

*From Selected Poems of Saint Soyarabai,  
Saint Karma Mela, Saint Nirmala and Saint  
Banka (from Shri Sant Chokha Mela: Life and  
Poems)*

Saint Soyarabai, Saint Karma Mela, Saint Nirmala and Saint Banka

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## SANT SOYARABAI (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

1.

O Lord of Pandhari<sup>1</sup>,

I prostrate myself at Your feet<sup>2</sup>.

You alone are generous;

Plenitude, fulfilment at Your feet.

You bestow comforts, deliverance.

How do I laud You any further?<sup>3</sup>

I'll sit at Your door<sup>4</sup>

Says Chokha's Mahari<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. पंढरी paṇḍharī; shortened name of Phandharpur (पंढरपूर paṇḍharapūra) where the temple of Lord Vitthal (विठ्ठल viṭhṭhala) is located.
  2. दंडवत daṇḍavata; literally, (to fall) like a stick; a way of paying obeisance, signifying absolute surrender to the Divine, offering Him all of one's actions performed through mind, body, and speech.
  3. Till here, Soyarabai (सोयराबाई sōyarābāī) portrays Vitthal's omnipotence, only to juxtapose in the final lines his sheer powerlessness in something as trifle as letting her inside the temple.
  4. This is a constant, and deeply stirring, image in the poems of all Dalit saint-poets, including Janabai (जनाबाई janābāī) and Chokha Mela (चोखामेळा cōkhāmēḷā), who are never allowed to enter the temple despite having attained sainthood during their lifetimes. All they can do is sit or stand with their hands joined in supplication at the outermost door (महाद्वार mahādvāra) of the temple complex.
  5. The caste name 'Mahar' (महार mahāra) is also heartlessly used as a casteist slur by the so-called higher castes. Its feminine form 'Mahari' (महारी mahārī) is also used in the same hateful manner. However, in her unique signature style, this is how Soyarabai (सोयराबाई sōyarābāī) addresses herself throughout her gatha (गाथा gāthā) or collection of poems. In doing so, she appropriates a term that is supposed to be an insult and goes on, instead, to flaunt it proudly, by signing off almost all her poems as 'Chokha's Mahari'.

2.

Come quickly, o Lord,  
I'll worship You, brick<sup>1</sup> and all.

Myrrh, lamps, garlands,  
We'll present You, o Lord.

Placing the plate before You,  
I serve food to my family.

It's not good enough for You;  
Pray, eat what we've got.

Runny broken rice at Vidur's<sup>2</sup>  
You ate lovingly, o Parent.

Draupadi's<sup>3</sup> vegetable leaf  
You were content to eat.

That's how it seems here,  
Says Chokha's Mahari.

- 
1. Lord Vitthal, an incarnation of Lord Krishna, stands on a brick, offered to Him by his foremost devotee Pundalik (पुंडलिक *punḍalika*) who was massaging his old parent's feet when the Lord came to visit him at Pandharpur.
  2. विदुर *vidura*; a major character in the *Mahabharata* and Lord Krishna's prominent devotee. In *The Book of the Effort (Book V)*, when Krishna visits Hastinapura as a peace emissary of the Pandavas, he rejects Duryodhana's offer of royal hospitality, preferring to stay at Vidura's humble place and eat their coarse food, owing to Vidura's devotion.
  3. द्रौपदी *Draupadi*; a central figure in the *Mahabharata* who is Lord Krishna's prominent devotee and close friend. This single wife to all five Pandavas is rescued on many occasions by Krishna, including when Rishi Durvasa and his thousands of disciples arrive for food at the Pandava's hut during their exile in *The Book of the Forest (Book III)*. Rushing to answer Draupadi's call for help, Lord Krishna still demands to be fed first and happily eats a vegetable leaf that he finds stuck at the bottom of an empty vessel.

Debased I am,  
How do I laud You?  
You are generous,  
O Lord.

