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2017

## **“I am the Mahar of your Mahars:” Cokhāmelā, the Modern Dalit Movement, and the Dalit Christian Theology**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Conway, Christopher. “I am the Mahar of your Mahars:’ Cokhāmelā, the Modern Dalit Movement, and the Dalit Christian Theology”. *The Apollonian* 4: 1-2 (March-June 2017): 5-26.

# *The Apollonian*

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Open-access | Peer-reviewed

*Vol 4, Issues 1&2* (March-June 2017)

Submission details and instructions for authors: <http://theapollonian.in/index.php/submission-guidelines/>

SPECIAL ISSUE | INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA: THEOLOGICAL REVISIONING

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*The Apollonian*

ISSN 2393-9001

<http://www.theapollonian.in/>



## “I am the Mahar of your Mahars:” Cokhāmelā, the Modern Dalit Movement, and the Dalit Christian Theology

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**ABSTRACT** Over the last century, Cokhāmelā's place and prominence in the Modern Dalit Movement and Dalit Christian theology have waned significantly. As the liberating potential of his work failed to be actualized, and more recent Dalit figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and movements like Dalit Sahitya began to examine his work and life more critically, Cokhāmelā and his *abhangas* were found inadequate. Cokhāmelā became identified as one whose conscientisation remained incomplete, primarily because he failed to convert from Hinduism and saw his caste through the lens of *karma*. This essay re-examines Cokhāmelā's life, death, and legacy so as to reassess his potential contribution to revitalising Dalit movements, at a moment when the present generation of leaders acknowledge a stagnation. Because Cokhāmelā occupies a liminal space that maintains a tension between the *Savarna* and the Dalits, he is able to create a dissonance that disrupts any attempts to ignore the discontinuity between the spiritual and material, potential and actual dealings of caste. This article tries to find out if his liberating social vision be realised.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Cokhāmelā, *abhangas*, Ambedkar, Caste politics.

### I

Although the doors to the Vithobā Temple in Pandharpur (Maharashtra) opened to Dalits in 1947, the thirteenth to fourteenth-century Dalit *sant* Cokhāmelā, renowned for his powerful, love-filled and pathos-fuelled *abhangas* (songs/poems), still remains outside the temple's threshold. The location of his *samādhi* (memorial), a few steps away from the temple, is indicative not only of the liminal space Cokhāmelā occupies within the Vaisnava bhakti *Vārkarī* tradition, but also his ambiguous place within the broader Modern Dalit Movement.

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Many of the themes present in Cokhāmelā's poetry anticipate what will become essential to the character and aesthetic of Dalit Sahitya. The Dalit Literary Movement understood itself to be the 'literary expression' of Babasaheb Ambedkar's "revolutionary ideas[that] stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra" (quoted in Mukherjee 1). Embodied in the works of writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Sharan Limbale, Daya Pawar, Hira Bansode, Kancha Iliah, Namdeo Dhasal, Dalit Sahitya radically flaunted and so rejected traditional aesthetic convention, in order to be "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness ... to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (Limbale 19).

Cokhā, as he is affectionately referred to, is not hesitant in his portrayal of the caste-based abuse he suffered at the hands of his supposed community of devotees nor does he fail to highlight the artifice he finds in the arbitrary delineation between pollution and purity, Brahmanical concepts essential to the discourse of caste in India. Like any Dalit poet deserving the appellation, Cokhā makes his pain and suffering, his particular Dalit pathos, manifest. However, while he possesses that pathos, he lacks the revolutionary vision and conscientising spirit deemed necessary for a true work of Dalit Sahitya (Limbale 19; Mukherjee 125). In the end, Cokhāmelā remains too complacent, too accepting of his religion and its explanation for his caste condition. For his failure to convert, he has been challenged, criticised, and condemned (Gokhale-Turner 33). Six hundred years later, Cokhāmelā remains "the Mahar of your Mahars" (*abhangā* 343) cast out from a fraternity for which he helped pave the way, but his recovery might have the revolutionary potential to actualize the liberation for which the modern Dalit movement continues to struggle to realize (unless otherwise noted, all *abhangā* translations are from Mokashi-Punekar).

