

## Understanding Caste and its portrayal in Literature till Bhakti Period

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### Abstract:

*F.G. Bailey and Louis Dumont have proposed different approaches to comprehend caste hierarchy. Bailey emphasizes that caste hierarchy is maintained through the control of productive resources. In his view, each individual within the caste system is assigned specific economic, political, and ritual roles. Dumont highlights that caste represents a unique form of social organization. If Bailey considers caste as the fundamental institution of Indian society, Dumont focuses on the hierarchical nature of the caste system and asserts that caste divisions are not simply based on economic factors but are deeply ingrained in the religious and cultural fabric of Indian society. In response to these disparities, the untouchables initiated various struggles and protest movements across India. These movements culminated in the form of literary writings that supported the cause of the untouchables. There are two aims of the paper: first, it aims to trace the echoes of Dalit awakening and acquiescence in the poetry of three great exponents of Bhakti movement namely Chokhamela, Kabir, and Eknath. These poets' works exemplify the shift from a poetics of resistance to a poetics of surrender. We suggest that while their resistance may seem moderate or compromising from a modern Dalit-radical perspective, it was considered revolutionary during the times in which they wrote. Second objective is to understand the substratum complexity of the caste system in ancient India by exploring the contemporary socio-anthropological approaches of Bailey and Dumont in relation to socio-economic, cultural, and religious disparities within the caste system.*

**Keywords:** Caste, Identity, Acquiescence Bhakti, and Movements

### Introduction

This seminar paper is an attempt to explore the evolution of the Dalit discourse in India until the Bhakti Period, utilizing historical, sociological and contemporary models of analysis. Identity formation among Dalits can be understood as a process influenced by their experiences within their community and in relation to upper-caste Hindus. These experiences not only shape how Dalits perceive themselves but also contribute to the socio-economic, political and cultural dynamics of India as a whole. The intellectual construction of Dalit identity has a rich tradition, with several non-Brahmin movements in India playing a significant role in constructing an alternative history and identity that challenges the dominant hegemonic order. These

movements have brought an attention to a wide range of issues related to Dalits, as Shah points out:

There has not been a single, unified Dalit movement in the country, now or in the past. Different movements have highlighted different issues related to Dalits, around different ideologies. However, all of them, overtly or covertly, assert a Dalit identity, though its meaning is not identical and precise for everyone. (195)

The construction of dalit identity is depicted as a multifaceted process influenced by historical and social factors. The paper acknowledges that various non-Brahmin movements have played a crucial role in shaping an alternative history and identity for Dalits, challenging the dominant hegemonic order. This diverse array of movements has addressed various issues related to Dalits, and although their ideologies and focal points may differ, they all aim to assert and redefine a Dalit identity, even if its interpretation varies among individuals. By discussing the diversity of challenges faced by dalits and the movements that have arisen in response, the paper highlights the overarching objective of these movements: to foster a more inclusive and just society. The entrenched caste system, which perpetuates social hierarchies and discrimination, is underscored as a focal point of critique. The struggles and movements led by dalits are depicted as efforts to dismantle oppressive power structures and advocate for social justice within the Indian society.

The Bhakti Period, characterised by the rise of devotional movements, witnessed the emergence of Dalit voices within religious and social spheres. Bhakti saints like Ravidas, Kabir and Chokhamela, who were themselves from lower castes, challenged prevailing social order through their teachings and poetry. Their works emphasized the importance of inner spirituality and rejected the notion of caste-based discrimination, promoting a more egalitarian and inclusive society. By examining the evolution of Dalit discourse up until the Bhakti Period, we can gain a deeper understanding of the historical, sociological, and contemporary factors that have shaped Dalit identity and the struggles faced by this marginalized community. The main objective will be to understand the substratum complexity of caste system in ancient India by exploring the contemporary socio-anthropological approaches of Bailey and Dumont in relation to socio-economic, cultural, and religious disparities within the caste system. Such an exploration will also enable us to appreciate the rich legacy of resistance, resilience, and cultural transformation that Dalits have contributed to the fabric of Indian society.

Discussion

### **Understanding 'Caste'**

It is generally believed to have originated from the Portuguese term 'casta,' which means "lineage" or "breed." The Portuguese traders and colonizers who arrived in India did use the term 'casta,' but it was not they who introduced the caste system in India. The caste system in India is an ancient social stratification system that developed over centuries. It is characterized by the division of society into distinct social groups known as castes, which are based on birth and

inherited membership. Each caste has its own customs, traditions, and social roles. The caste system is hierarchical, with different castes occupying different positions in the social order.