Pray, fulfil  
My wish;  
Pray, show me  
Your feet.  
The great river<sup>1</sup>  
Is overflowing,  
I cannot purify  
My body.<sup>2</sup>

I'm drowning, pray, get me out,<sup>3</sup>  
Says Chokha's Mahari.

- 
1. Pandharpur is situated on the banks of the River Bhima (भीमा bhīmā) which flows barely a couple hundred meters away from the Vitthal temple, whose water is considered as holy as the Ganga by the devotees.
  2. The practice of untouchability is almost entirely based on the hierarchies of the caste system and the argument of 'spiritual pollution' laid out in the scriptures. 'Untouchability' is said to be caused by 'unclean bodies' which, ironically, are made so by being assigned such socially-essential work as the disposal of dead animals, by the so-called higher or 'purer' castes. The many layered misogyny and discrimination is clear: though the holy rivers like Chandrabhaga are said to be capable of washing away even the greatest of sins, they somehow cannot wash 'pure' a woman's body, even when she works to clean the town's roads and gutters. (When [a brahmin] has touched a chandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse, or one who has touched a corpse, he becomes pure by bathing. *The Laws of Manu*, p 183) After employing quatrains with the rhyme scheme of *abbc* for the first three stanzas, the poet concludes the poem with a couplet - an unusual choice, since abhangas comprise of either four lined stanzas or couplets and the two stanza forms are not generally mixed in an abhanga.

4.

All colours One became;

In colours, is coloured the Colour Supreme<sup>1</sup>.

Distinction between self and other is laid to waste

Upon seeing the Lord of Pandhari.

There's no place for discrimination<sup>2</sup>;

Anger, lust have absconded.

Despite being, You are beyond<sup>3</sup>,

Ever in Samadhi<sup>4</sup>, behold.

The Beholder, the beholding vanished<sup>5</sup>,

Says Chokha's Mahari.

- 
1. In these two lines, Soyarabai beautifully captures the thesis statement of the *Amrutanubhav* (अमृतानुभव amṛtānubhava) by Dnyandev (ज्ञानदेव dnyānadēva): the entire world is the manifestation of the Absolute. (जग असकी वस्तुप्रभा jaga asakī vastuprabhā; Chapter 7, Verse 289)
  2. The Varkaris believe that Lord Vitthal is the Absolute incarnated, whose mere darshan bestows the ultimate knowledge: all the beings (not just human beings) emanate from the Absolute. (सर्व खल्विदं ब्रह्म sarvam khalvidam brahma; *The Chhandogyopanishat* 3.14.1 p. 323)
  3. The emphatic founding principle of the Varkari (वारकरी vārakarī) Sect as proclaimed by Dnyandev in his *Dnyaneshwari* (ज्ञानेश्वरी dnyānēśvarī) is: clan, caste, class are entirely irrelevant. (कुले जाति वर्ण हे आघवे चि गा अकारण kuḷē, jāti, varṇa hē āghavē ci gā akāraṇa; Chapter 9, Verse 452)
  4. Unlike other religious/spiritual sects which lay emphasis on renouncing this world, the Varkaris believe that one can attain the Supreme Goal of life while carrying out all the necessary worldly matters to one's best ability.
  5. समाधी samādhī; a meditative union with the Absolute.
  6. "Thus, when knowing the Absolute, the knowing is essentially the Absolute, then how can the knowing and the knower remain?" (एवं वस्तुशी जाणो जाता । जाणणेचि वस्तु तत्वता । मग जाणणे आणि जाणता । कैचा उरें ēvam vastuśī jāṇō jātā । jāṇaṇēcī vastu tatvatā । maga jāṇaṇē āṇi jāṇatā । kaicā urē; *Amrutanubhav*, Chapter 5, Verse 18).

5.

The body is polluted,  
Says everyone;<sup>1</sup>  
But the soul is unstained,  
Unadulterated, enlightened.

