

Religious poetry of an Indian Muslim saint: Sheikh Muhammadbaba

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Since the last centuries of the first millennium India saw a rise of the voices that expressed the religious ideas and experiences in the vernaculars. The bearers of these voices, men and women today recognized as holy, were often self-made poets, or better singers and performers of religious poetry who expressed their inner thoughts and devotion with rare intensity thereby earning the recognition of the surrounding public. They came from the various social circles and could be also of different religious denomination. Their poetical compositions, prevalently, but not exclusively, clad in the Vaishnava idiom, emphasized rather a personal than organized engagement with the religion. Not seldom the saint-poets therefore became critics of then contemporary religiosity and social organization and till today enjoy a wide popularity among the Indians.

Sheikh Muhammad from Shrigonda¹ (c.a. 1560-1660), colloquially called as Muhammadbaba, was a Muslim holy man who became ranked as a primary example of Muslim saint-poets - (*'musalmān marāṭhī santakavī'*)² - whose vehicle of communication was Marathi the dominant language of today's Indian state of Maharashtra. An acknowledgement of this may be seen in the fact that the Sheikh's poems were included in the collection of dominantly Vaishnava poetical compositions '*Sakalasantagāthā*' (i.e. Songs of All Saints) that has been widely popular among the Maharashtrians (Gosavi 2000, 911-917). His voice thus represents

the only Muslim poet hailing from Maharashtra among the host of other saint-poets. Being often a stern critic of the pre-modern Maharashtrian society has also won him a recognition of being an incarnation of Northern Indian saint³ Kabir. However, over the four centuries the Sheikh became particularly dear to Maharashtrian Vaishnavas – Varkaris, the devotees of the Vitthala from Pandharpur. With Varkaris he shared not only the ways of expressing devotion in personal and emotional terms, but also the myths related to Pandharpur, Vitthala, as well as to the other saint-poets to whose company he has been often placed in the hagiographic narratives. Indeed, the religion of Varkaris, who form the mainstream religious movement in whole Maharashtra has been fed on the saint-poets and their songs. They convey the inner religious experiences and Varkaris considered utterly important to share them with the others. Given this, it may be not a surprise that Muhammadbaba's first hagiographer Dasganu, as well as the great modern Maharashtrian politician and lawyer Mahadev Govind Ranade called Baba a convert to Hinduism (Joshi 1932, 83, Ranade 1974, 75). Following this line of interpretation, the other earlier scholars, hailing mainly from outside of Maharashtra, considered Sheikh, similarly to his Northern counterpart Kabir, to be a great example of integration of Hindus and Muslims (Chand 1946, 224; Ahmad 1964, 159).

Speaking historically, allows a yet different charac-

1 Shrigonda, earlier Chambhargonda, is a town in Ahmadnagar district of about thirty-one thousand inhabitants. More on the history of Shrigonda, see in Gavli (2009) and the *Gazetteer of Ahmadnagar district*.

2 A term coined by Ramachandra Ch. Dhare in his path-breaking *Musalmān Marāṭhī Santkavī* (1967) that till today remains the only concise academic treatment of these saint-poets. In 1994 the book was republished under the name *Ekātmatece Śilpakār (The Shapers of Unity)*.

3 '*Sant*' is a term widely employed in new Indo-Aryan languages. In its common use the term denotes a holy man or woman promulgating inner religious experiences whose ideas often give space to a stern criticism of social evils.

terization of the Sheikh. The first and by far the only known record contemporary to Baba's time, which conveys an information on the Sheikh is an *inām*⁴ document allegedly ordered by Maloji Bhosle, a grandfather of Maratha king Shivaji. According to the document, Maloji, who respected the Sheikh as his preceptor provided him also with a land in Shrigonda (Bendre 1957, 69-70).⁵ This document was brought to light in 1957 by Vasudev Sitaram Bendre, who further discusses the other historical evidences. Pointing to a verse found Baba's chief written work *Yogasangram*, of which today remain only the later copies, Bendre connects him to another great saint-poet of Varkaris – Eknath (1533-1599). Both Sheikh Muhammad and Eknath, according to *Yogasangram*, seem to have been inspired in their religious endeavours by a mysterious persona of certain Chand Bodhle, an incarnation of divine sage Dattatreya. Bendre discusses also another document giving the religious lineage of the Sheikh a yet different turn. A Sufi Qadiri lineage found in Shrigonda, but today unfortunately lost, makes the Sheikh a disciple of Chand Saheb Qadiri, whom Bendre identified with the above-mentioned Chand Bodhle. This interpretation has been followed by other well-known Maharashtrian scholars of saint-poets, namely Ramachandra Chintaman Dhere (1994, 79-82) and Shankar Gopal Tulpule (1979, 377-378). Although it is not possible to say with certainty whether the Sheikh was a Qadiri Sufi who turned to a sant beloved by Vaishnavas his interactions with local Hindu religiosity and its representatives strongly transpire both through his written works as well as through the devotional legacy that carry on his today's followers.

