

Three Women Sants of Maharashtra

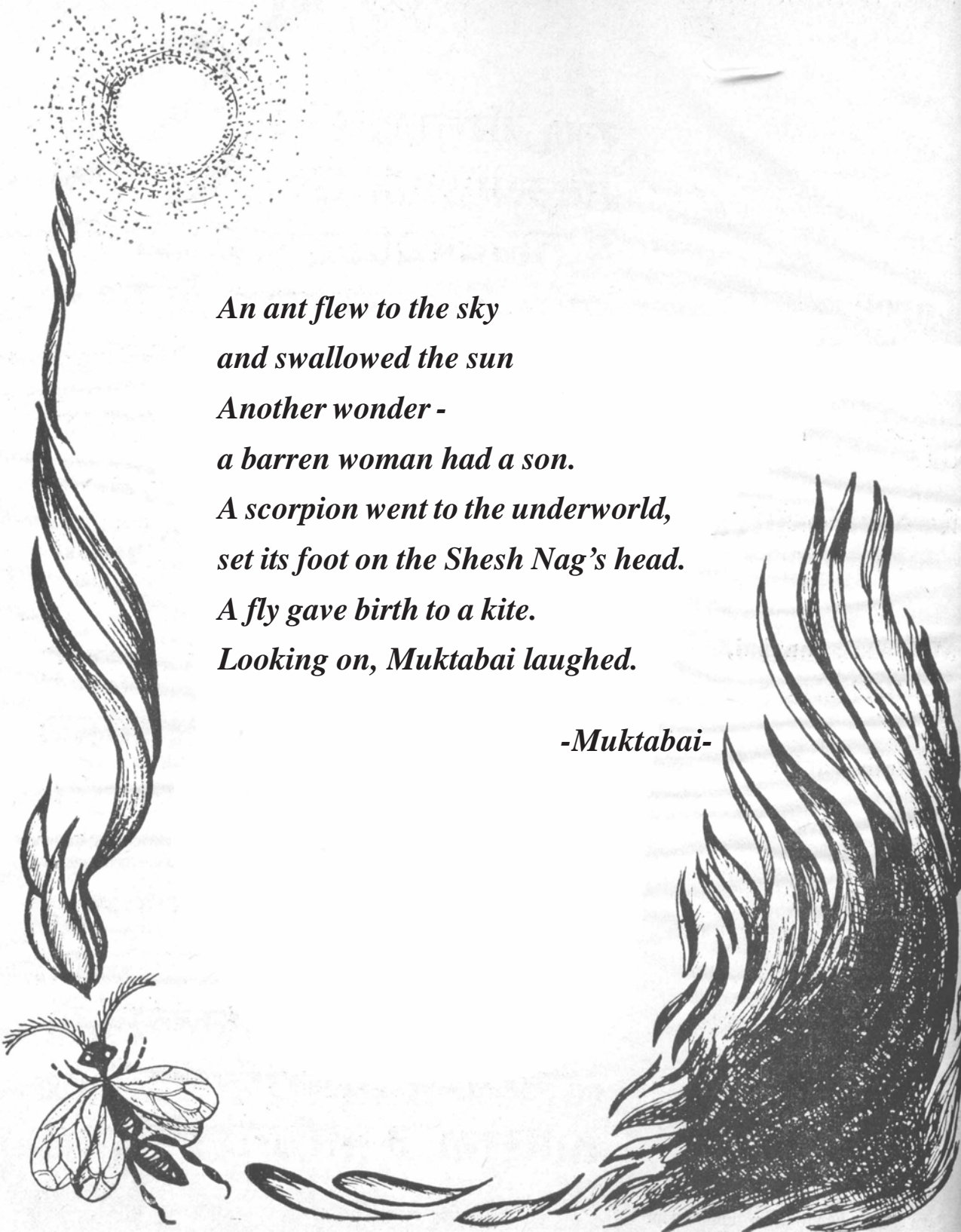
Muktabai, Janabai,
Bahinabai

by Ruth Vanita

खुण वारिनुक्याचनिडाण ५ ६५
सतकृपाजाली ईमारतफळाअली
१ ज्ञानदेवेधातलापाया उभारिले
देवाक्या २ नामातयाचाकिंकर ते
णरचितेआवार ३ जनार्दनयेकना
थ स्वांदिल्लामागवत ४ तुकाजा
लासेककस भजनकरासावकास ५
बठणिफडकतिध्वजा निरोपणक
लेवाजा ६ ६६
मरणनयाह्मणतोरनरमरणनया
प्रणतो स्वानुभविकसुरवतोहिज
यासीविषजोरमतो १ खिसुत
धनदुहिताप्रीयज्पासीभ्रमरज्पा
भ्रमतो आवडिमानप्रतिष्ठाळेकी
कयेथचिजोरमतो २ राज्यसुखी
रतिआर्तमुर्छनाकाभिलुब्धकतो
जोव्यसनिप्रियमद्यपरस्त्रिलंपट
तामसतो ३ वाघिनाइद्रफदिम

Page from a handwritten manuscript of
Sant Bahina's poems at Sheor

शिरुर येथील हस्तलिखिताच्या एका पृष्ठाचा फोटो



*An ant flew to the sky
and swallowed the sun
Another wonder -
a barren woman had a son.
A scorpion went to the underworld,
set its foot on the Shesh Nag's head.
A fly gave birth to a kite.
Looking on, Muktabai laughed.*

-Muktabai-

THE main trends in *bhakti* in Maharashtra took the form of a number of *sant* traditions which developed between the thirteenth and the seventeenth centuries. The *sants* in Maharashtra were men and women from different castes and communities, including Brahmans, Vaishyas, Shudras and Muslims, who emphasised devotion to god's name, to the *guru*, and to *satsang*, the company of the good, as the path to self realisation.

By teaching in Marathi, the *sants* contributed to developing a culture and its language. They composed verse in the *abhang* form, based on an old folk song form called *ovi*. Most *sant* poetry was transmitted orally until the early seventeenth century.

There are five main *sampradays* or *sant* traditions in Maharashtra. The Mahanubhav Sampraday, established in the thirteenth century in Vidarbha by Chakradhar Swami, acknowledged no deity other than Krishna. They established *maths*, and encouraged devotees to undertake the life of a wandering ascetic, living on alms, although they also had householder *sants*.