Pollution of the body  
Is born in the body,  
How can anyone's deeds  
Be clean?

The menstruating female<sup>2</sup>  
Is the locus of origin<sup>3</sup>;  
No body in the world  
Is created differently.

Therefore, o Pandurang,  
I keep singing Your glory;  
Pollution resides  
In the body.

Pollution of the body is  
Decidedly for the body alone,  
Chokha's Mahari  
Keeps saying.

- 
1. Chokha Mela has recounted these awful experiences with great poignance in one of his poems: "Pollution, Pollution" / Uttered each moment // No one accepts me / In their company / "Get lost from here" / Says one and all. (*One Hundred Poems of Chokha Mela: Bilingual Edition*, p. 23)
  2. Across all castes, menstruating girls and women are considered as 'untouchables.'
  3. Soyarabai is the first Bhakti poet to employ this distinctly womanist perspective to strike at the very foundation of intersectional, untouchability-based discrimination.

6.

Whose mind gets weary

Upon seeing the Lord,

Futile are his observances, principles;

Befouled always is his heart.

Artful at masquerading,

He excels at ritual story-telling;

His mind fixated on others' wealth,

He makes a show of the swaying body.

Such a man is nothing but an evildoer,\*

Says Chokha's Mahari.

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The extent of the revolution that the Varkari Sect brought about in Hindu social dynamics can only be understood when one remembers the ways in which the 'Shudras' (or service castes) were punished for uttering a single invective against the so-called higher castes (twice-born). Not only did this revolution enable a Dalit woman to criticize the hypocritical 'Brahmins,' but it celebrated and preserved her words for seven centuries. If it weren't for this revolution, see what Manu, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> C Manusmriti, (Laws of Manu) a foundational text of Brahminism, would have had Soyraibai go through: "A [Shudra], who insults a twice-born man with gross invective, shall have his tongue cut out; for he is of low origin. If he mentions the names and castes (gâti) of the (twice-born) with contumely, an iron nail, ten fingers long, shall be thrust red-hot into his mouth. If he arrogantly teaches Brahmanas their duty, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and into his ears." (*The Laws of Manu*, pp 301-02)

KARMA MELA (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

1.

My father<sup>1</sup> was Your fosterling;

Why do you forget, o Lord?

As a child, You bathed me<sup>2</sup>;

Why are You hardened now?

Uphold Your title<sup>3</sup>, o Vitthal,

Only then keep Your good name.

Says Chokha's Karma Mela,

O Lord, pray, do not forget me.

- 
1. Around 1338 CE, Chokha Mela died when a portion of the under-construction town wall at Mangalwedha collapsed, crushing him and many other forced-labourers to death. This and many other poems were composed in response to this tragic incident.
  2. Legend has it that Lord Vitthal personally assisted Soyarabai in raising her son, since Chokha Mela would either be at work or at the door of the Vitthal temple.
  3. पतितपावन patitapāvana; the Uplifter of the downtrodden. This is said to be inscribed on the anklets that Lord Vitthal wears. (समान करिसी सर्वाभूतीं जाण । पतितपावन ब्रीद तुझे (samāna karisī sarvābhūtīm jāṇa | patitapāvana brīda tujhē; कृपाळु दीनाचा बडिवार नामाचा । तोडर ब्रीदाचा साजे पाई (krpāḷu dīnācā baḍivāra nāmācā | tōḍara brīdācā sājē pāī; *Shree Namdev Gatha*, p 204 & 268)

2.

Our caste is made the basest<sup>1</sup>;

Why don't You understand, O Lord?

Our whole life is spent eating scraps<sup>2</sup>,

You don't feel ashamed of it.

At our home, curd and rice

You ate,<sup>3</sup> how can you deny that?

Says Chokha's Karma Mela,

Why did You give me birth?

