IN RECENT YEARS, a literary-cultural movement known as Dalit Sahitya (literature of the poor or down-trodden) has emerged on the Indian literary scene. Since the early 1960’s, a growing number of poets and writers, largely from the Scheduled Caste communities of Mahars and Buddhists in the state of Maharashtra in western India, have been producing literary works dominated by the themes of Untouchability and poverty, repression and revolution, and above all, contain fierce attacks on the Hindu religious and social order of caste and its modern forms. Dalit Sahitya is considered to be a unique genre of modern Indian literature, for now Untouchables themselves, using the traditionally-denied weapon of literacy, are exposing the conditions under which they have lived, as well as directly rebelling (vidroha) against the Hindu institution which has assured their perpetual subordination, the varna (caste) order.

Yet the emergence of Dalit Sahitya is not without its historical antecedents. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Maharashtra saw the development of a literary tradition among members of the non-Brahman and Untouchable castes through the medium of the bhakti (faith or devotion) movement. While the bhakti tradition has been most prominently identified with the Brahman saints Dnyaneshwar and Eknath, it also included the Mahar saints Chokha Mela, Karma Mela, Banka and Nirmala, the courtesan Kanhopatra, as well as the non-Brahman saints Namdev (tailor), Gora (potter), Sawata (gardener), Sena (barber), and Tukaram (Kunbhi or peasant). Many of the abhangs (religious poems) of these poet-saints (and especially those of the Untouchables) expressed in poignant terms the inequalities and injustices suffered by the lower castes as a result of the varna order. The bhakti tradition, therefore, first raises certain themes pertinent to the life of those at the bottom of the varna hierarchy, which reappear in Dalit Sahitya, even though the perspective of both movements is quite different. This paper examines some aspects of the relationship between the two by focussing on Dalit Sahitya’s understanding of bhakti and on the treatment of caste and Untouchability in the abhangs of the Untouchable saints and in the poetry of modern dalit writers.
The bhakti movement of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Maharashtra represented a remarkable instance of literary and cultural efflorescence.¹ Inveighing against the excessive ritualism and Brahmanical supremacy of the day, and insisting that the individual by means of sublime faith or bhakti could attain the Divine, poet-saints from various castes gathered at Pandharpur and spread their message throughout the region known today as Maharashtra. Dnyaneshwar stressed, for example, that in the eyes of God there were no varnas or jatis (caste as an occupational division), and further, in the social realm, all varnas and jatis were inherently equal as the proper functioning of each was necessary for the well-being of the whole society.² While the social effects of the teachings of Dnyaneshwar and the other poet-saints may have been quite limited, it seems that among the saints themselves few caste distinctions were observed. It was in this context that the Mahar Chokha Mela’s claim to religious knowledge was honoured by his fellow saints.³

The details of Chokha Mela’s life are not precisely known. It is thought that he was born in a village near Pandharpur but spent the bulk of his life in Pandharpur itself. Several instances proving that Chokha Mela enjoyed divine favour (beginning with his birth) are reputed to have taken place during the course of his life. Each instance pointed up the discrepancy between Chokha Mela’s earthly station as an Untouchable, and the purity of his heart and the intensity of his devotion to Vitthal. The birth of his son Karma Mela, for example, was occasioned by divine dispensation: an aged and famished Brahmin came to Chokha’s house and begged for food. Chokha’s wife was reluctant to serve him as she was a Mahar. He insisted, however, and she yielded to his entreaties. Upon having finished his meal, the Brahmin (who was actually Vitthal in disguise) assured her that she would give birth to a son for whom she had long prayed.

Similarly, even though access to the temple was forbidden to Chokha, the god Vitthal carried him into the sanctum sanctorum and even bestowed on him his own necklace. The townspeople, however, did not accept that Chokha was beloved by the Deity and continued to harass him as an Untouchable. Finally, even in death Chokha could not escape his position as a Mahar. He died while performing veth (forced or compulsory labour required of all Untouchables, especially Mahars). The Mahars of his village had been called up to repair the village walls. The walls collapsed and many Mahars, including Chokha Mela, were crushed to death. His friend, the saint Namdev, describes in a touching series of abhangs how he was asked by Vitthal to go and find Chokha’s remains so that a monument could be erected over them.⁴

While the majority of Chokha Mela’s abhangs describe his devotion to the deity Vitthal and sing his praises, several express in very direct and heartfelt tones the consciousness of his existence as an Untouchable. Indeed, some of his most emotional abhangs concern the tension between his love for Vitthal and his difficulties in displaying that love due to his Untouchability. It should also be pointed out that the consciousness of Untouchability or of low birth is evident...