The first woman poet in Marathi, Mahadamba (1233-1308) belonged to this tradition. She was a Brahman child widow, granddaughter of a learned woman priest. She became Chakradhar Swami's disciple and composed two narrative poems on the wedding of Krishna and Rukmani.

The Nath tradition was an ancient Shaiva cult, very popular, especially among the lower castes. Today, it survives in certain regions. The Datta tradition combines Shiva and Vishnu worship in the form of the deity Dattatreya, an incarnation of the three gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The Samarth tradition was founded in the seventeenth century by Ramdas, a Brahman, devotee of Ram, who became Shivaji's *guru*. His spiritual successor Akkabai was a woman, and so was one of his chief disciples, Venabai (1627-1678), also a poet. Both were Brahman child widows. Venabai herself was a *guru* to many, including another woman poet, Baiyabai. Thus, the sect has a tradition of initiating women.

By far the most popular tradition in

Maharashtra is the Varkari tradition which still has the largest mass following. Founded in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries¹ by Namdev (a *sant* of the tailor community, and Jnaneshwar, son of a socially outcasted Brahman) who wrote the famous *Jnaneshwari*, a versified commentary in Marathi on the *Bhagwad Gita*, the Varkari (pilgrim) tradition, like the Mahanubhav, practises nonviolence and vegetarianism. In addition, they also prescribe certain other practices, especially an annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, a practice said to have been started by Jnaneshwar. Their emphasis on leading a devoted life while living as a householder, and their use of musical devotion (*bhajari*) and congregational gatherings (*kirtari*) attracted ordinary people. Maharashtra's major *sants*, Chokhamela (Mahar), Savarta (gardener), Eknath (Brahman) and Tukaram (Shudra) belonged to this tradition. It also had a number of women *sants*, as well as many women followers.

