



## **The Contribution Of Indian Saints In Social Reformation: A Study**

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### **Introduction**

“Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting but by the awakening of the thought and the progress of the ideas.”

Henry George

It is very well said that social reform can be secured by making noise, conducting processions, showing angst, provoking people, revolting against the system, killing people etc. Social reform is the process of a gradual awakening to be articulated by affecting the thought process of the masses for the good. It is the journey from worse towards better. It is channelizing the forte and enthusiasm of the youth in a proper channel. It is the eradication of the prevalent bad norms in the society by changing the mindset of the masses. It directs towards propagating the maxims of equality, liberty and fraternity through constitutional methods.

Since pre-Independence, many freedom fighters, leaders, social workers and people have been striving hard not only for the freedom of the nation, but also for annihilating the old, orthodox social traditions which are considered to be evil for the country. Another army which had join hands in this process of social reformation is the saints of Bhakti movement. Who through their gospel, teaching, motivating speeches tried hard to uplift the drooping Indian social scenario to a better and higher pedestal.

### **Aims and Objective**

The main purpose of writing this research paper is to do an analytical study of the contribution of religious saints in the process of social reformation in the Indian context. In this paper an attempt has been made to study contribution of saints like Kabir, Sant Rohidas, Sant Tukaram, Sant Chokhamela and Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj.

### **Sant Kabir Das (1440-1518)**

Kabir was a poet, saint and thinker of the fifteenth century. He belong to the family of Julaha, the untouchable caste. His writings influenced Bhakti movement. His early life was in a muslim family, but he was strongly influenced by his teacher, Ramanand, a bhakti leader.

The brahminical counter-revolution started to save Hinduism from Islam. Adi Shankaracharya started 'Advaitvaad' in 11<sup>th</sup> century, a form of Vaishnav bhakti. They started converting dalits into vaishanism. For Kabir there were two power centers in society- the Mullah and Pandit. Kabir could see that how they are exploiting the masses. How the feudal lords, money lenders and traders had turned the life of common man into hell. Mullah and pundits were not only the ruling material force but also the intellectual force of society.

Kabir held dialogues with both the people, but of no use. So he turned to the principle of 'Neither hindu, nor muslim' and negating both the religion provided a revolutionary leadership to the people. He criticized both Hinduism and Islam. He developed his own aesthetics. He says,

‘अल्लाह राम का गम नहीं, ताहम घर किया कबीर’

Kabir then came up with the revolutionary concept of 'Nirgun', (attribute less). That militated in the belief in the Varna system and in the other world. He realized that no revolution is possible without abandoning both Pandit and Mullah.

Kabir's theology rejects the concept of heaven and hell, of rebirth of salvation, incarnation and puja, pilgrimage and fasting and no faith in any scripture. Kabir's emphasis was on love which can

only convert poison inside a person into the nectar of life. There was a thought of behaviorism and social revolt in his poems.

‘कभी न देखा भाव भजन में, न देखा कभी पोथी में,  
कहत कबीरा सुनो भई साधो, जो देखा सो रोटी में,  
भूखे भजन न होइ गोपाला, लेले अपनी कंठी माला’ |

Such open bare words influenced many stalwarts. He further says,

‘बड़ा हुआ तो क्या हुआ, जैसा पेड़ खजूर,  
पंछी को तो छाया नहीं, फल लगे अति दूर’ |

He felt the pain of a common man,

‘सुखिया सब संसार है, खाए और सोये,  
दुखिया दस कबीर है, रोये और गाये’ |

There was a great philosophy of life in kabir’s poems. He says,

‘माटी कहे कुंभार से , तू क्या रोंदे मोहे,  
इक दिन ऐसा आएगा, मैं रोंदुंगी तोहे’ |

Kabir was a great poet. He was not the idol worshipper but Nirgunwadi. Dr. Ambedkar kept him on the equal pedestal with Buddha and Mahatma Phule.

#### **Sant Rohidas (1450-1520)**

Shri Guru Rohidas(Ravidas) was a north Indian saint of the Bhakti Movement in 15<sup>th</sup> century in the region of U.P. and Maharashtra. He was born in Varanasi. He was given honorific ‘Bhagat’. He was a founder of Ravidas religion. He was a suave socio-religious reformer, a thinker, a theosophist, a humanist, a poet and a pacifist. He was a man of formidable intellect; he preached ‘inclusive co-existence’ based on casteless and casteless society.

He was a shoemaker of the caste, Kutbandhlla . He had written 41 verses, 240 hymns and Amritvani. His devotional songs were included in the sikh holy book, ‘The Adigranth’, by fifth guru, Arjan Dev.