The four main varnas, as traditionally described in ancient Hindu texts, are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (laborers and servants). Beyond these varnas, there were also groups known as Dalits or Scheduled Castes, who were historically marginalized and faced social discrimination. It is important to note that there are numerous castes and subcastes within each varna and Dalit communities, resulting in a complex social structure.

The assignment of rights, privileges, and duties in the caste system is traditionally determined by birth. Individuals inherit their caste status from their parents and are expected to fulfill specific roles and occupations associated with their caste. Mobility between castes has historically been limited, although there have been some instances of individuals moving between castes over time. Basic rights and duties were assigned to groups of people on the basis of birth and were not subject to change as Jodhka explains:

In popular understanding, caste is an ancient institution of the Hindus based on the ideas of *varna*, *karma*, and *dharma* pronounced in a text titled *Manusmriti*.

These ideas got translated into a hierarchical society structured around the notions of purity and pollution. The varna system divided the Hindus into four mutually exclusive categories- the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. Beyond the four varnas were the *achhoots* (the untouchables). These four or five categories occupied different positions in the status hierarchy, with the Brahmins at the top, followed by the other three varnas in the order mentioned above, with the *achhoots* occupying a position at the very bottom. (Jodhka 2)

It is worth mentioning that the caste system has been a subject of significant social and political debate in India, and efforts have been made to address caste-based discrimination and promote equality. Laws have been enacted to protect the rights of marginalized castes and uplift them socioeconomically. However, the caste system's influence continues to be a complex and deeply rooted aspect of Indian society.

With the passage of time, a vertical hierarchy emerged in which Shudras were placed at the bottom. Typically considered low, impure and polluting because of their birth and traditional occupation in society, these people were addressed as Chandals, Panchama, Avarna, Malechha, Nihada, Antayja, Atishudra etc. They were subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, violence and exclusion from the rest of the society. These people referred to as 'untouchables' had been socially and economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically marginalized since times immemorial. In his famous essay 'Caste in India', B.R. Ambedkar has quoted a few definitions by distinguished scholars to elaborate the concept of 'caste'. He has quoted Nasfield who defines 'caste' as "a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community" (Ambedkar 7). A well known dalit critic, Dr. Ketkar has been quoted as defining 'caste' as "a

social group having two characteristics: (i) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group” (Ambedkar 7). Mahatma Gandhi, in a gesture of philanthropic patronage, called them ‘Harijan’, the children of God. Ambedkar used a somewhat marxist phrase referring to them as a category of ‘depressed classes’. In legal and constitutional terms, the British government categorized them as ‘Scheduled Castes’ in Government of India Act, 1935. This Schedule was retained with some modifications in the Indian constitution adopted in 1950.

Since 1970s, the term ‘dalit’ has been widely used as a signifier of the exploited and the oppressed in the name of caste-hierarchy. Eleanor Zelliot, a renowned dalit scholar explains the term ‘dalit’ as referring to “those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way. There is, in the word itself, an inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy” (267). Another prominent dalit writer Arjun Dangle refers to dalits as those “who are exploited and oppressed economically, socially, culturally, in the name of religion and influenced by several other factors” (Iiii). Dalits in India have been denied the right to a voice, agency and subjectivity as Eleanor Zelliot observes that in the term and concept ‘dalit’, there ‘is an inherent denial of dignity, a sense of pollution and an acceptance of the Karma theory that justifies the caste hierarchy. (267)

### **Contemporary Socio-Anthropological Approaches to Understand Caste**

In recent years, several anthropologists and sociologists have been pre-occupied with the issue of caste and hierarchy in the Indian social order. F.G. Bailey a British social anthropologist and Louis Dumont a French anthropologist have made an attempt to explain the Indian caste system. They assume in their writings that the caste hierarchy is an exclusive and rigid system of social relations in the traditional hindu order. Both the scholars, however, differ regarding the nature of the code of that hierarchy. Most social anthropologists have aligned themselves with the approaches of either.