The Varkari tradition drew upon both Shaiva and Vaishnav traditions. Jnaneshwar's older brother and *guru*, Nivrutti, received initiation from a Nath *guru*, and Jnaneshwar states that the *mantra* transmitted by him was originally received from Shiva. The Varkaris' deity, Shri Vitthal of Pandharpur, iconographically combines Shaiva, Vaishnav and folk traditions in himself. He is identified with Krishna but has a Shiva *ling* on his head. Not just Vaishnavs but many Shaivites, Buddhists and Jains also acknowledged him as a deity. The Varkaris' emphasis is on the name of god, and Jnaneshwar states that it does not matter whether this name is that of Shiva or Vishnu.

Shri Vitthal's defining characteristic is overwhelming love for his devotees. The most popular story regarding the origin of his name exemplifies this characteristic. This story is about Pundalik, a devotee whose devotion took the form of tireless service of his parents. Hearing of Pundalik's virtue, Krishna came to his house at Pandharpur to visit him. Pundalik was busy washing his parents' feet and, without interrupting his activity, threw a

brick towards Krishna for him to stand on. Krishna stood on the brick and was so lost in Pundalik's devotion that he forgot to return to heaven. His wife Rukmani had to come and join him in Pandharpur where she stands as Rakhumai beside Krishna in the form of Vitthal (said to be derived from *vitha* or brick).

The Maharashtrian *sants'* relationship to Vitthal is one of tender and intimate love. They scarcely ever use the erotic or bridal metaphors prevalent in other regions and do not dwell on Krishna the lover of the *gopis* or of Radha, as northern *bhaktas* do. Instead, they relate to Vitthal as loving friend and companion. Intimacy with god results in an inability to distinguish between self and god. One striking image used is that of two mirrors facing each other — which reflects which? The identity of the self with god often results in the *sant* as *guru* being revered by other *bhaktas* as god. The numerous legends of Vitthal coming in different shapes to perform lowly service for different devotees reinforces this notion.

Conversely, service of other devotees, indeed of all living creatures, is seen as the highest form of devotion, since god is indistinguishable from the universe. Almost all the *sants* have stories attached to them about their impoverishing themselves and distressing their families by their generosity to others. One such story told of Namdev is that he ran after a dog that had stolen his bread, in order to offer it his curds as well.

Another metaphor these *sants* very commonly use is that of Vitthal as loving parent, especially mother. Vitthal is frequently addressed as a female, Vithai. Vitthal's yearning for his devotees is figured as often greater than his devotees' yearning for him. One of Janabai's most popular verses gives a charming depiction of Vitthal as a loving parent of the devotees — men and women from different castes, including the untouchable Chokhamela, thus imaged as equals, brothers and sisters:

"My Vithoba has many children — a company of children surrounds him. He has Nivrutti sitting on his shoulder, and holds Sopan by the hand. Jnaneshwar

*A sage lives on the temple dome:
of him, the great yogi asked :
Moonlight by day, heat by night -
how can this be brought about?*

*Said the sage : Death quakes before a champak bud,
knowledge and madness are one.
That one is threaded through the universe,
Easily Vitthal sets it free.
The unexpressed, without form, is revealed in
Vaikunth,
Mukiai says, yet people seek wrong ways.*

Muktabai -



walks ahead, and beautiful Muktai behind. Gora the potter is in his lap, and with him are Chokha and Jiva. Banka sits on his back, and Namdev holds his finger. Jani says, look at this Gopal who loves his *bhaktas*.” (30)²

Legends relating to the Varkari *sants* often depict them as coming into conflict with religious authorities the priestly Brahmins, because of their heterodox style of devotion, such as Chokhamela the untouchable coming to the temple, or Namdev singing and dancing in public amongst a crowd of devotees of different castes, thus disturbing ritualistic observances. The legends always end with god in person coming to the aid of the devotee or making some sign, such the temple swinging round to Namdev who was sent by the priests to the back of the temple. Brahmins are compelled to give way and recognise the *bhaktas*' devotion as legitimate. Brahmanical hostility almost never reaches the point of the devotee being martyred.