Rohidas taught that one is distinguished not by one’s caste (Jati), but by one’s action (karma). Every person has a right to worship god and read holy book. He opened a frontal attack against the system of untouchability.

He rejected the tradition of Brahmin mediator to reach the Supreme Being. He won over admirers from all strata of the society. He was not irreverent to those who did not follow him.

It was his spirit of forgiveness and depth of philosophy, which endeared him to the people. He says,

तोही, मोही, मोही, तोही, अंतर कैसका,  
कनक काटी , जलतरंग जैसा |

He emerged as a formidable challenge to brahminical hegemony and spoke for the rights of the downtrodden. He openly denounced all the Holy Scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Smritis. He says,

चारो वेद किया खंदोती, जन रविदास करे दंदोती |

He was country’s one of the foremost socio-religious revolutionary who attacked inequalities and preached equality. He invented Gurumukhi language and urged people to educate themselves. He says,

अविद्या अहित कीन, ताते विवेक दीप भव मलीन |

About the perfect society he says,



ऐसा चाहू राज मैं, जहाँ मिले सबन को आन,  
छोटे बड़े सम बसे, रविदास रहे प्रसन्न |

He overcome the hierarchical barriers of brahminical social order and established “Begumpura”-a state without fear and sorrow. The great saint Meerabai became his disciple. The conservative Brahmin could not stand the popularity of ‘Untouchable saint’ and complaint in the king’s court. Disturbed by the growing fame of Rohidas, the high caste people bribed him with the stone ‘Paras’ to lure him. Later they came to see whether he took that stone. But to their surprise, he did not touch that stone and was engrossed in his work of shoemaking.

Once, disciples of Rohidas urged him to take a dip in the holy river. Rohidas refused to do so by saying that he had to complete his orders of shoes. Rohidas believed in the enlightenment of soul. So he urged his people to take education. Then only they can be aware of their real condition. Rohidas created an ideal state of ‘Begumpura’- a land without sorrow, negating all discrimination. This theory was followed by Karl Marx. Emerged as a formidable challenge to brahminical hegemony and spoke for the rights of downtrodden.

#### **Sant Tukaram (1608-1649)**

Sant Tukaram was a 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and saint. Born in poor family and victim of Hindu caste system, despite all the odds of those days, he shattered the Brahmin myth and iron wall and became a saint. He was a part of egalitarian, personalized Varkari devotionalism tradition. During his 41 years, Tukaram composed over 5000 Abhangas which are focused on god, Vitthal, Pandurang. These abhangas became popular among masses of common people. His popularity caused brahmins to hate him, as they were losing their power over the masses.

Tukaram’s teacher was Baba Chaitanya. Tukaram in his Abhangas referred Namdev, Dnyaneshwer, Kabir and Eknath. He denounced mechanical rites, rituals, sacrifices, vows and instead encouraged direct form of Bhakti . He encouraged kirtans. He accepted devotees and disciples without discriminating gender. He said,

‘Pride of caste never made any man holy’.

Tukaram’s efforts at social reforms, with in Varkari Sampradaya must be viewed in this historical context and as part of overall movement. He wrote poems of fierce social criticism. His religious activities antagonized the Brahmins, who persecuted him. He wrote,

‘He is not a Brahmin who abhors the touch of a mahar. What retribution can he pay?

He won’t throw his life away! A chandal drives him wild, it’s his heart, that’s defiled.

His caste defined by what fills his mind’.

He was innocent of worldly ways and was often cheated and humiliated in dealing with the public. According to a legend, the local Brahmin compelled him to throw the manuscripts of his poems into the river, Indrayani., and taunted him with the observation that he were a true devotee of god, the manuscript would reappear. Tukaram commenced a fast unto death, invoking the name of god. After thirteen days the manuscripts of his poems reappeared floating on the river.

In 1649, Tukaram disappeared mysteriously. According to a legend, to get rid of his nagging wife, he went to heavenly abode in a Pushpak Vimaan.

#### **Sant Chokhamela**

Sant Chokhamela was a saint of Maharashtra of 14<sup>th</sup> Century. He belonged to the Mahar caste. He was born in Mehuna Raja in Deulgaon Raja District in Buldhana. He wrote many Abhangas. He was one of the first dalit poet in India. He lives with his wife Soyarabai and son Karmamela in Mangalvedha. His work was to guard and work in farms of upper caste people. As a lower caste person, he was forced to live outside the town in a separate settlement for members of the untouchable caste.



Chokhamela's family followed Varkari sect. He was initiated into Bhakti spirituality by the poet saint Namdev. When he visited Pandharpur and listened to saint Namdev, he was moved by his teachings. When he moved to Pandharpur, he was denied neither entry into the temple nor to stand at the doors of the temple. So he built a hut by the side of Chandrabhaga river.