- 
1. Karma Mela, here, shows clear understanding of caste as a social construct, not something divinely created and assigned as per one's past deeds. Being a second-generation rebel-poet, he does not, unlike his elders, use the stative verb आहे ('is') but the dynamic verb केली ('made') to bring in the descriptor 'the basest', marking the momentous shift from putting the blame on Fate to holding the hegemonic perpetrators accountable for the social injustices.
  2. For all their hard work of keeping the towns and villages clean and hygienic, the members of the Mahar community were paid in kind in the form of stale food from the previous day/s, which would be thrown in their baskets from a distance when they would go door-to-door extending salutations and asking for food throughout the settlement.
  3. In an incident recounted by both Soyarabai and her sister-in-law's husband Banka (बंका bankā), an old brahmin had visited Chokha Mela and Soyarabai's house and asked for food, eating the plain curd and rice that Soyarabai could procure at that moment. A brahmin visiting a Dalit household and eating their food sounds improbable even today in 21st century India, so it seems plain impossible in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. No wonder that the family took the brahmin to be Lord Vitthal in disguise!

3.

What happiness can we get

By associating with You?<sup>1</sup>

You don't understand

Even a bit, o Lord.

Debasement for us,

Debasement for us,

Debasement for us,

O dear Lord!

We never ever get

Food that's eatable<sup>2</sup>;

Always humiliation for us

In this world.

Rejoicing for You,

Celebrations blissful;

In our share,

Degradations.

Chokha's Karma Mela

Says, o Lord,

This is all we've got:

Our misfortunes.

- 
1. While all his elders seek respite in the Lord, Karma Mela's anguish over the debasement thrust upon him is so excruciating that he raises questions on the relevance of the very association with the Lord in the face of the inhuman conditions of his existence. It is no wonder that his poems were never popular, even among the Varkaris who sing/recite his parents' poems with great affection. Due to their perceived defiant tone, Karma Mela has been shunned by subsequent scholars of Bhakti literature as well.
  2. Here is a specimen of what kind of food came to the share of the Mahar community as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "Flies were swarming over the mouldering crumbs which had turned green and foul. Grandpa begged Bapu Patil for those crumbs. The oxen seemed to have refused to eat them. They were smeared with dung and urine. Grandpa collected them all with happy excitement and neatly put them into his sackcloth." (*The Poisoned Bread*, p. 172)

4.

Why did You raise me?

Pray, tell me this, o Vitthal.

What kith and kin do I have<sup>1</sup>?

Your custom doesn't seem right.

By forsaking me, o Benefactor,

What is it that you gain?

Says Chokha's Karma Mela,

You will earn bad name.

- 
1. This is perhaps the last poem - composed after the deaths of Soyarabai, Nirmala and Banka – of the first phase of Karma Mela's poetic endeavours, in which he identifies himself as Chokha Mela's son, just like his mother identifies herself as Chokha Mela's wife in her poems. Out of his twenty-seven extant poems, only five bear this signature.

5.

For Chokha's sake,  
The Lord worked miracles;  
His curd and rice  
The Lord gobbled.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the brahmins  
Got Chokha shackled;<sup>2</sup>  
See, it was You  
Who delivered him.

After his passing away,  
How benevolently  
You have watched  
Over us!<sup>3</sup>

Says Karma Mela  
To the Lord of Pandhari,  
Tell me who is there  
For us now?