Today, similarly to many other persons of the remote past, most of the material on the historical Sheikh suffers from the overlap between what has been preserved, recorded, imagined and created after the Sheikh's demise. Depending on the choice of the evidence he may appear a Muslim turned Varkari, indeed, as a popular song puts it „*an Avindha in whose heart dwells Govinda*“.⁶ Or he may be seen a yogi performing miracles, which many stories told about him would confirm, or just a saint answering prayers and wishes of

his devotees, and currently also as Shrigonda's patron deity (*grāma-devatā*, Gavli and Gavli 2011, 36). One of the possible ways to approach Sheikh's complex legacy is to read through the poetical compositions attributed to him. His main work is *Yogasangram*, a poetical treatise that peculiarly elaborates upanishadic image of a Soul (*ātmā*) fighting its own faults through the control achieved via yoga.⁷ Another set of ideas offers the collection of the Sheikh's shorter poetry that came to be recorded in the notebooks of different traditional singers of saint-poetry. The most authoritative version has been published by Bendre under the name *Kavitāsangraha* (1961).

Although, as Hawley (1988, 269-290) would remind us, to decide on authorship of the saint-poetry may be a tricky exercise, the painstaking effort of expressing who talks and why strongly marks many of the alleged Sheikh's compositions. On the one hand, the majority of these texts convey a deep sympathy for the Varkari religiosity. Their author is familiar with Varkari devotional philosophy, saints, and myths, but also with yogic practices and experiences that extend beyond the Vaishnava world. On the other hand, the firm claims of being Muslim, emphasis on the Oneness of God and his familiarity with basic Islamic (and possibly also Sufi) theology, certainly pose a problem for those who have chosen to see Sheikh exclusively through Vaishnava eyes. What dominantly transpires is an attempt to fight one's own vision of religious understanding through the surrounding social environment. It is also here where the emotional appeal that expresses the Sheikh's own experiences gets embodied in his poetry. Being a Muslim seeker of mystical knowledge of God, the one with the soft corner for the local religiosity, must have brought the Sheikh to many a controversial situation where he had to defend his own religious visions and experiences against those who claim to possess the knowledge by birth or profession. This is also seen from the following selection of translations that on the one hand show the pride for his own achievements, and on the other point to all those who he thinks should be ashamed.

4 *Inām* is generally a written statement that confirms a land proprietorship.

5 The document expresses the relationship of the patron (Maloji) and the patronized (the Sheikh) in the words “*Tumhī āmce guru āhāt va āpaṇ tumce śiṣya āho* (You are our guru, and we are your disciples).

6 ‘*Avindha*’, literally one without having his ears pierced, i.e. a Muslim. ‘*Govinda*’ is one of epithets used for god Krishna.

7 There exist several manuscripts of *Yogasangram*. The most accessible version has been published by Ramachandra Cintaman Dhere (1981).

