

Book Review

*The Ant who Swallowed the Sun*  
(*Abhangas of Marathi women Saints*)

translated by Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto  
New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Classics, 2020

***Madhavi Narsalay***

Department of Sanskrit,  
University of Mumbai  
madhavinarsalay@yahoo.com

Medieval Maharashtra has been a theatre of socio-political and religious upheavals. This period marked the end of the Yadava dynasty and the emergence of Islamic rule. It also marked the ascendancy of a different form of worship—Bhakti—which gave birth to the Warkari sampradaya—or the Warkari movement. Bhakti was about praying to the God in oneself. As related by Dnyaneshwar, it was about praying to “Rama, Krishna, Govinda” within yourself. This movement made human the embodiment of God or making human one with God.

It was therefore not surprising to see the Warkari movement attracting fellowship by millions and becoming a melting pot of narratives that brought God in sight of human grasp. No wonder it started touching the lives of men and women alike irrespective of caste and creed. Pujaris and Shastris started ceding power to Saints—the ones who could bring many much nearer to God and vice versa. Saints gave birth to a new form of poetry—*ovis* and *abhangas*—that became the foundation to driving social change.

And the outcomes were evident and quick. Women saints appeared on the scene—a phenomenon that would not have been possible in the institution of ‘Shastris’. Women saints excelled at the creativity and some like Bhagu and Vatsara only made their presence felt through their work, and not physical presence.

Beginning the 13th century, the Warkari movement gave Maharashtra some of its best women poets from different strata of society: Muktabai, Bahinabai (Bahena), Janabai, Rajai, Gonai, Kanhopatra, the sex worker and Soyarabai.

Their most significant biggest contribution was to open the minds of a patriarchal and caste have driven society into believing that they are all children of one almighty and that the same almighty was in each of them irrespective of they being a man or a woman, a brahmin or a dalit, a married women woman or a sex worker.

It is in this spirit that Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto position their translation of abhangas and ovis of women saints from Marathi to English for poetry lovers and Bhakti exponents. History being 'his-story' has little to say about biographical details of these women saints. It this very gap that is bridged by this translation.

The book is an anthology of 61 ovis and abhangas composed by ten women saints from the Warkari tradition.

The title of the book, "The Ant Who Swallowed the Sun", is a direct translation of the famous first line of Saint Muktabai's composition, "Mungi Udali Akaashi, Tine Gilile Suryasi". It's a harbinger of what's inside—positioning the small 'her' as being capable of gulping the infinite and the eternal 'he'—presenting us an opportunity to grasp 'her-story' (and not 'his-tory') from 'her' lens.

The authors use their work as a mirror. They want us to look into it and see how our present is positioned in comparison to the historical social constructs and frameworks—that influenced the compositions of women saints. They provoke us to think, right from the Preface, wherein Jerry Pinto pens a retort to Muktabai's noting: Vaanjhe putra prasavalaa. Jerry asks Muktabai (and therefore us), as to why should a child be engendered. In his words "Why son, Muktabai? I wanted to ask isn't a child enough". He compels us to think as to why did Muktabai naturally ended up writing 'son': putra; and not 'baalak' and inadvertently makes us think if a similar approach to composition would have been adopted if she were to write today. It is this approach that makes the book stand out. I would have although

liked Jerry Pinto to also raise a question on why Muktabai positions women as the only source of infertility/barrenness.

Neela Bhagwat coins an interesting analogy terming women saints, as 'adi-dalit'—exhorting the need for women to be understood within a framework of gender and caste. She makes an interesting use of the present tense to note, "they are prey to multiple conflicts, their lives are never easy subsuming of everything into the pieties of faith; they bring their states of anger, frustration and exhaustion into their poetry" (Pg. 23)—compelling us to reflect on the status of women in our society today. She believes Vitthal and Rakhumai were their chief source of hope and life. They were their sounding-boards, and soul-mates with whom they could easily share their joys and sorrows and request guidance to address challenges.