- 
1. Karma Mela's word choices are stunningly biting. Here, he does not use खाल्ले ('ate') to denote the Lord's consumption of the refreshment, he chooses खादले ('gobbled').
  2. In one of the biographical poems ascribed to Sant Namdev (नामदेव nāmadēva), a contemporary of Chokha Mela, this horrifying incident in which the latter was formally punished to be quartered alive is recounted thus: They said, "This mahar / Has polluted the Lord / Yoke the oxen / To kill him // Tying up his legs / They spurred the oxen / Vitthal stood there / Holding the yokes // Whips after whips fell / On the backs of the oxen / They were exhausted / While whipping. (*Śrīnāmandēvācī āṇi Tyāñcē Kuṭumbāntīla va Samakālina Sādhūñcyā Abhaṅgāñcī Gāthā*, pp 419)
  3. Karma Mela's distinct sarcasm is inherited from his mother, for there is no sarcasm directed at the Lord in Chokha Mela's poems. This does not come as a surprise since there is no textual evidence in any of Karma Mela's poems to suggest that they were composed when his father was alive. One may deduce that Karma Mela had not come of age when his father passed away.

6.

My father had raised  
Mountains of pious deeds,  
Hence you had a meal  
At his house.

Was it at that time  
You were starving?  
Was that the reason  
You ate with him?

That same Lord that You are,  
You have turned away from us;  
Why don't You regard us  
In like manner<sup>1</sup>?

Kama Mela says,  
Swear on our lives  
And reveal to us, o Lord,  
Our true form.

- 
1. Being treated equally is all that Karma Mela keeps seeking throughout his poems, recalling again and again how his father received at least some semblance of equal treatment. By the time Karma Mela was in his twenties, i.e. around 1350 CE, all the luminaries of the Varkari Sect, including Namdev and Janabai had passed away. This situation gets exacerbated by the fact that there were no comparable saint-poets in the second generation of the Varkari Sect. Consequently, Karma Mela found very few people around him like Vasudev Kayastha – the scribe to whom we owe gratitude for writing down Karma Mela's poems - who treated him in the manner his father was treated by his numerous illustrious peers.

NIRMALA (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

1.

Joyfully *ovis*<sup>1</sup>

I will sing to You,

Dedicating at Your feet

My very existence.

Delicate, comely,

Dainty feet<sup>2</sup>

Stand elegantly

On the brick.

With hands on hips,

The Lord is standing

On the bank of the Bhima

At Pandhari.

Sister of Chokha<sup>3</sup>

Who is at the Lord's door<sup>4</sup>

Prostrates herself

Before both of them.

- 
1. ओवी *ōvī*; (in the context of Bhakti poetry) a verse form comprising of a four-lined stanza of 5-15 syllables in the first three lines with comparatively shorter fourth line, and *aaab* rhyme scheme. The seminal works of the Varkari Sect, the *Amrutanubhav* and the *Dnyaneshwari* by Dnyandev are composed entirely in the ovi form. Although Nirmala calls her compositions as *ovis*, with 6-8 syllabic lines and *abbc* rhyme scheme, she has composed *abhang* (अभंग *abhaṅga*) which evolved from *ovis* as the new verse form in the 1290s CE and had been recently defined by Namdev.
  2. Here, Nirmala has used three adjectives to describe the feet that she had had never an opportunity to cast her eyes over. The temple complex at Pandharpur is so vast that it is next to impossible to catch a glimpse of the idol while standing at its outermost door, beyond which Nirmala and her family were never allowed to go. Despite all the achievements of the Varkari Sect, the fact remains that even at its pinnacle with Dnyandev and Namdev physically present on the premises, the doors of the temple remained shut to the Dalits.
  3. Just like Soyarabai and Karma Mela, Nirmala identifies herself as a member of Chokha Mela's family, which shows the kind of sense of pride in one's identity that the great poet had inspired in the minds of the Dalits of that time. Besides his family, Sant Janabai has mentioned Chokha

Mela in a number of poems, even hailing him as “the epitome of devotion to Lord Vitthal” (*Śrī Nāmadēva Gāthā*, p. 959).

4. Namdev interred Chokha Mela’s bones - that he had collected from under the collapsed town wall of Mangalvedha - right in front of the outermost door of Vitthal temple at Pandharpur in 1338 CE and built a small memorial which stands there even today. The fact that, in these lines, Nirmala speaks of paying obeisance at this memorial indicates that this poem was composed some time later.