F.G. Bailey, defines caste as “a system of ranks which is related to differential control over the productive resources” (266). In his ‘Closed Social Stratification Approach’, he points out that differential control over productive resources is the code of caste hierarchy as each person in the caste system has to perform a set of economic, political and ritual roles. Thus there is a “high degree of coincidence between politico- economic rank and the ritual ranking in caste” (266). A poor Brahmin cannot fall to a low ritual rank, nor can a rich untouchable attain high ritual rank. Between these two extreme situations, the ritual rank of a person is considered to be more important than his economic rank.

Louis Dumont, in his ‘Structuralist Approach’ (1966) postulated that caste is the most fundamental Hindu institution of Indian society. His approach towards understanding of caste is termed as ‘structuralist’ as it used the oppositional structure of pure/impure that governs the operations of the caste system. Dumont explains:

The principle of the opposition of the pure and impure underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure; underlines separation because the pure and impure must be kept separate; and underlies the division of labour

because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.(43)

In his holistic conception of caste, hierarchy is expressed in an Indian cultural code of relative purity and impurity in a continuously graded status order whose extremes are Brahmins at the top- the most pure of men and the untouchables at the bottom - the least pure of men. Brahmins and untouchables are conceptually opposed in a number of ways that contribute to their archetypal purity and impurity. The Brahmin lives at the centre of the village and is considered as a 'god on earth'. The murder of a Brahmin is a heinous crime equal to the murder of a cow considered by the Hindus. On the other hand, the untouchable lives outside the village and is excluded from religious life. The Brahmin purifies himself in order to approach the gods, and thus meditates between men and gods. The untouchable makes personal purity possible by removing the, in contrast, strongest sources of organic impurity, and mediates between men and the maleficent demons.

Dumont interprets this opposition of Brahmin and untouchable as complementary –the completion of a 'whole' by two equally necessary but unequally ranked parts. In his explanation of the concept, he states that the impurity of the untouchable is inseparable from the purity of the Brahmin as 'the execution of impure tasks by some is necessary to the maintenance of purity for others...society is totally made up of two unequal but complementary parts' (92-93). He rejects the very idea of 'caste' having a 'class' character or any 'racial' affiliation. Instead, he explains that religious motives play an important role in creating and maintaining the system. This crucial point is, very often, missed by present day scholars engaged in the study of the system. Emphasizing the importance of this dimension of the issue, another contemporary sociologist, Gail Omvedt also recommends studying the caste system from a religious point of view so that we do not miss its central ordering religious values (5).

### **Caste System in Historical Perspective**

Historically, caste system can be traced to two major roots. One traces its origin to the influx of Aryans into the region that is today called India. The Aryans, originally, were nomadic, tribal groups who invaded India from the north-west around 1500 B.C. They conquered and subjugated the indigenous people, destroyed the pre-existing Indus valley civilization. According to this theory, the upper castes are the descendents of Aryans and the lower castes, including shudras and dalits, are the progeny of the darker skinned non-Aryans. The Aryans are said to have composed the first Rigvedic hymns sometimes between 1500- 1200. B.C. In the Rigveda, the oldest scripture, one finds the mention of the Shudra in the *Purushasukta*, which contains a myth about the origin of the fourfold social structure as Michael testifies:

"The composition of the *Purushasukta* and its inclusion in the Rigveda was probably the first attempt to systemise, justify and legitimise the exploitation of the non-Aryan masses by the Aryans. The easiest way was to find the supernatural basis" (51).

The occupations of the four ranks are related symbolically to the parts of the body of the *Purusha* and establish an organismic analogy between man and society, legitimising the varying ranks and functions of different groups. In Rigveda, the words *Ranjanya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* occur only in *Purushasukta*:

*The Brahmana was his mouth,  
The Rajanya was made of his two arms,  
His thighs became the Vaishya,  
From his feet was produced the Shudra* (Michael 50).

The *Brahmana* has been called the mouth of the *Purusha* and is placed highest in the society, his special function pertaining to speech. Being a priest, invoking gods in his privilege. The second rank, *Rajanya*, is born of the arms of the *Purusha* and has the privilege of wielding physical power. The thighs of the *Purusha* became *Vaishya* whose occupation is agriculture and trade. *Shudra* was produced from the feet of the *Purusha*. Just as the feet are the lowest in the body, *Shudras* are the lowest in the society.