Now let me discuss some features of this book, which I really liked.

Let me start with their work on compositions of Muktabai. Muktabai was the youngest sibling to Nivrutti, Dnyaneshwar and Sopan—the three acknowledged saintly brothers who laid the foundation of the Warkari movement. Despite being the youngest, as instantiated, she was probably the first amongst the siblings to fill Dnyaneshwar with conviction when he had locked himself in a hut, on being insulted as an outcaste. Muktabai consoled and counselled him through a set of Abhangas which are popularly known as 'taatichhe abhanga'—displaying her profound emotional and philosophical maturity. She urged Dnyaneshwar to bear the world's spite without any complaints.

The authors have made befitting use of language to narrate Muktabai's thoughts on liberation.

While ordinarily, "Taati ughadaa Dnyaneshwara" could have been simply translated as 'O Dnyaneshwar, open the door', the authors have worded it as "throw open the doors". By doing so, they astutely present Muktabai's metaphorical power to compare a physical door of the hut to the gates of mind and soul.

In certain specific compositions, they have maintained a praiseworthy meter. For example:

“First came joy and on the morrow  
 Hard on the heels, the visit from sorrow  
 Muktai tells Changya: self-born, the soul,  
 Standing like a banyan, aloof and whole.”

Now let's turn to Soyarabai. She was saint Chokhamela's wife. Chokhamela, a contemporary of Dnyaneshwar, faced hardships, contempt and torture as he was an “untouchable”. Soyarabai witnessed the suffering inflicted on her husband on the one hand and the respect he received by his Warkari brethren for his poetic genius and ardent devotion towards Lord Vitthal on the other. Her works are, therefore, a reflection of binaries and contrasts. An elevated soul, she looked at life and death with equanimity. She considered death and lamenting as a lie. The authors' translations don't miss capturing such binaries and contrasts. In the abhanga titled, “Yei Yei Garud-dhvajaa” the phrase; “Vitesahita karen puja” has not been translated. It's a 'zero' that accompanies Vitthal—the only 'one' to complete the 'whole'.

Janabai, the maid-servant of saint Namdev, was a powerful and eloquent saint-poet. She was responsible for menial jobs in the house of saint Namdev. For her Vitthal is a caretaker—the one who looks after her and participates in her chores to lighten the work she was subjected to. Her abhangas reflect the hardships she had to undergo and the role Vitthal could and did play in lightening her load. Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto have used the free verse form to translate saint Janabai's compositions. They have wonderfully captured the aspect of 'Sakhya bhakti' through befitting verses such as, “When Jani sweeps the floor, Vitthala fills the dustpan”.

Kanhopatra, the saint poet of the 14th Century CE, was born in the family of a sex-worker. Her pain and humiliation were lightened by her friendly devotion with to Lord Vitthal. In one of her abhangas she regards Lord Vitthal as Krishna-aai and Kanha-aai, i.e. her mother. The refrain of this abhanga has been splendidly used by the authors— “From your unseeing eyes let your mercy flow”.

To summarize, women saints have raised voices of dissent, they have questioned the existing parameters of gender and caste and at the same time rendered

complete surrender to the Lord. The Warkari tradition, which works on the principles of humanity, equality and fraternity, have retained these compositions and immortalized them.

Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto have done a commendable piece of work by translating abhangas of women saints into English and bringing these lesser-known saints to the forefront. They have taken up a socio-semiotic perspective in their translation. In this perspective the language is considered to be rooted in socio-cultural concepts. The translation is simple, lucid, rhythmic with apt choice of words. The preface and introduction by the translators give a perspective to the reader and create a good background for readers to understand and appreciate the work. Sharing the original work alongside the translation will help the readers to compare the translation with the original work. The work done by Neela Bhagwat and Jerry Pinto is inspiring and, as mentioned earlier, will provoke and promote similar translations of works of women saints across different regions of India.