Kavitāsaṅgraha (part Niṣkaṣaṅka Prabodha), poem no. 34

भूदेव ते ब्राह्मण सकळ वर्णो श्रेष्ठ ।	पन्नास कोटि मंत्र गायत्री वेद चतुर ।
ते सांगेन चोखट श्रोतियांला ॥ १ ॥	योग होम थोर ब्राह्मण नव्हे ॥ ६ ॥
घोतर टिळे जानवी नव्हेति ब्राह्मण ।	अनुष्ठान जपतप नव्हे ब्राह्मण पूर्ण ।
हृदयीं शुचपण तोची ब्राह्मण ॥ २ ॥	तत्त्वेशीं विज्ञान ब्राह्मण विरक्त ॥ ७ ॥
शेंडी मोचे कडदोरें ब्राह्मण नव्हेति ।	सडा संमार्जन तुळसी वृंदावन ।
कल्पना मुंडिती ते ब्रह्मरूप ॥३॥	विधी कर्मबंधन नव्हे ब्राह्मण ॥ ८ ॥
आचारे नव्हे ब्राह्मण नेणती विचार ।	निर्बध उपनिषद हा पहावा मोझा ।
अनामिकाचार केल्या ब्राह्मण नव्हे ॥ ४ ॥	न येतां गोही वोझा शब्द ग्रंथ दुषावा ॥ ९ ॥
आंघोळ संध्या त्रिकाळ ब्राह्मण नव्हे खरा ।	शेख महंमद ब्राह्मणाला वंदी ।
हृदयीं निर्मळ बरा तो ब्राह्मण ॥ ५ ॥	अब्राह्मण निंदी ब्रह्मविज्ञाने ॥ १० ॥

Brahmans are gods on the earth, the most superior from all castes.

Listeners, I shall explain it clearly.

Dhoti,⁸ sacred mark on forehead and sacred thread, do not make Brahmans.

Brahman has a pure heart!

Tuft, slippers and thread on the waist, do not make Brahmans.

Brahmanness is to shave off the fancies!

Brahmans don't behave thoughtlessly.

Acting absurdly, bathing ritually three times a day, does not make a true Brahman.

It is cleanliness of heart!

500 million mantras, Gayatri and Vedas, yoga and homa,⁹ that's not a Brahman.

*Performing ceremonies, repeating God's names, austerities
do not complete a Brahman.*

It is the knowledge of principles of detachment!

Purified house, a tulsi-pot,

rituals also do not make a Brahman.

Look how endless is the magnitude of Upanishads!

However, he who missed their meaning blames only the book.

Knowing Brahma, Sheikh Muhammad adores Brahman and criticizes non-Brahman!

8 A long loin cloth, an unsewn cotton garment worn by men to cover the lower parts of body.

9 A Vedic fire ritual.

Kavitāsangraha, poem no. 179

ब्रह्मपुरीचे तुरुक । द्वैत मिळोनि जालो एक ॥ १ ॥
 अहं टोणगा भक्षिला । निज प्रेमाचा प्यालो प्याला ॥ २ ॥
 सांडवलों आचार विचारा । कोणी भले म्हणा बुरा ॥ ३ ॥
 कोणी अम्हांसी बाटले । बाटुनि मूळ ठायां गेले ॥ ४ ॥
 शेख महंमदीं बाटले । यातीवेगळें घातले ॥ ५ ॥

*I, the Turk from the city of Brahma, stopped perceiving differences.
 I swallowed the confused ego and drank the goblet of love.
 I casted away the thoughts and am not concerned with the correct behaviour. Say whatever!
 Somebody made me impure and the impurity my origin.
 Yes, Sheikh Muhammad became polluted, and got beyond caste!*

Kavitāsangraha, poem no. 236

अनिवार पंढरी । अविनाश श्रीहरि । वाहीन अंतरी व्यापुनि अलिप्त ॥ १ ॥
 मूर्ती लपविल्या । अविंधीं फोडिल्या । म्हणती दैना जाल्या । पंढरीच्या ॥ २ ॥
 अढळ न ढळे । ब्रह्मादिकां न कळे । म्हणती आंधळे । देव फोडिले ॥ ३ ॥
 चराचरीं अविट । गुप्त ना प्रकट । ओळखावा निकट । ज्ञानचक्षे ॥ ४ ॥
 हरि जित ना मेले । आले ना ते गेले । हृदयांत लक्षिले । शेख महंमद ॥ ५ ॥

*Without any attachment, I keep firmly in my mind the unrestrained Pandhari and indestructible Shri Hari!
 His image was hidden, but Muslims (avindha) broke it. Some may say, they gave Pandhari a very bad time.
 Motionless never moves, however, those blind like Brahmans do not understand it and say that the God was broken!
 Always there in all living and non-living beings, not hidden not apparent, recognize it closely through the eyes of wisdom.
 Hari doesn't live and doesn't die, doesn't come and doesn't go. He is present in the heart of Sheikh Muhammad.*