Thereafter, through the *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda* and *Atharvaveda*, the Aryans are said to have built up, step by step, an elaborate system of thought. Brahminical system was further consolidated through various interpretations, additions and alterations (through the *Sutras* and *Shastras*) along with a variety of other literature. The *Dharmashastras*, the *Smritis* and *Puranas* clearly proceeded on the hierarchy of the 'varnas', i.e. 'duties'. For restoring the 'varna' hierarchy, the backbone of the traditional Indian social structure, *Smritis* came into existence. The *Manusmriti* was composed sometime between 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. to 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. In it, one can find an extensive theorization in favour of the stratification of society into higher and lower varnas. In order to justify a social order wherein the numerically stronger classes involved in production were expected to multiply social goods on which the Brahman-Kshatriya power elite could thrive without contributing in any way to the actual process of production.

In the *Smriti* era also, the Brahmins ensured the unquestioned supreme position for themselves. *Manu* declares that the Brahmin, from the very birth, is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law. Explaining the concept Michael points out that the Brahmin calls himself a great god just like fire, be ignorant or learned. Just as the fire does not get contaminated, so also a Brahmin, although he may follow even a low occupation, should always be honoured and should be considered a great deity. Birth in a particular 'varna' was considered enough for securing all kinds of privileges or denials. It appears that by the time *Manusmriti* was composed, norms of ritual purity had substituted those of racial purity. *Manu* declared that the Brahmana is the lord of all varnas because of his superiority of birth and observance of rituals and sacraments (64). The fact that *Manu* assigns low position to the *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* does not mean that he was not aware of their functional utility. Infact, he enjoins the king to ensure that *Vaishya* and *Shudra* varnas continue to perform the work prescribed for them. He realizes that if these castes "swerved from their duties, the world would be thrown into confusion" (Michael 65). *Wedny Donigner* in his book, *The laws of Manu*, explains the caste system which implied discrimination and setting up of a hierarchy. He sates:



It supports this caste classification in genuine way. The purity- pollution concept developed around the Brahminical order not only to make discrimination amongst the different caste and community groups but also to dictate their modes of behaviors inside or outside the concept of Chaturvarna pattern of classification exclusively fashioned under mythological view points. (48)

The 'varna' hierarchy influenced the legal system in a significant way. Since Brahmins were placed highest in the social structure, they enjoyed the maximum privileges. The life of a Brahmin was held in the highest esteem while that of the Shudras was considered the lowest. These provisions were not based on any faith in equality for all before the law. The traditional Indian legal system clearly discriminated between persons belonging to different 'varnas'. According to Manu, untouchability is the punishment for miscegenation between two persons from high and low castes. The children of such unequal pairs become untouchables. The greater the social gap between the two parents, the lower the status of their children. The consequences are further severe if the mother is from a superior caste and the father is from an inferior one. The child of a Brahmin father and a Shudra mother is called Nishada; he becomes a fisherman. The child of a Shudra father and a Brahmin mother is called Chandala; the most degraded of all the mortals. To Manu, a degraded occupation is not the cause of untouchability; rather untouchability condemns a person to a low and impure occupation. Therefore, untouchability preceeds occupation.

The practice of untouchability intensified and was applied to more groups in the years following 200 A.D. Throughout medieval India, the caste system remained an important pillar of exploitation as there was an undoubted connection between caste and power. By and large, the non-Hindu rulers patronised the caste system for their own reasons despite the fact that the system itself had to accommodate a variety of adjustments and changes. Reputed historian Irfan Habib in his famous essay 'Caste in Indian History' points out that the caste system helped to generate larger revenues from the village and lower the wage cost in the cities. Therefore, the Indo-Muslim regimes considered it important to protect it. He further discussed that the Arabs conquered Sindh in 711-14 A.D, their commander, Mohammad Bin Qasim, readily approved of all the constraints placed by the previous regime upon the Jats, these being very similar to those prescribed for the Chandalas in Manusmriti.(173-177)

### **Anti-Caste Movements in India and Role of Literature : Acquiescence in Bhakti Literature**

In order to remove the socio-economic, cultural, religious and other disparities, the untouchables initiated struggles and protest movements of several types all over India. A number of literary writings were undertaken in their support. One can trace the development of dalit literature and discourse of dalit identity in different contexts through these movements. The Brahminical orthodoxy and the legitimacy of caste in India was first challenged in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. by Lord Buddha who preached equality, justice and fraternity for all human beings. This was in marked contrast to the exiting theory of caste hierarchy based on birth. As a result in the present century, the untouchables can be observed to have been drawn towards Buddhism since Dr. Ambedkar declared it an emancipatory religion for the oppressed.

