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Janabai



Saint Janabai is one of the popular woman saint-poets to have been born in Maharashtra. Women all across Maharashtra sing her verses while pounding and grinding grain. Along with saint-poets like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, and Tukaram, Janabai has a place of honour in the minds of the Marathi people in Maharashtra, especially the Warkari sect.

Janabai was born in Gangakhed, a village on the banks of the River Godavari in Parbhani district, to a family belonging to the Shudra caste, which is considered to be the lowest in the caste rung. Her father Dama was Warkari and her mother Karunda was a Bhagawad-Dharma devotee. Both her parents were intense devotees of Lord Vitthal of Pandharpur. They would go on the annual Pandharpur pilgrimage every year. Janabai's mother died when she was very young and her father took her to the city of Pandharpur shortly before his own death, where she became a servant in the household of Damasheth Shimpi, who were Warkari devotees. One of the sons in the family was Saint Shiromani Namdev, who went on to become one of the greatest Saint poets of all time in Maharashtra. Janabai cared for the young Namdev and remained his Daasi (a servant) throughout her life. She would call herself Naamyasi Daasi (servant of Namdev) It is said that they died on the same day.

Around 340 Abhanga composed by Saint Janabai have been published in a collection of saint-poetry, Sakal Sant Gaathaa. They were included by Namdev in the compilation of his own works. Other than these, she also has composed parables like KrishnaJanma (the birth of Krishna), Thaalipaak, PrahladCharitra (biography of Prahlad), BaalKridaa (Children's Sport), Harishchandraakhyaan (Parable of Harishchandra), Draupadi Swayamvar. Her softly sentimental compositions Thaalipaak and Draupadi Swayamvar inspired the great poet Mukteshwar (grandson of Saint Eknath).

Saint Janabai's sentimental poetry is replete with her love for the God. It is said that because of her devotion to God, she completely succeeded in merging into God by erasing herself. She became detached even before she realized God. She has sketched innumerable of her experiences in life in her compositions. Her compositions are replete with her devotional love for Saint Namdev, her intense sentiment towards Saint Dnyaneshwar, the great devotional strength of Saint Chokhamela, and her devotion towards Lord Vitthal. She has indeed done her future generations a great favour by doing a precise of the life, good characteristics and great work of the great saints in her time like Saint Dnyaneshwar, Saint Namdev, Saint Sopankaka, Saint Goroba, Saint ChokhaMela, Saint Sen Nhavi, etc. Her simple language touches the heart of the common man.

In her poems she sings:

Let me undergo as many births in this world as You please, but grant that my desires are fulfilled. They are that I see Pandharpur and serve Namdev in every birth. I do not mind if I am a bird or a swine, a dog or a cat, but my conditions are that in each of these lives, I must see Pandharpur and serve Namdev. This is the ambition of Namdev's maid.

Give me only this girl, O Hari, that I shall always sing Your sacred Name. Fulfill my only desire that You will accept my humble homage and service. This is all that I desire. Have mercy on me and fulfil my desires. I want to concentrate my eyes and mind on You and have Your Name on my lips. For this the maid Jani falls at Your feet.

That sums up the philosophy of Janabai and how she attained her goal. So intense and sincere was her devotion to Vithoba, it is said, that He Himself used to lighten her household duties, which, on becoming old, she was unable to perform.

Janabai's songs are still widely sung in Maharashtra. Janabai is said to have passed away in 1350 at the main entrance of the Vitthal temple in Pandharpur. But she lives on in the hearts of the people of Maharashtra through her Abhanga.

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