Women *sants* appear to be integrated in the Varkari tradition right in the start. The prominent ones usually from *bhakta* households do not individually have to face social slander or flout public convention when they express their devotion. Neither do they become wandering wise women nor do they appear miraculously at a young age. They seem to live relatively ordinary lives yet the tradition is able to make space for them as teachers and *sants*. They are referred to with the same honorific prefix: “Sant Janabai” as are the males: “Sant Namdev.” The integration is also suggested in that each has a clear *guru parampara* or lineage, which is important in *sant* tradition.

The paradox, however, lies in the fact that these *gurus*, as indeed most *sants*, in their teachings strongly emphasise the need to stay away from women. Woman, in the songs Eknath and Tukaram, is not only symbol of worldly attachment, but is to be physically shunned lest she distract the seeker. Eknath advises that the *bhakta* stay away even from a *satvik* or saintly woman and even from a female doll, lest lustful desires be aroused. Yet, in practice, these *sants*, some of whom, like Namdev, were neglectful of, like Tukaram, in conflict

with, their wives, accepted women *bhaktas* their disciples and inspired them in turn become teachers.

The presence of these exceptional men as *sants* did not substantially change the image of women in *sant* teachings and tradition; indeed, the women *sants*

who, in different ways, came to be especially significant — Mukta, a founder of the Varkari tradition; Jani, a maidservant whose devotion exemplifies the *sants*⁹ emphasis on humility; and Bahina, for whom devotion becomes a life-line when she is being crushed by the humiliating



“My Vithoba has many children...” Modern religious illustration of Jani’s poem.”

themselves sometimes endorse this image. Also, most of them remain subordinate to a male *guru* who is often a relative and refer to themselves in terms of their familial relation to him. For example, Chokhamela’s wife Soyra Bai signs her verses as “Chokhya’s Mahari” and Aubai signs hers as “Namya’s sister.” Muktabai, Jnandev’s sister, is an exception, signing her verses simply as “Muktai.”

We will here look at three women *sants*

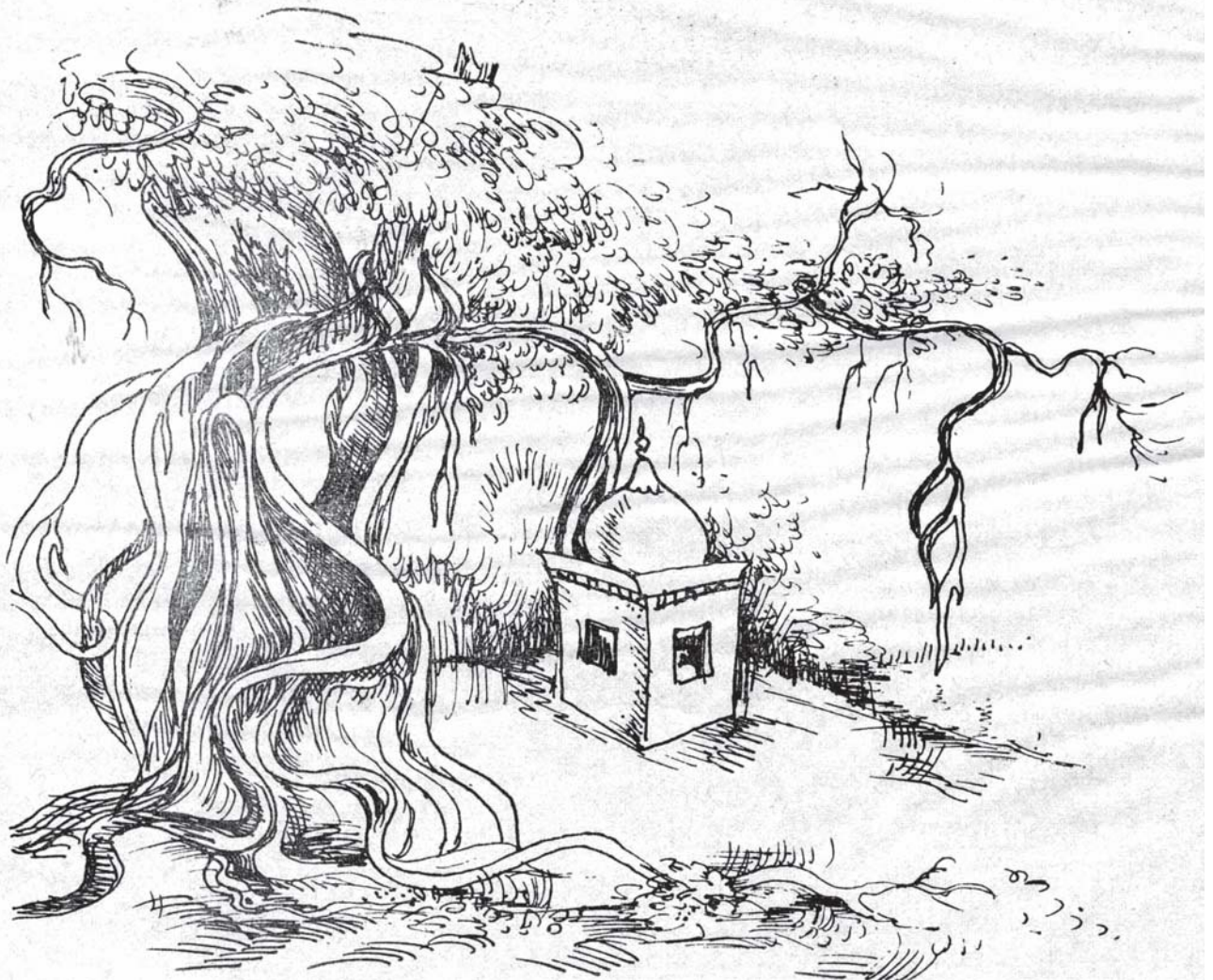
lot of the average woman.