#### **(a) Sacred Dissent's Discourse of Caste**

Reformist movements, such as the 'Bhakti Movement' led by Kabir, Ravidas, Shivrinarayan, Chaitanya, Chokhamela and others stressed for equality of status for everyone. The idea of equality attracted the attention of untouchables. Like Buddhism, this movement also appealed for the establishment of an egalitarian society. The poetry of Chokhamela and Eknath, became a source of inspiration in dalit awakening. Bhakti movement cut across barriers of caste, creed, language and religion. Many well-known poets, singers and saints associated with it were from lower castes; e.g. Namdev (1270-1350 AD) belonged to the Shimphe (tailor) caste from Maharashtra; Chokhamela (13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century) was a Mahar (untouchable) from Maharashtra; Kabir (1398-1518 AD) was a weaver from Uttar Pradesh; Sena (another contemporary of Ravidas) was a barber also from Uttar Pradesh and Tukaram (born in 1608 AD) was a Kumbi (peasant) from Maharashtra. An inherent element of protest against untouchability can be observed in Chokhamela's *Bhakti* songs along with traditional devotion and piety of a *Bhakta*. Chokhamela, a 14th-century Mahar Dalit saint-poet, is known for his deeply spiritual and socially revolutionary abhangas. Abhangas are a form of devotional poetry in Marathi literature, and Chokhamela's abhangas are characterized by their strong devotion to God, criticism of the caste system, and challenges to social norms. Chokhamela's abhangas are expressions of his profound devotion to God, often focusing on Lord Vitthal (a form of Lord Krishna) or other deities. His poetry reflects his spiritual experiences, longing, and love for the divine. Through his verses, he conveys a sense of intimate connection with the divine presence. One of the distinguishing features of Chokhamela's abhangas is their bold criticism of the caste-based hierarchy and the social injustices faced by Dalits. He challenges the notion of purity and impurity based on birth, asserting that true devotion transcends such distinctions. Through his abhangas, Chokhamela empowers the marginalized by asserting their right to worship and seek spiritual solace. His poetry is a form of resistance against the societal norms that sought to suppress and oppress Dalits.

In another *abhang*, Chokha expresses his inability to serve the divine as he does not have access to 'Thee':

*O God, my caste is low;  
How can I serve you? Everyone tells me to go away;  
How can I see you?  
When I touch anyone, they take offence.*

*Chokhamela wants your mercy. (Abhang 76) (qtd. in Zelliott 5-6).*

The main focus of his poetry was protest and questioning of supremacy of the *Brahmanical* order. Though Chokhamela lived the life of a Mahar with its traditional limitations, Zelliott points out that the spirit of most of the *abhangas*, lies in the "delight in the Lord, delivery from life's sufferings through devotion. Even though agony is there, the central message is that Chokha even though a Mahar (Dalit) could experience the grace of God" (8).

In Poems of Chokha Mela, the poet writes:

*Unadulterated Chokha Mela  
Celebrates the name of the Lord  
Outcaste Mahar I am*



*Erstwhile borne as Neel  
Slandered the Lord then  
Hence reborn as Mahar  
Chokha says pollution  
Is the fruit of our past deeds ( 13)*

The poem touches on themes of spiritual growth, the concept of karma, and the cycle of birth and rebirth in certain belief systems. It seems to reflect on the speaker's journey from a negative past to a more enlightened present, where they are now celebrating their faith and acknowledging the consequences of their past actions.

Ravidas, another *bhakti* poet from a so-called low-caste of North India believes that liberation can be attained through worship and through work, which goes against the grain of modern-day radical dalit rhetoric. His life and poetry reflect his direct experience with caste-based discrimination and oppression. In his verses, he often spoke out against the injustices faced by Dalits and challenged the prevailing notions of caste superiority.

Ravidas's *bhakti* poetry emphasized the fundamental equality of all human beings in the eyes of the divine. He believed that societal hierarchies and divisions were irrelevant in the spiritual realm. His compositions underscored the idea that devotion and righteousness were more important than one's caste background. Ravidas's verse begins by emphasizing the equality of all individuals, regardless of their social or caste background. Whether one's heart is associated with a Brahmin, Vaishya, Shudra, Kshatriya, Dom, Chandal, or mallech (various caste designations), Ravidas asserts that these distinctions hold no relevance when it comes to matters of spiritual devotion. He suggests that by worshiping the divine, one can attain spiritual purity and liberation, regardless of their caste or social position. This idea challenges the caste-based notions of purity and impurity prevalent in society.