Cokhāmelā's dramatic decline in stature within the Modern Dalit Movement—the movement arising in Maharashtra that traces its lineage from Jotiba Phule, through B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit Sahitya, and the Dalit Panther—coincided with the meteoric rise of Dr. Ambedkar (Conway). In fact, if one were to attempt to pinpoint the exact moment the latter eclipsed the former, the gathering in Trymbak in 1929, at which Ambedkar presided, would be a logical starting place. Eleanor Zelliott observes that in the early part of the twentieth-century, Mahars routinely invoked Cokhāmelā's name "as their claim to a place in past religious life and greatness ... which could serve the necessary purpose of legitimising their worth" (141). A night school (1912-1933), a hostel (1914), and a reform society in Vidarbha organised in the early 1920s (and advocating the construction of a new temple open to all persons) all bore Cokhā's name (141). However, the meet-

ing in Trymbak, called in order to consider the construction of a temple dedicated to Cokhāmelā, seems to have put a near-complete end to this particular naming practice. Rather than breaking ground for a temple that would memorialise the Mahar sant, Ambedkar argued that a “real memorial consisted in devoting themselves with unflagging energy to the removal of the blot of untouchability” (quoted in Zelliott 142). This alternative proposition, which the committee agreed to accept, marks an important transition in Ambedkar’s assessment of caste and its relation to religion. Although more than a quarter-century separates the two events, the road from Trymbak leads directly to Nagpur where in 1956 Ambedkar and several hundred thousand of his fellow Mahars rejected Hinduism, and so the bhakti devotion of Cokhāmelā, for Buddhism and the new identity it promised.

The years leading up to Ambedkar’s famous vow at Yeola (1935) not to die a Hindu was marked by his increasing realisation that this nascent movement would need to find a non-Hindu mooring. The failed second satyagraha campaign in Mahad (1927) to open the Vireshwar Temple to Dalits convinced Ambedkar that politics rather than religion ought to be the route towards liberation. With a direct reference to Cokhāmelā’s own *Vārkarī* Sampradāya, Ambedkar highlights what he perceives to be the total ineffectiveness of Hindu devotional practices as they pertain to practical matters. He states:

The appearance of *Tulsi* leaves around your neck will not relieve you from the clutches of money-lenders ... You will not get salaries at the end of the month because you make pilgrimages to Pandharpur (quoted in Zelliott 142).

Ambedkar provides a similar class-caste critique of Hinduism a year later during a 1933 meeting with Gandhi at the Yerawada Jail. Ambedkar continues to ground the movement in politics. He states, “I do not think that temple entry will make any material difference ... if [untouchables] get political rights they will also gain social status and their social and religious disabilities will disappear automatically” (Gore 142, 144).

The depreciation of Cokhāmelā’s status in the Modern Dalit Movement corresponded with this strategic shift in Ambedkar’s approach to addressing the plight of Dalit communities. The failures of the Mahad and Kalaram satyagraha campaigns cannot be underestimated. Contemporaneous to these temple opening campaigns, Kisan Fagu Bansode, a Mahar leader from Vidarbha, drew directly upon the life and legacy of Cokhāmelā for inspiration. He writes:

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Why do you endure curses?  
Chokha went into the temple resolutely.  
Why do you, ashamed, stay off?  
You are the descendants of Chokha.  
Why do you fear the temple?  
Brace yourself like a wrestler, come,  
Together let us conquer pollution. (quoted in Punalekar 223)

Bansode's poem references a famous episode in Cokhā's life recounted in Mahipati's hagiographic work on the Marathi saints titled *Bhaktivijaya* (Victory to the Bhaktas). Led by Vithobā himself into the temple's inner sanctum, Cokhāmelā steps over a boundary that the Lord does not recognise. To the brahmins serving at the temple, Cokhā's entry clearly oversteps his place in society. The perceived transgression coupled with his robust theological defence against the charge of temple defilement result in Cokhā's being exiled across the river so as to ensure such violations occur no more (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar 191-192).

