

## **Enduring Faith: Resilience and Resistance in the Life and *Abhangas* of Saint Poetess *Soyarabai***

Dr. Rina Puradkar

Head & Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy,

R. J. College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Empowered Autonomous), Mumbai – 400086

Email: [rinpuradkar@rajcollege.edu.in](mailto:rinpuradkar@rajcollege.edu.in)

### **ABSTRACT**

The philosophy of resilience emphasizes recovering from adversity by not only enduring hardships but also emerging stronger and more capable. It is the ability to bounce back from hassles or conflicts, persist through difficulties, and turn obstacles into sources of strength and growth. It is a continuous and evolving process that helps to develop an individual's inner strength, effectively coping strategies, and gaining support from others, ultimately enhancing overall well-being and satisfaction in life.

Saint poetess and mystic *Soyarabai* belonging to *Varkari Sampradaya* of fourteenth century, presents a remarkable philosophy of resilience through her devotional poetry (*abhangas*). As a woman belonging to the Mahar caste (marginalized community) and the wife of the revered saint *Chokhamela*, Saint *Soyarabai* endured both caste and gender-based oppression rooted in everyday life—marriage, poverty, pilgrimage; her *abhangas* articulate a spiritual transcendence that confronts social hierarchies. Through bhakti, she negotiates and transcends caste and gender constraints, carving for an egalitarian sacred space. Her voice enlarges our understanding of medieval Indian mysticism and *Dalit* feminist philosophy. Her *abhangas* not only reflect a deep devotion to Lord *Vitthala* but also express the pain, alienation, and struggle of the marginalized *Dalit* community. Through a unique synthesis of divine longing and lived reality, *Soyarabai* redefines bhakti as a space for inner strength, social protest, and spiritual dignity. Her poetic expressions of suffering, her criticism of divine neglect, and her unwavering faith as a form of moral and emotional resilience is reflected in her *abhangas*. Her inclusive spiritual outlook holds special relevance in today's diverse and interconnected world, offering a message of resilience, tolerance, equality, and deep personal transformation. Ultimately, her *abhangas* serve as a light house for egalitarianism, ecstasy, resilience, and the universal search for spiritual truth and oneness. She frequently portrays the soul's deep yearning for divine connection as a path of inner purification and self-discovery, culminating in the dissolution of the ego before the divine through her *abhangas*. Her *abhangas* continue to resonate with and inspire people across all walks of life, particularly women belonging to all ages. They also reflect the framework of personal growth as well as collective healing in the face of adversity, underscoring her contributions to spiritual egalitarianism, embodied mysticism, and cultural defiance. The paper tries to investigate this philosophical

underpinning of her resilience through embodied mysticism, social critique, and proto-feminist consciousness hidden in her *abhangas*.

**Keywords:** *Resilience, Resistance, Spiritual egalitarianism, proto-feminist consciousness, Social oppression, Personal devotion, Inner purity, Oneness*

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## Introduction

The philosophy of resilience emphasizes recovering from adversity by not only enduring hardships but also emerging stronger and more capable. It is the ability to bounce back from hassles or conflicts, persist through difficulties, and turn obstacles into sources of strength and growth. It is a continuous and evolving process that helps to develop an individual's inner strength, effectively coping strategies, and gaining support from others, ultimately enhancing overall well-being and satisfaction in life.

The *Varkari Sampradaya* of *Maharashtra*, revolves around the worship of Lord *Vitthala* of *Pandharpur*, which was a notably inclusive stream within the Bhakti movement. Within this tradition, Saint *Soyarabai* of the fourteenth century stands out not only as a mystic poetess but also as an early voice of resilience against systemic social injustice. Her *abhangas* reflect the tension between the *Varkari* ideal of equality and the social reality of caste discrimination. She challenged the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender through personal devotion to a chosen deity. Her remarkable philosophy of resilience is reflected through her devotional poetry (*abhangas*). During her time, the caste system was firmly entrenched; As a woman belonging to the *Mahar* caste (marginalized community) and the wife of the revered saint *Chokhamela*, Saint *Soyarabai* endured both caste and gender-based oppression rooted in everyday life—marriage, poverty, and pilgrimage; her *abhangas* articulate a spiritual transcendence that confronts social hierarchies. *Dalits* were denied access to temples, education, and relegated to menial and impure tasks and considered as outcaste. Though she lived in close proximity to the temple, were not permitted entry and constantly faced violent exclusion. ‘*Pandhariche brahmane Chokhyahisi chhaleele, Tyaalagi kele navale deva*’ This *abhang*a replicates the oppression by the Brahmin upper class to the lower marginalized class. This *abhangas* oscillate between total faith she has in her Lord *Vitthala* and disappointment in Him. She praised God for His generosity (‘*Tumhee Keshav udaar*’) but also chastised Him for his lack of assistance (‘*Kiti kitibolo deva, kit Karoo ataa heya*’). She not only witnessed but internalized these