Ravidas employs a metaphor to illustrate his point. He likens the effect of devotion to nectar in water. Just as a water plant's leaf remains untouched by the nectar it produces, the essence here is that the devotee remains untouched by the worldly impurities while experiencing spiritual transformation through devotion. The verse concludes with a contemplative question.

Ravidas questions the nature of a blessed life in this world. He invites readers to reflect on whether a life centered on devotion and spiritual purity is truly lived amidst the mundane and societal divisions.

Another well-known *bhakti* poet Kabir, a 15th-century mystic poet and philosopher from India, addressed social issues of his time through his thought-provoking and insightful poetry. While Kabir's verses did not specifically mention the term "dalits" (referring to oppressed or marginalized communities in India), his teachings often challenged social hierarchies and advocated for equality and inclusivity. However, it's important to note that while Kabir's teachings resonate with themes of social justice and spiritual equality that are important to the Dalit community, the term "Dalit" as it is understood today did not exist during Kabir's time. The concept of "Dalit" as a social identity emerged much later. That being said, Kabir's teachings align with the principles of social equality, which are central to the Dalit movement.

He is also famous for his reformatory quest which is overtaken by metaphysical propensities and thus seeks renunciation as:

*Kabir says, renounce,  
All family, caste, and clan.  
Turn into an ant,  
Instead-  
Pick the sugar [Hari] from the sand  
And eat.  
(Dharwadkar 120).*

Kabir vehemently rejected the caste system and criticized the divisions it created among people. His verses often emphasize that true spirituality transcends caste distinctions, and he advocated for a direct connection between the individual and the divine, without intermediaries or social hierarchies. Kabir's poetry emphasizes the inherent equality of all human beings. He spoke about the universality of the divine and the idea that all individuals are equal in the eyes of God. This aligns with the Dalit movement's call for social justice and the dismantling of caste-based discrimination. His teachings focus on spiritual liberation and self-realization. His poetry encourages individuals to break free from the constraints of societal expectations and material attachments. This emphasis on liberation aligns with the Dalit movement's call for freedom from oppression.

Eknath, another prominent figure in the Bhakti movement, was indeed a devotional movement that emerged in medieval India. He lived during the 16th century and is considered one of the important saints and poets of Maharashtra, a region in western India. Eknath's contributions were significant in the realms of religious and social reform. He was a Brahmin Bhakti poet who spoke on behalf of the Mahars. His dramatic poems called *bharuds* were dominated by the Mahar voice. He wrote about three hundred bharuds, of which: “fifty poems were written with as if an Untouchable were the author. Forty –seven bharuds seem to come from the mouths of Mahar men or women; one is written in the name of a Mang, one of the three important Maharashtrian untouchable castes”. (qtd .in Zelliot15).

Bhakti movement all over the country, especially in Maharashtra, makes it clear that there is no caste distinction created by God. Eknath explicitly uses the names of the Non- Brahman saints from Maharashtra and Northern India:

*God baked pots with Gora,  
drove cattle with Chokha,  
cut grass with Savata Mali,  
wove garments with Kabir, coloured hide with Ravidas,  
sold meat with butcher Sajana,  
melted gold with narahari,  
carried cow- dung with janabai  
and even became the Mahar messenger of Damaji. (qtd .in Zelliot 22).*

Eknath's teachings emphasized the equality of all individuals regardless of caste or social background. He spoke against caste-based discrimination and social hierarchies, focusing on the idea that genuine devotion and ethical conduct were more important than one's caste status. Eknath's writings addressed the need for social reform and ethical conduct. He advocated for righteous living, emphasizing humility, compassion, and empathy as essential qualities. These principles align with the Dalit movement's goals of seeking justice and dignity for marginalized communities. Eknath's abhangas (devotional songs) and other literary works often touched upon themes of devotion, moral conduct, and the pursuit of righteousness. His poetry encouraged introspection, self-improvement, and devotion to a higher purpose.

While Eknath's identity is not specifically that of a Dalit, his teachings, emphasis on social equality, and commitment to ethical values resonate with the aspirations of marginalized communities, including Dalits. His inclusive approach to spirituality and his emphasis on the dignity and worth of every individual reflect the broader ideals of the Bhakti movement and the principles championed by advocates of social justice.