While working on the construction of a wall in Mangalvedha, the wall fell down, crushing some workers, including Chokhamela. His tomb is in front of Vitthal temple. According to a legend, his bones are still chanting Vitthal.

Chokhamela's work largely observes and questions his place in society. His relationships with god is seen through the lens of an 'untouchable', many of his compositions describe his plight of sitting at the threshold of the temple, forbidden to cross it.

Chokhamela's poem, "**Oos donga par**" is often taught to school children in Maharashtra.

"The sugarcane is crooked. But not its justice.

The bow is curved, not the arrow.

The river is bent, but not its water.

Chokha is twisted, not his faith.

Why are you drawn to the shape of the king?"

Sant Chokhamela prays to the God. He says;

"They thrash me Vithu, now don't walk so slow.

The Pandit's whip, some crime,

Don't know what: How did Vithoba's necklace come around your throat,

They curse and strike and say I polluted you.

Do not send the cur at your door away, giver of everything.

You, Chakrapani, yours is the deed.

With folded hands Chokha begs, I revealed out secret, don't run away."

Chokhamela's Abhangas have a dalit literary perspective which is never found in literary works of brahminical narrative. His poem, "**On the Threshold**" and one hundred poems are translated from Marathi to other languages.

In the Abhanga, 284, Chokhamela writes;

"He pulled a wall for Dnyaneshwar, made Chandev famous,

Weeded the bed for Savda, the gardener and fired pots for Gora.

He loves more than ownself the goldsmith,

The cobbler and Namdev the tailor, he grinds the grain at Jani's home,

Sweeps the dirt and brings the cowdung in."

Says Chokha, he is so tender, his devotees know him as a fond mother.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar attempted to visit the temple, but he was also denied entry into the temple. Later being influenced by Sant Chokhamela, Dr. Ambedkar dedicated his book, '**The untouchables, who were they and why they became Untouchables**' to the memory of Chokhamela. **Rashtasant Tukdoji Maharaj(1909-1968)**

Tukdoji Maharaj was a spiritual saint of Maharashtra. He was born in Yawali, Amravati. He was also a social reformer and involved in construction of roads and other developments in rural regions. He also performed rigorous penance for self-realization. He was also a great orator and musician. He had composed more than 3000 bhajans in hindi and Marathi, 2000 Abhangas, 5000 Ovis. He has also written many articles on Dharma, society, nation and education.

With the help of his Dafli and Khanjiri, Tukdoji used to sing song to revolt against British rulers. He says,

'माझ्या प्रिय भारताला का हो धरला अबोला?

स्फूर्ती या तरुणांशी ऐसी! उद्धरू मायभू कैसी!



जातो धर्म लयाला!!'

For the reconstruction of the rural India ,Tukdoji says,  
'खरे नाम निष्काम ही ग्रामसेवा!

झट्ट सर्व भावे करू स्वर्ग गाव!'

In 1941, Tukdoji Maharaj took part in satyagrah and 'Quit India Movement'. He opposed inhuman repressive measures adopted by British rulers. He had established 'All India Shri Gurudev Seva Mandal'. Due to his social activities, President, Dr.Rajendra Prasad gave him the title 'Rashtrasant'. He was the Vice President of Vishwa Hindu parishad. He took active part in Bengal Famine, China War, Pakistan war, Koyna Earthquake, Vinoba Bhavé's Bhudan Movement. Former Nagpur University is renamed as 'Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University' on his honour.

Tukdoji Maharaj had also attended World Conference of Religion and world peace in Japan in 1955. His great literary work 'Gram Geeta' was based on village development and national reconstruction. He has established his Gurukunj Ashram at Mozari village about 120 km from Nagpur. The following motto is written on the entrance of the Ashram.

'Open to all is the temple of ours'

'Welcome to all from every creed and religion'

'Welcome to all from home and abroad'

Tukdoji started mass awakening through cultural and spiritual program and also took active part in national freedom struggle. He was also jailed in 1942. He advised the people that god is not only in temples but everywhere. He stressed on self realization. He also forces on congregational prayers. He was truly a national saint who inspired the youth for self realization and tireless work.

### **Conclusion**

Like above mentioned saints and social reformers there are many more saints like Sant Gadge Maharaj, Ravindranath Tagore, Dayanand Saraswati , Swami Vivekanand and many more who through Bhakti movement and other ways worked for the social reformation of the country. They had done their job of influencing the mindset of the people for eradicating vicious and orthodox traditions, customs and norms of the society which had been an obstacle in the harmonious progress of the nation. Through sermons, speeches and literary works these stalwarts had been instrumental in reshaping the past, present and future of India.

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