Mukta, whose name means “liberated”, was born in 1279. She and her three brothers, Nivrutti, Jnandev and Sopan are considered the founders of the Varkari tradition. Her untimely death at the age of 18 is not related to her being a woman but to the unusual circumstances of her family — since her brothers too were only a couple of years older than she when they died.

Some Other Abhangs

*The name is strong - frees even in the body.
Peaceful, forgiving the mind praising Hari.
Pity clothes the mind, compassion for all beings,
Constant desire for Hari's beauty.
Madhav, Mukund Hari's name fills the heart-
Repeating the name all are freed.
Muktai's wealth is utterance of Hari's name -
It has set the whole world free.*

*Beginning to end, Hari fills all hearts.
Knowing this, sants are filled with love.
God's name in their hearts, love overflows-
Ever, ever content with devotion to god,
Peace, forgiveness, compassion rule their minds.
Sanak and the sages rejoice over them.
Muktai says, linked to Shri Hari's name,
Ever find joy in serving at his feet.*



*To be all is joy,
 From the 'I' comes sorrow.
 Give up the poison of 'mine' and 'my'.
 Distinguish the goal from the hindrance,
 Reason and search out wisdom's path-
 Find all pilgrimage sites in god.
 Hari, the cloud, pities the chatak,*
 Showers down rain.
 Subtle the path - bhaktas give up body's illusion,
 Take on truth.
 The story the Vedas try to tell
 Is one which cannot be heard -
 It is found in the sense of oneness.
 Muktai says knowing 'I am That' fills the world.
 Formed, formless are filled with 'I am That'
 And all is god.*

**bird, who, in mythology, will not drink any water that has
 touched the earth but only rainwater that falls through the air.
 Symbol of the yearning for purity.*

*They whose mind's sole business in Parbrahm
 Never again come to dwell in a womb.
 Blessed the womb that gives birth
 To those whose minds are attached to Narayan.
 The unsaid, the said, they experience within.
 Filled with god who is all, everywhere.
 Knowing the oneness of knower, known, knowl-
 edge, Their being becomes Narayan.
 They who know Hari to be all, beginning and end,
 Turn away from domestic affairs.
 Muktai's mind is forever free
 Hari is the wealth stored up in my house.*