2.

The wildfire is raging  
On all the sides, o Lord,  
Why don't You have  
Mercy on me?

Attending the worldly matters,  
I'm caught between two rocks;  
Rescue me at once,  
O my Parent!

I am wearied  
To death, o Lord;  
Pray, rush forth  
With haste, o Lord.

What kith and kin  
Do I have other than You?  
My only benefactor  
You are, o Lord.

Therefore, Nirmala  
Embraces Your feet;  
Do not push me away,  
O my Parent.

3.

Not even an iota  
Of joy in this world,  
Driven by the needs  
Day and night.

There's not at all  
Chanting the Lord's name,  
Service to the saints  
There's none.<sup>1</sup>

Mind finds peace  
In no one place,  
Ever in anguish  
Day and night.

Nirmala says,  
Chokha is wise;  
He holds in his heart  
The Lord of Pandhari.

- 
1. Nirmala's complaint that the daily grind for the basics leaves her with no time or energy for higher needs sounds very Maslowian. The Mahar community was not paid monetarily for their services. After the long day's work of keeping the village clean, they had to go begging throughout the village at sundown. Unfortunately, as if all this humiliation was not enough, they were never given fresh food. Since the scraps from the overnight meal—often turned to the extent of fermentation—given to them would not be enough to satisfy hunger, they were forced to scavenge for food late into the night. Consequently, there would be no time left to satisfy higher needs like love and belonging, creative activities, or spiritual aspirations.

4.

Rid me, o dear Lord,  
Of the burdens of the heart;  
O Lord of Pandhari,  
Rush forth.

Why do you abandon  
Those who seek refuge?  
Why don't You have  
Mercy on me?

Orphaned, alienated,  
Who have I got except You?  
Give me some respite,  
Soothing me.

In Your heart,  
There's abundant space;  
This heart of mine  
Gets impatient.

Nirmala says,  
This is what I've to say;  
I'm done reporting  
My situation.

5.

Why have You forsaken me,

O Lord of Pandhari?

I don't remember

Anything else.

All that I desire

Are Your feet;

I don't know of

Any tricks.

You bestowed bliss,

Solace upon Chokha;

But it seems

You've forgotten me<sup>1</sup>.

Nirmala says,

You are all wise;

Who will rid me

Of my plights?

- 
1. This shared experience of 'being forgotten' that this Dalit family had to endure shows how rapidly, after the demise of Namdev, the social conditions must have returned to their status quo - wiping out to a great extent the semblance of equality that their spiritual democracy had ushered into Maharashtra's socio-cultural spheres, which also explains why there has been no Varkari poet of note after Karma Mela till the advent of Sant Eknath (एकनाथ ekanātha) in the 16<sup>th</sup> C. CE.

BANKA (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

1.

It is Your title,  
You should uphold it;  
You are the mighty one  
For me, o Parent.

Who else should I  
Seek refuge with?  
Why not consider me  
As Your own?

Debased caste mine,  
Miserable sinner of a kind;  
Is that why you have  
No mercy for me?

Banka says, o Lord  
Resident of Pandhari,  
No hope from anyone  
Other than You.

2.

Sinner from a debased caste,  
I am guilt-ridden and frail;  
But You are merciful,  
O Saviour of the wretched!

Known in all the three worlds  
As the Deliverer of the orphaned,  
Your name reassures  
All the three worlds.

No one appears to have been ruined  
By chanting the Lord's name;  
Such seems to be  
The might of the faith.

Banka says, o Omniscient,  
Merciful Vithoba<sup>1</sup>,  
Pray, fulfil my yearning  
Just this one.

---

1. विठोबा viṭhōbā; literally, Father Vitthal; an endearing way of addressing Lord Vitthal. While Banka uses this term eight times in his 39 extant poems, Karma Mela uses it only once in his 27 extant poems, which speaks volumes about how different their relationship with Vitthal (and everything that He represents) is.