It is important to understand the nature of revolt initiated by dalit Bhakti poets. The language these saint-poets used for their songs, dohas and abhangas was vernacular, as spoken by the common people. They frequently used metaphors connected with their daily work. Though there is no evidence to suggest that Chokhamela ever protested against the traditional limits of Mahar village work, the internal evidence of his *abhangs* suggests some protest against the concept of untouchability. Kabir's voice of dissent against the existing reality, the glaring disparity between the rich and poor, the discrimination by Brahmins and high caste Hindus towards the lower castes (especially the untouchables) and his relationship with God without the meditation of Brahmins and the Mullahs whom he ridicules as greedy and ignorant, had a profound impact on Shudras.

The paper further highlights that Chokhamela, Eknath, and Kabir were all influential Bhakti poets who lived in different regions of India and composed their works in various languages sharing the core belief of devotion to a higher power and the importance of inner spirituality. While Chokhamela emphasized social equality and challenged caste-based divisions, Kabir bridged religious gaps and promoted universal love, and Eknath focused on moral values and ethical conduct. Their collective contributions enriched the Bhakti movement and continue to inspire individuals to seek a deeper connection with the divine and a more meaningful life. While they share the common theme of devotion to a higher power, there are distinct dissimilarities in their poetry in terms of their backgrounds, styles, and philosophical inclinations. They are different in their philosophical themes:

Chokhamela in his poetry focused on the struggles of the marginalized and the need to transcend societal divisions and prejudices. Chokhamela's devotion was deeply rooted in challenging the caste-based hierarchy and emphasizing equality and social justice. Eknath, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of devotion, knowledge, and inner transformation. His poetry often conveyed spiritual wisdom and guidance for leading a righteous life within the societal framework. Whereas, Kabir's poetry was characterized by his unique blend of Sufi

mysticism and Bhakti principles. He criticized rituals, dogmas, and external religious practices, advocating for direct communion with the divine through inner realization.

As far as language and style of writing is concerned, Chokhamela, primarily composed his poetry in Marathi, often using simple and direct language. His verses were emotionally charged and conveyed his experiences of social discrimination. While Eknath's poetry exhibited a more scholarly approach. His works included commentaries on sacred texts and philosophical discourses, along with devotional compositions.

Kabir's verses were marked by their metaphorical and symbolic language. He employed vivid imagery and analogies to convey complex spiritual ideas in a relatable manner.

With regard to Influence and Legacy, Chokhamela is considered a pioneer in challenging caste-based discrimination and promoting social equality. His life and poetry continue to inspire movements against caste oppression. Eknath's contributions extend beyond poetry to include his role as a reformer who advocated for social harmony and ethical conduct. His writings have had a lasting impact on Marathi literature and culture. Kabir's verses had a profound influence on both Hindu and Sufi thought. His ideas of transcending religious boundaries and seeking the universal truth remain relevant even today. Therefore, Chokhamela, Eknath, and Kabir shared a devotion to the divine and a commitment to spiritual expression, their differing backgrounds, approaches, and legacies highlight the diverse nature of the Bhakti movement and its impact on Indian society and culture.

Most of the Bhakti poets were Hindus by caste. They may be called 'reformists' as they only attempted to correct some of the evils of Hinduism, particularly the practice of untouchability without questioning the caste system in general. In their poetry, the poetics of surrender ultimately eclipses the poetics of resistance. Yet the credit of inaugurating a concerted resistance against brahminical oppression goes to these poets. Their resistance might appear moderate and even compromising from a modern dalit-radical perspective but according to the times in which they wrote it was quite revolutionary.

### **Summing up**

To sum up, India has been considered the most stratified of all known societies in human history because of its peculiar form of caste system. The system is peculiar in the sense that it harbours one of the greatest separating forces that divides human beings into high and low castes. This division is backed by certain religious sanctions which sociologists use to explain concepts such as 'purity' and 'pollution'. As discussed above, the origin of the caste system according to the western view is centered around the Aryan invasion theory to which the consequent social oppression and enslavement of the native population is attributed. The Brahmanic view is the mythological-religious theory, which sees it as a result of divine sanctions, with its origin in mainly the *Purusha Sukta*. In the medieval period the Bhakti movement which included radical thinkers and mystic reformers challenged the varna system and stratification of human society on the basis of caste. It can be considered as the time from where this hegemonic social order was begun to be countered.

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