injustices and responded to them in *abhangas* poetic. Being a prolific saint poetess, only 62 of her *abhangas* have survived. She produced a substantial collection of writings, employing a unique style of blank verse that she herself had devised; she identifies very prominently herself as *Chokhamela'sMahari*, demonstrate her love and commitment to her partner and reproaches God for neglecting the *Dalits* and condemning them to suffering.

Despite these conditions, the *Varkari Sampradaya* of *Maharashtra* provided a unique space for the people belonging to different strata of life, the spiritual equality which was not contingent on caste. Yet, this sense of inclusivity carried its own contradictions. *Abhangas* of *Soyarabai* not only reflect a deep devotion to Lord *Vitthala* but also express the pain, alienation, and struggle of the marginalized *Dalit* community. She endured both caste and gender-based oppression rooted in everyday life—marriage, poverty, pilgrimage. Her *abhangas* articulate a spiritual transcendence that confronts social hierarchies and carving for an egalitarian sacred space as well as caste-gender constraints. Through a unique synthesis of divine longing and lived reality, *Soyarabai* redefines bhakti as a space for inner strength, social protest, and spiritual dignity. Her poetic expressions of suffering, her criticism of divine neglect, and her unwavering faith as a form of moral and emotional resilience is reflected in her *abhangas*. Her inclusive spiritual outlook holds special relevance in today's diverse and interconnected world, offering a message of resilience, tolerance, equality, and deep personal transformation. Ultimately, her *abhangas* serve as a light house for egalitarianism, ecstasy, resilience, and the universal search for spiritual truth and oneness.

Her *abhangas* portray the life of poverty and discrimination faced by *Dalits*, they have distributed the leftovers of food during the religious feasts. These incidents indicate that it is difficult for the lower caste people to attain the grace of divine or God. In one of her *abhangas*, she rebukes God for the social restrictions that prevent her from entering the temple, where she openly protests against untouchability. She not only speaks of her daily struggles and experiences of discrimination but also expressed a strong desire to reshape and establish an egalitarian society. Her *abhangas* replicate the form of early Indian prototype feminism, and this indicates that she belonged to the early phase of Indian modernity. It is necessary that her struggle, negotiation, and cultural expressions should be re-examined as emancipatory cultural history from a proto-feministic point of view. Her voice amplifies our understanding of medieval Indian mysticism and *Dalit* feminist philosophy. Her life and work exemplify a

reflective model of how spirituality can serve as a tool for both inner liberation and social transformation.

Being wife of Saint *Chokhamela*, *Soyarabai* was deeply involved in the devotional life of the *Varkari* saints. However, her voice was distinct; unlike male saints who occasionally wrote about caste discrimination from a metaphysical standpoint, she infused her *abhangas* with the lived experience of untouchability and domestic subjugation. She rejects ritualism, criticised social norms, and embraced a path of inner devotion that recognized the divine in all beings. Her *abhangas* demonstrate her unshakable faith and conviction in the transformation of potential spirituality. They are the silent cry of discrimination and emotionality.

