bee, which keeps flying making a buzzing sound until it reaches its final destination, the flowerbed with nectar. Similarly, the mind with its two wings (Ahamkara and Mamakara) flies around the world making sounds (grieving, complaining, etc). Until it reaches the final destination viz. the Lord’s lotus-feet (flower bed) to enjoy eternal bliss (nectar). In order to train the mind to meditate on the Lord’s feet, one has to resort to Nama Smarana.

Abhangs also disseminated many lofty moral values and philosophical ideologies among the masses. For instance, in a Tukaram Abhang “NAhi santpAn milat hAti....”, he says “Saintliness is not to be purchased in shops nor is it to be had from wandering about nor in cupboards nor in deserts nor in forests. It is not obtainable

for a heap of riches. It is neither in the heavens above nor in the entrails of the earth below. Tuka says: It is a life's bargain and if you will not give your life to possess it better be silent". Morality shines in all its glory in another Tukaram Abhang "PAPaChi vAsana nako davU DOla....", which means "O God, let me not be the witness to sin, better make me blind; let me not hear ill of anyone, better make me deaf; let not a sinful word escape my lips, better make me dumb; let me not lust after another's wife, better I disappear from this earth. Tuka says: I am tired of everything worldly, Thee alone I like, O Gopal!".

Our scriptures have always upheld the importance and worth of a Guru in the spiritual quest of a Sadhaka. There are ample of Abhangs which proclaim the glory of Sadguru. In one of her Abhangs, Mukthabai(sister of Dhyaneshwar) affirms that there is no point in calling oneself a bhakta without Gurukrupa and nothing is possible without the guidance and blessings of a Sadguru. The abhang goes like this.

"zaAsi hari bhakta, tari Amha kAy
Atali ti sOyi, na thauki
guruvin tuj, nAvEchi ga MokSha
hOshil mumukShu sAdhak tu
santAncha sanmAn kalEna tayAsi
rAhuni dEva pasi kay KEIE
mhAnE muktAbAi, pUre te darshan
guruvin sant pAn Ahe kOthe"

Sant Eknath, Swami Samarth Ramdas, Sant Chokha Mela, Janabai, Kanhopatra, Sant Sawta Mali, Sant Narahari Sonar and Sant Gora Kumbar are some of the other luminaries who have adorned the bhakti firmament of Maharashtra and have given birth to the "Vaarkari Sampradaya".

Abhang is truly an art form that propagates devotion and high ideals through beautiful poetry. It is indeed an integral part of Indian music, literature and philosophy.