3.1

The brahmin stood<sup>1</sup>  
Near the tulsi altar<sup>2</sup>;  
Asking, “Who all are  
In your family?”

“Whose house is this?  
It looks pretty.  
How many children  
Do you have?”

Listening to his words,  
Tears of love  
Welled up in the eyes  
Of Chokha’s wife.

She said, “My husband  
Is devoted to Vithoba,  
Keeps chanting the Lord’s name  
All day and night.

“There’s not even an iota  
Of joy in my life<sup>3</sup>;  
Lamenting forever,  
Day and night.

“I am not blessed  
Even with children.  
See, my life has been  
Utterly futile.”

Banka says,  
Having spoken thus,  
She prostrated herself

Before the brahmin.

\*\*\*

3.2

Then the Lord of Pandhari<sup>4</sup>

Said to Soyara,

“I have come from afar,

Walking on this route.

“I am very hungry,

O dear daughter.

Pray, bring and give me

Something to eat.”

She said, “We are

Low-caste Mahar,

How dare I offer you

Anything to eat?”

He said, “I am

Dying of hunger,

Caste does not

Matter to me.

“Whatever food you have -

Scraps or leftovers,

Give it right now

With all speed.”

Banka says, divine

Play of the Lord;

He begged to her

With spread hands.

\*\*\*

3.3

Soyara began to ponder,  
Saying to herself,  
“How should I do  
The unthinkable?”<sup>5</sup>

“Here is seemingly  
An old brahmin;  
Toothless, hard of hearing,  
Weak of frame.

“If I give him food,  
What will become of me?  
People shall beat me  
Black and blue.”<sup>6</sup>

“If he goes empty-handed,  
My husband will be angry;  
This will be a disgrace  
Upon my head!”

Banka says, thus  
She deliberated,  
Then placed her head  
On his feet.

\*\*\*

3.4

“We here belong  
To the Mahar caste,  
Yours is the higher,  
Pre-eminent caste!

“If I give you food and water,  
People shall condemn me;  
They shall thrash me

Mercilessly.”

Listening to her,  
He replied thus,  
“Your caste is not  
Any concern for me.

“You ought to save my life  
By giving me food;  
Pray, don’t think  
Of anything else.”

Listening to these words,  
Soyara got up;  
Went inside the house  
With haste.

Taking in a bowl  
Curd and rice,  
She brought it out  
And gave it to him.

Banka says, the Lord  
Ate with great relish;  
Saying, “Ask me what you want  
I will give it to you.”

\*\*\*

3.5

She said, “Master,  
What would you give me?  
We are destined  
For the scraps.

“Pray, keep your leavings<sup>7</sup>

As blessings for us.

O lord, that is all

Dear to us.”

He said, “Do take

This morsel from my hand,

You will be certainly blessed

With a child.”

Listening to this,

She prostrated joyfully,

Touching his feet reverently

With all her heart and soul.

Banka says, unfolding

Such a divine play,

The mighty Lord

Departed from there.

- 
1. Banka has written a series of biographical poems in which he depicts Chokha Mela’s domestic life, including the famed episode of Vitthal eating curd and rice at their house.
  2. A sacred podium-like platform, in front of the house, for the worship of the holy basil plant (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*).
  3. Banka reveres Chokha Mela as his Guru and lauds him in his poems in the highest possible manner but does not hesitate to give an honest account of his failures on the domestic front.
  4. That Banka and everyone else around believed the brahmin to be Lord Vitthal in disguise should not be treated merely as a hagiographical trope but must be also looked into from a sociological perspective in order to understand why it was so difficult for them to believe that a brahmin would/could not eat their food under any circumstances.
  5. The reason that the simple request for food from a hungry old man comes as such an extreme shock to Soyara is the religious strictures against a brahmin eating the food cooked by a Shudra, which have a history of more than two thousand years. For instance, one of the oldest texts and one of the standard authorities in ancient Indian jurisprudence, The *DATE Vashishta Dharmashastra* solemnly declares: If a Brahmana dies with the food of a Shudra in his stomach, he will become a village pig (in his next life) or be born in the family of that Shudra. (*The Sacred Laws of the Aryas: As Taught in the Schools of Apastamba, Gautama, Vasishtha, and Baudhayana Part II*, p. 38)
  6. This is neither a run-of-the-mill figure of speech nor unsubstantiated paranoia, since instances of food-related caste-based violence keep surfacing every now and then till this date. For