‘हीन मी काय वानूं देवा । तुम्हीं केशवा उदार ॥१॥ करा माझे समाधान । दाखवा चरण आपुले  
॥२॥ लोटलेंसे महा नदी । नाहीं शुद्धदी देहाची ॥३॥ बुडत्यें काढावे बाहेरी । म्हणे चोख्याची  
महारी ॥४॥‘

The above *abhangas* of *Soyarabai* reflects the concept of resilience and revolves around the challenging patriarchal norms and social injustices faced by both men as well as women particularly belonging to the lower caste. This directly addressed the misery and restrictions imposed on men and women belonging to the *Mahar* caste, a low-caste community from *Maharashtra*. Through her devotion to Lord *Vitthala*, she found a way to transcend materialistic reality and claim her own spiritual space, demonstrating her inner strength and resilience in the face of societal limitations and advocating for the inherent divinity within all beings, regardless of caste or gender and try to establish the egalitarian society.

Along with other female saints of Bhakti movement like *Muktabai*, *Janabai*, *Mirabai* and *Akkama Mahadevi* she participated in a silent yet powerful resistance against patriarchal norms through her poetry and spiritual defiance. Her legacy lies not only in her literary prowess but also in her courageous stance against social injustices, serving as an inspiration for new generations’, women and activists. Her *abhangas* echo the oppression faced by women in patriarchal caste-based society, which states that a woman cannot attain God or divine grace,

being bound by kitchen and child. But she states that I see His face in the rolling pin and hear His song in the child's smile.

Her *abhangas* are preserved through oral tradition and later on through transcription. Though fewer in number compared to her male counterparts, her works offer invaluable insight into the mind of scholars. She focuses in her writings on hardships faced by women belonging to marginalized communities at the sametime. Thus, this provides the study material to modern *Dalit* literature and feminist theology.

One of the recurring themes in *Soyarabai's abhangas* is the idea that the soul is pure, regardless of the body it inhabits. One of the most oppressive customs women endured was the taboo surrounding menstruation, which led to their exclusion and humiliation. She was the first women saint poetess who courageously raised her voice to challenge this custom or practice and stance against menstrual taboos, making a powerful declaration in her verses, rejecting the notion that menstruation made women impure. She strongly condemned menstrual taboos, questioning the purity associated with bodily functions: In her famous line, 'If menstrual blood is impure, tell me who wasn't born of that blood?' This highlights the biological necessity and challenges the patriarchal belief that the menstruating body is impure, demonstrating her courage and intelligence.

'They call it bodily impurity,  
Yet the soul remains pure and wise.  
If bodily impurity is born with the body,  
Then who remains truly pure?  
  
Without menstruation,  
Nobody is ever created in this world.'

This *abhang* reflects being illiterate she still possesses the scientific understanding which is require for human birth. Her verses question the societal taboos and the pain of oppression. She states that, 'The body is impure, not the soul; a soul is untouched by caste....' she contemplates on the untouchability or impurity of the human body and further on the origin of the physical body. She condemns that this mortal body is untouchable and the spirit or the soul has no such bounds. It is pure and it is part of whole, the Ultimate Reality. The physical impurity or

untouchability depends on the origin of the body. Her abhangas does not transcended mere religious devotion but it became a powerful medium through which she voiced her objections to societal inequalities and discrimination. In her above mentioned *abhanga* she begins by asserting that all people (*sakal*) refer to the physical body (*deha*) is impure but in reality, the soul is pure, awakened, and enlightened. She further asked If impurity lies at the very source of creation, which body in this world can be called pure? This *abhanga* powerfully rejects ritualistic notions of purity and pollution, especially those imposed through caste and gender hierarchy. she asserts that the true essence (*Atma*) is pure (*nirmal*) and immaculate (*shuddha-buddha*), suggesting its transcendental nature; thus, the true essence is Lord *Vithala*. This aligns with and anticipates ethical humanism within the *Varkari* tradition. Here she emphasizes the importance of spiritual realization beyond the physical form. This *abhanga* explores the paradoxical relationship between the physical body and the divine essence, challenging conventional notions and highlighting the importance of recognizing the transcendent nature of the self. This line encapsulates her central philosophical insight, namely, true divinity lies beyond external distinctions or physical embodiment. Her resilience is rooted in her conviction that the divine does not discriminate but we being human try to impose discrimination. This metaphysical stance becomes a radical act of defiance in a society that systematically dehumanized her caste. She is not afraid of expressing the pain of her exclusion. In one poignant *abhanga*, she writes, '*They say I pollute the temple, but who has made this temple? Isn't Vithala in my heart too? The body is impure, not the soul; Soul is untouched by caste. Who says a Mahar cannot reach God? Vithala lives in my breath.*' Here she directly confronts the *Brahmanical* authority or upper castes' access to temples and rejection of untouchables. Her resilience lies in claiming equal spiritual space that the society denies her physical existence. She doesn't stop here; instead keep challenging the authority of *Brahmins* who authorized and monopolized religious rituals. In an *abhanga* she says, 'The *Brahmins* of *Pandhari* harassed *Chokha*. God was surprised at this. Everyone gathered at *Chokha*'s house. Wealth and power stood at the door. *Rangoli* at the entrance, flags at the gate. *Vaishnavas* sing the joyous *kirtan* which is all accommodative or inclusive. The celebration was like *Diwali* and *Dusshera*. *Soyara* waves the lights of *arati* before *Chokha*. (Translation: Eleanor Zelliot). This indicates that her resilience is not just passive endurance but active critique.

