

Chapter 1

Dalit Saints of Hinduism

Often Hinduism is presented as a construct of upper-caste Brahmins in our academic and popular discourse whereas nothing can be far from truth. Hinduism in its construct and popular practice remains a spiritual-system of the masses and people now called Dalits/ Shudras have been the prominent upholder and proponents of the Dharma. Veda Vyas himself was son of a fisherwoman and Rishi Parashar. It is Veda Vyas who systematised the four Vedas, wrote Mahabharat, which contains one of the holiest texts of Hindus – Gita. Besides these, 18 Puranas and Brahma Sutras are also attributed to him. It will be no exaggeration to say that Veda Vyas is the strongest pillar of the classical Hinduism. Rishi Valmiki, a Dalit saint, wrote Ramayana, the text which captured the imagination of people not only in India but around the world. Not only him but Kamban who wrote Kamban Ramayana in Tamil was also a Shudra. And without Ramayana and Ram Bhakti, there can be no conception of Hinduism. Rishi Matang was the son a Shudra mother with a Vaishya father. He is one the highly revered figure in Hinduism who was visited by Ram and Sita. His ashram was a refugee of the unfortunate and hopeless. Son of Veda Vyas and a shudra maid, Vidur, was a authority on Dharma whose teachings on Niti & Dharma are preserved in Viduraprajara in Mahabharat. In Mahabharata itself, Dharmaraj Yudhistir would often visit Sage Kapinjalada, who was born a Chandala, for guidance. Thiruvalluvar , Tamil poet-saint, who wrote Thiru-Kural was a lower caste weaver.

Hindu history is full of saints belonging to the lower strata of the society and it was by them that the vitality of Hinduism was restored from time to time. Bhakti movement is an important case in the point. Bhakti movement was a popular reaction against the dry logic of

atheists and Buddhists, which began in the South India. It was also the result of the discontent against social and caste hierarchies and later as a defence mechanism against forces of Islamic Imperialism. Bhakti movement threw up several Dalit saints whose contribution to the enrichment and shaping of Hinduism is immense. Saint Chokhamela, a Mahar, is a prominent 14th century figure in Marathi bhakti movement. He was the disciple of Sant Namdeo, himself a Shudra, and an ardent devotee of Vitthala. He wrote several famous Abhangas which are devotional poetry dedicated to the Vitthala. Kanhopatra was a female devotee of Vitthala. She was born in a brothel and was a courtesan & dancing girl before devoting herself to the worship of Vitthala. Like Chokhamela, she too belonged to the Varkari sect of Hinduism. She is the only women-saint of Varkari sect who is not associated with any male-figure and had no guru or belonged to any parampara. She attained sainthood purely on the basis of her devotion. Her abhangas are popular even today and the devotees worship the tree at her Samadhi in Pandharpur. Sant Nirmala was a Dalit Hindu women saint who was the sister of Chokhamela. She was entirely devoted to the Vitthala and wrote devotional poetry, which describes injustice of the prevalent social system. Her husband Sant Banka is a renowned figure in Hinduism whose poetry praises Vitthala in happiness and peace. Sant Soyarabai was wife of the Chokhamela and an important Bhakti saint. She produced a large devotional literature although only few of it survives today. Her poetry exudes intense devotion and advocacy of social reforms. Sant Janabai, in 13th century, was a Dalit Hindu woman Saint who is placed among most renowned saints of Varkari sect like Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram etc. She is famous for her high-quality abhangas and almost 300 abhangas are attributed to her.

In 12th century, a remarkable socio-religious movement emerged in Karnataka in the form of Sharana movement, which challenged social hierarchy and advocated utmost devotion to Shiva. It produced a whole literary tradition known as Vachana Sahitya, which spans several centuries. Vachana is a form of Kannada devotional poetry, which narrates personal spiritual experiences. The movement emerged from the below with Madara Chennaiah considered to be founder of the Vachana Sahitya. Like him most of the poets came from castes lower in social hierarchy like Revanasiddha (a shepherd), Marulasiddha (an untouchable), Madivala Machideva (a washerman), Madara Dhoolaiyah (a cobbler), Medara Ketaiah (a basket-maker) etc. They expressed their devotion by deploying the imagery of their trade &