Kavitāsangraha, poem no. 182

शुच सोंवळी हीन याती । नेणें विटाळ वित्पती ॥ १ ॥
 भिंत करूं जातां सोंवळी । तों अधिकचि निघे मळी ॥ २ ॥
 येणें न्यायें विप्र याती । पाणीयानें पाण्या धुती ॥ ३ ॥
 विप्र विटाळाचें माहेर आंधोळींत गेला संसार ॥ ४ ॥
 शेख महंमदीं धुतलें वोंवळे । जन विजन दिसे सोंवळे ॥ ५ ॥

*The clean and pure member of the low caste doesn't have a basic idea of pollution.
 If someone tries to clean the wall, only more dirt comes.
 Such law applies to Vipras,¹⁰ who even wash water with water.
 Vipras are the original home of pollution! They spend life in taking bath!
 Sheikh Muhammad has washed the impurity.
 He sees people and the world unpolluted.*

¹⁰ I.e., Brahmans.

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ATTILA KOVÁCS

Historická pamäť dokáže byť – a v strednej a východnej Európe zvlášť – občas veľmi výberová. Osoby a fakty, ktoré sa nehodia do naratívu tej či onej národnej alebo inej ideológie, sa ľahko strácajú v hmle zabudnutia, alebo v lepšom prípade žijú svojím alternatívnym životom menšinových subkultúr. Takto už nepretržite osemnásť rokov sa každoročne koná v Dunajskej Strede orientalistická konferencia, ktorá bola z veľkej časti nepovšimnutá prevažnou časťou slovenských orientalistov. Stalo sa tak zrejme preto, že hlavným rokovacím jazykom konferencie je maďarčina. To však nič nemení na fakte, že ide o jedno z najvýznamnejších orientalistických podujatí v strednej Európe a konferenčné zborníky, vydávané každoročne, tiež zdôrazňujú význam tohto konferenčného cyklu. V tomto príspevku by som rád priblížil samotnú konferenciu, tiež aj okolnosti jej vzniku. Tiež sa budem venovať aj faktu, že málokto z českých a slovenských orientalistov, ktorí nehovoria po maďarsky, o tomto vedeckom podujatí počul.

Pre lepšie pochopenie je však treba začať osobou, ktorá konferencii dala meno: Árminom Vámbéryim (Filipský 1999, 46, 497). Tento vo svete dobre známy orientalista, turkológ a cestovateľ (Landau 2014; Mandler 2016), ktorého životné osudy v druhej polovici 19. stor. patrili v našich končinách k tým najdobrodružnejším, zostal v slovenskom prostredí do veľkej miery neznámy (Morvay 2007; Markusková 2017). Pritom sa začali práve na území dnešného Slovenska. V r. 1832 sa vo Svätom Jure pri Bratislave v chudobnej židovskej rodine narodil chlapec menom Hermann Wamberger (až neskôr si zmenil meno na maďarskejšie znejúce Ármin Vámbéry). Mal neľahké detstvo, ako trojročný ochromel na ľavú nohu a skoro nato zomrel aj jeho otec. Po tejto udalosti sa s matkou presťahovali do Dunajskej Strede, vtedy významného židovského centra a Vámbéry sa vždy hrdo hlásil k tomuto mestu.

Už v detstve sa ukázalo jeho jazykové nadanie - ako 16 - ročný už ovládal maďarčinu, nemčinu, hebrejčinu, francúzštinu, latinčinu a začal študovať angličtinu, škandinávske a slovanské jazyky, ktoré si časom tiež osvojil. V r. 1845 sa zapísal na piaristické gymnázium vo Svätom Jure, od r. 1847 pokračoval v štúdiu v Šoproni. Popri štúdiu - aby finančne podporil svoju rodinu - pôsobil ako domáci učiteľ. Štúdiá dokončil v Prešporke (dnešná Branislava) a v Pešti. Študoval semitské a iné orientálne jazyky, najmä osmanskú turečtinu.

Jeho talent a snaha boli ocenené v r. 1857, keď s podporou vtedajšieho uhorského ministra kultúry baróna Józsefa Eötvösa odcestoval do Istanbulu a v osmanskej metropole strávil štyri aktívne roky. Počas tohto pobytu sa mu plne podarilo integrovať sa do osmanskej spoločnosti a pôsobil pod menom Rešid *efendi* ako tajomník