Her *abhangas* also celebrate devotion through daily chores, affirming that the sacred place can be found in the mundane. This is nothing but a feminist assertion: that a woman's spiritual life does not need to be severed from her domestic role. Her spirituality is embodied, practical, and rooted in the rhythms of ordinary life—a form of resistance against the ideal of ascetic male renunciants. She expresses in her *abhanga* how the discrimination and patriarchal power torment her life, 'You are the only refuge. Come quickly, my lord *Keshava*.

Further in one of her *abhangas* she invites Lord *Vitthala* to her house and offers porridge as *naivedyam* with all hospitality like *Draupadi*'. She compares her offerings to *Draupadi*'s offerings. This *abhanga* showcases her profound devotion and understanding of spiritual principles, emphasizing the importance of sincerity, humility, and devotion in one's worship and spiritual practice. Her *abhangas* continue to resonate with readers, inspiring reflection on issues of caste discrimination and the universal pursuit of spiritual liberation. Thus, her legacy lies not only in her literary prowess but also in her courageous stance against social injustices.

Though she is aware of the injustice she faces but also has the ability to confront the contradictions of the caste system. She expresses this unjust hierarchy of the society in almost in all her *abhangas* where she stands and demands as an independent woman with a keen sense of the ridiculous as follows:

'Kiti he marti, kiti he radti',

How much death, how much weeping.

Who is that laughing on the sky?

We look and we wonder: What is truth?

And so many pining for a lie?

What is death? What is grieving?

At whom do we aim our thoughtless laughter?

Who has been spared? Who is leaving?

Our fate is common in the hereafter.

Soyra says: I find it odd

Not one among them remembers God.

Sant Soyrabai, Translated by J. Pinto and Neela Bhagwat

The spiritual identity or oneness is constantly reflected in her *abhangas*

The five elements are all their play,  
but the Self is pure and stainless.  
Who truly dies and who remains?  
Only the One who is the cause knows this.  
In vain, they carry another's burden upon their own head,  
in vain do they boast with empty pride.  
Relatives say, "This seems strange!"  
but they cannot utter a single word of the highest Truth.

She demolishes the spiritual hierarchy by elevating devotion (bhakti) above ritual purity. This theological position asserts that even an 'untouchable' person can attain divine grace, which is a powerful challenge to the caste-based patriarchal spiritual monopoly. 'Why speak of Vedas and shastras, when love for God is all that matters?' Unlike many saints who chose renunciation, her resilience is totally rooted in her role as a householder. She affirms that *Pandharpur* is far, and the road is long, But I carry the image in my soul. Each breath is a step toward Lord *Vitthala*, who dwells within, who makes me whole. These lines reflect the inner pilgrimage.

She boldly expresses the purity of saint *Chokhamela* and oneness of him with Lord *Vitthala* despite the ill treatment he received in the name of being untouchable. This showcases her resilience to fight for injustice and establish a spiritual egalitarian society.

