Chokhamela and Eknath: Two *Bhakti* Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change

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CHOKHAMELA, a thirteenth to fourteenth century Maharashtrian *sant* in the bhakti tradition, and Eknath, a sixteenth century *sant*, are both revered figures in the *Warkari sampradaya*, the tradition of pilgrimage to Pandharpur which marks the important *bhakti* movement in the Marathi-speaking area. The lives of both are known by legend; their songs are sung by devotees on the pilgrimage and in *bhajan* sessions. Chokhamela was a Mahar, the only important *bhakti* figure in Maharashtra from an Untouchable caste. Eknath was a Brahman from the holy city of Paithan who wrote about Chokhamela, ate with Mahars, allowed Untouchables into his *bhajans*, and wrote poems in the persona of a Mahar who was wiser in spiritual matters than the Brahmans.

Both, then, offer models for contemporary change in regard to Untouchability: even though an Untouchable, Chokhamela achieved sanctity and a place among the *bhakti* pantheon of *sants*; Eknath, even though a Brahman from a distinguished scholarly family, showed by his actions that there was equality among the true *bhakta*. This paper will explore the thought and the actions of each *bhakti* figure in an attempt to determine their basic social and religious ideas, and then note the contemporary attempts to legitimize change through reference to these earlier religious figures.

Chokhamela was born in the second half of the thirteenth century, probably about the time that Dnyaneshwar, who is considered the founder of the *bhakti* sect in Maharashtra, was born. He died in 1338 in Mangalvedhe, a town in Sholapur district not far from Pandharpur. Chokhamela and his family seem to have followed the traditional village duties of the Mahar. The legend of his birth involves his parents' carrying mangoes to Pandharpur on the orders of the village headman, a duty expected of the Mahar village servant who was at the beck and call of the *patil*. On their journey, the God Viththal, worshipped as the central figure by the *Warkari sampradaya*, disguised as a Brahman, begged a fruit from the wife. He tasted it, found it sour and returned it to her.
She tucked it into the folds of her sari and delivered the other mangoes to the priests at Pandharpur. The fruit was counted and when she pulled the bitten mango from her sari to show why the full quota was not delivered, it had taken the form of a lovely child—Chokhamela.  

Chokhamela’s death legend also involves traditional Mahar work and God’s grace. He and other Mahars were called to build a wall at Mangalvedhe—another traditional Mahar duty. As they worked on it, it collapsed, burying them. Namdev, a bhakti sant from the shimpi, or tailor, community who was Chokhamela’s most devoted friend, went to the village to claim Chokhamela’s body. He found the bones that murmured “Viththal, Viththal” and took them to Pandharpur, where they were buried near the steps of the temple.

The legends, of course, can do no more than suggest that Chokhamela and his family were thoroughly and uncomplainingly involved in the traditional work of the Mahar caste, with divine intervention only to allow that work to proceed more smoothly. In even the lowliest of duties, that of dragging dead cattle out of the village, the God Viththal appeared to help Chokhamela. There is no evidence to suggest that Chokhamela ever stepped beyond the traditional limits of Mahar village work.

The internal evidence of Chokhamela’s abhangas (bhakti songs) suggests some protest, however, of the concept of untouchability, even though the greater part reveal only the traditional devotion and piety of the bhakta. The printed collection of Chokhamela’s abhangas with which I have worked contains 211 songs, some of them obviously spurious since the names of later sants appear in them. The collection was prepared for popular use, and no substantive scholarly work has been done on the manuscripts held at Pandharpur. It seems to me, however, that an authentic voice does come through these songs, however corrupt the text may be.

All but thirty-two of Chokhamela’s over two hundred songs could have been written by any of the lower class saints. They are simple, direct, without reference to his caste, such as this one:

Why do you need a mirror
   to see the bangles on your wrist?
Have faith in the Name of Viththal.

You don’t need to think about ritual;
Chant the Name of Viththal.
The path of the Yogi is not filled with clutter;
   the chant is free;
do it first.
Chokha says: there is bliss in the company of the saints;
   chant the Name every night, every day./Abhang 14

The abhangas which do refer to untouchability, however, reveal that Chokhamela was profoundly troubled by his despised place in society. At times he was accepting; at times rebellious.