example, a 2020 Hindustan Times report described the arrest of two men in Madhya Pradesh for allegedly beating a Dalit man to death merely for touching their food (HT Correspondent).

7. Although Soyarabai might not have been aware of it, there was a stricture even against this: Let him not give to a Shudra advice, not the remnants (of his meal), nor food offered to the gods. (*The Laws of Manu*, p. 141)

BHAGU (14<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

1.

I've nothing to do with people,<sup>1</sup>  
All I want is to please the Lord.

People will laugh at me,<sup>2</sup>  
Now I go shamelessly.

I have no one to call my own,  
Except my companion Vitthal.

Without efforts, He does everything,  
Hence, I have trust in Him.

Bhagu says, I've become fearless;  
My Vithai is there for me.

- 
1. Although belonging to the Mahar community, Sant Bhagu was an orphan. As an orphaned Dalit woman, she belongs to a distinct class of 14<sup>th</sup> century Mahar poets and her five extant poems have a kind of poignancy that is unique even among this very niche group. While all five poets in Chokha Mela's extended family express an intense longing to 'belong', Bhagu simply does not give a damn about other people.
  2. It is apparent that all the Dalit poets of the 14<sup>th</sup> century had to face persecution at the hands of the caste-supremacists for obvious reasons, but they also faced ridicule from their own community for harbouring outlandish aspirations of life, in ways that were associated with the higher echelons of society. However, apart from Bhagu, only Chokha Mela has given a voice to this aspect of their lived experiences: Others call me names / Speaking out filth / That hurts my heart / To no end. (*One Hundred Poems of Chokha Mela*, p. 69)
  3. विठाई vithāī; literally, Mother Vitthal; yet another endearing way of addressing Lord Vitthal. Among all the six Mahar poets of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, only Bhagu addresses Vitthal in this manner. However, in the usage of this tender vocative, she shows great affinity with another orphaned Dalit woman of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, viz. Janabai who frequently addresses Vitthal as 'mother' in her poems. Like Bhagu, Janabai too did not bother about other people's opinions throughout her long poetic career of more than 50 years. (*One Hundred Poems of Janabai* [Unpublished Manuscript])

2.

I came for Your darshan<sup>1</sup>;

Pray, grant me a visit.

All the saints are inside the temple,

I am languishing outside all alone.

Listen to my cry for mercy, o Vithai;

I'm Your child, grant me a visit.

The Lord came out of the temple,

He carried me inside on His shoulder.<sup>2</sup>

Bhagu says, I met the Lord;

My worrying is over.

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1. दर्शन darśana; seeing or being in the presence of a sacred idol.

2. Whether this was a mystical experience or hallucination or day-dreaming on Bhagu's part, the doors of the Vitthal temple remained shut for all Dalits until, in 1947 when India was becoming independent, Sane Guruji led a satyagraha, with the demand of throwing open the doors of the temple for one and all. Travelling throughout Maharashtra he held public meetings and made speeches for the eradication of untouchability; this culminated in an indefinite fast in Pandharpur from 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1947. Amidst fierce opposition from the caste-supremacists, the temple doors were finally flung open to the Dalits on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1947 - after more than 650 years of struggle that started with these Dalit poets of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is a happy coincidence that Sane Guruji's first name was Pandurang which is another name of Lord Vitthal.