‘चोखा निर्मळ एकरूप। दरुशनें हरे ताप॥१॥ वाचे विठ्ठलनामछंद। नाही भेद उभायतां ॥२॥ तीर्थ  
उत्तम निर्मळा। वाहे भागीरथी जळा॥३॥ ऐसी तारक मेहुणपुरी। म्हणे चोख्याची महारी॥४॥’

Themes of unity, oneness and the embracing of difference are powerfully articulated in her work as follows: 'अवघा रंग एक झाला|रंगि रंगला श्रीरंग। मी तूपण गेले वाया पाहता पंढरीच्या  
राया॥ नाही भेदाचे ते काम....' 'All the colours have merged to be one. God of colours himself  
is coloured in this colour. The distinction between I and You has become extinct upon seeing  
the Lord of *Pandhari* There is no place for discrimination. Anger and Lust too have  
disappeared. Though you are embodied you are formless. I see you in a constant state of  
meditation. There remains no difference between the spectator and the gaze, says *Chokha's*  
*Mahari*.'

In another *abhanga* she once again focuses on the oneness; such a festival of bliss, the pure one beholds with her own eyes. Joy fills the very sky, the *Vaishnavas* dance in delight. Where there is no division or difference, *Govinda* pervades all. That storehouse of happiness has been embraced by the pure one. Seeing this, *Soyara* rejoices, time and again beholding her *Vithu*.

Her *abhangas* has the flavour of spiritual egalitarianism and she states that it is possible to establish the society of egalitarians by just chanting the name of Lord *Vitthala* and that no rituals are required; ‘simple and easy it is to sing the Lord’s Name with the tongue; at once, the filth of sin flees away. Whoever utters ‘*Hari, Hari*’ aloud man or woman becomes pure. No need to think of caste, gender, lineage, or clan; the essence in this age of *Kali* is the Name of *Hari*. *Soyara* says: I delight in the Name; it carries me safely across the calamities of *Kali*’s time.

*Soyarabai*’s gender and caste consciousness may not be compared to that of the modern-day feminists, but when we refer her *abhangas*, they reflect the hardships of daily life and the constraints imposed upon her as a member of the *Mahar* community, revealing her consciousness of her marginalized position in society and proto-feminism. With the help of her pure devotion she transcends material reality and claims her own spiritual space. Eleanor Zelliot thinks of her as a true mystic, ‘... finding at times the words to describe the indescribable, words that recall the poetry of mystics of many cultures.’ She describes, ‘*Soyarabai* as a fourteenth century Untouchable woman who seems to have risen above the problems of low birth to sing the immersion in the divine.’ She secured her place not only in the Bhakti tradition but also in the wider discourse on women’s spirituality and egalitarian society.

Her poetry reflects her deep devotion within the sphere of her marital life, ‘how much must I plead, lord? How much more jealousy must I bear? The love of others touches you. Why do you refuse mine? (87, Pinto) Through her profound insight, unwavering devotion, and timeless teaching continues to inspire and resonate with truth-seekers, she made a lasting impact on spirituality, deep devotion and knowledge, and has provided enduring guidance that still motivates and speaks to truth-seekers today.

She played a vital role in the philosophical and spiritual discourse of her period till date, emphasizing the universality of divine love and compassion. Her work reflects a synthesis of spiritual doctrine and social consciousness, promoting social justice, devotion, and communal concord. Her philosophy of resilience lies in her unwavering affirmation of spiritual equality, her resistance to ritual orthodoxy, and her deep devotion expressed through everyday life. She frequently portrays the soul's deep yearning for divine connection as a path of inner purification and self-discovery, culminating in the dissolution of the ego before the divine through her *abhangas*. Her *abhangas* are more than devotional poems rather they are declarations of dignity, mystical affirmations, establishing an egalitarian society and acts of defiance. They invoked the contemporary struggles for caste and gender justice; in a world still fractured by inequality. Her *abhangas* continue to resonate with and inspire people across all walks of life, particularly women belonging to all ages. Thus, *Soyarabai* offers a vision of radical inclusivity and unshakable dignity and welfare for all; which is the framework of personal growth as well as collective healing in the face of adversity, underscoring her contributions to spiritual egalitarianism, embodied mysticism, and cultural defiance.

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