For Bansode invoking Cokhā's defiant spirit, one that speaks truth to power was a challenge to his fellow Mahars to follow in the sant's footsteps and to enter any temple with the confidence of knowing that you belong. For Ambedkar, this narrative points not to divine liberation, but instead to the futility of such endeavours. In the end, Cokhā, just like the Mahars in Mahad and Kalaram, was violently cast out from the temple. When his wife Ramabai desired to make a pilgrimage to Pandharpur, Ambedkar forbade her, saying that she would not be permitted to go any further than Cokhā's samādhi. In an effort to console her, he is reported to have said:

What of that Pandharpur which prevents its devotees from seeing the image of God? By our own virtuous life, selfless service and spotless sacrifice in the cause of downtrodden humanity we would create another Pandharpur. (Zelliot 1981: 142)

For the Mahar community particularly, and for the Dalits across India more generally, Ambedkar and the Dalit Sahitya have done just that. In both the theological and artistic imagination of the Dalit communities, Ambedkar and the Buddha have supplanted Cokhāmelā and his compatriots. And when Ambedkar gathered together several hundred thousand Mahars in Nagpur to convert to Buddhism, the local newspapers described the scene as being like 'another Pandharpur' (Zelliot 1981: 143).

With Ambedkar's passing and the emergence of an increasingly politicised Dal-

it Literary Movement, which in turn gave rise to an increasingly radicalised Dalit Panther movement, invocations of Cokhāmēlā became increasingly antagonistic. The poetic trajectory of Harish Bansode captures this change of tone well. In ‘Gift to My Teachers’ he writes: ‘The blood of Chokha Mela/ Runs through my veins/ The remembrance of Bhimrao,/ Mahatma Phule/ Stirs through every hair of my body’ (quoted in Gokhale-Turner 33). Bansode establishes a lineage of protest-poets placing Cokhā at the head and as the life force that runs through the entire Modern Dalit Movement. However, in a later poem, Bansode is very critical of Cokhā, Vithobā, and the *Vārkarī* tradition. He writes:

We’ve lived our whole lives  
On the steps of the Temple  
Roaring out our songs of bhakti  
Singing and weeping  
We’ve walked hundred of miles to Pandharpur  
We’ve lived our whole lives  
Worshipping God  
Adoring that stone image  
Even then we were left on the steps  
As Untouchables  
We’ve lived our whole lives  
At your doors  
Enduring our slavery  
Serving you honestly and piously  
We’ve lived our whole lives  
At your doors  
But we never met each other  
You were inside we were outside  
You were in the temple we were on the steps  
Because you thought us Untouchable  
But those days are over.  
We’ve begun a new life  
We’ve found our own temples  
Regained our lost faith  
Our Gods are where we are  
All are equal here...  
This faith is going to  
Penetrate every corner of the world  
Now you can scream  
It’s fallen! It’s fallen!

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Brahman dharma has been overthrown  
You lit your own pyre  
What can you do now? (Gokhale-Turner 35-36)

For Bansode and his fellow Dalit poets the conversion to Buddhism, and then later to Ambedkarism or Marxism, is an abandonment of the traditional, i.e. religious, ways of conceiving of caste and its origins. The collective scream, “It’s fallen! It’s fallen!/ Brahman dharma has been overthrown” is the cry of conscientised people, awakened to the realisation that caste oppression derives not from *karma* and the sins or successes of past lives but a minority that uses religion to justify its domination of the majority. The theological defence of untouchability, preached and sustained by the Brahmanical social and political discourse is challenged and rejected by this awakening. Those who support such otherworldly or extraordinary explanations are to be identified as the enemy. In a poem so named, Yeshwant Manohar writes:

All those gods and believers are my enemies  
Those who wrote poem in pretty rhymes to Untouchability  
Clearly, they are my perfect and absolute Enemies  
They who have not let me be free until today. (quoted in Gokhale-Turner 34)

Waman Ingle adds, “even if Chokha Mela, Bankasena and other saints were in a particular (Dalit) caste, we do not call them Dalit writers” (34). From such quotations, it is clear that to be a Dalit poet is not to be a Dalit who writes poems or even a Dalit who writes poems about Dalit experiences. For the Dalit Sahitya movement, to be an authentic Dalit poet is to be one who stands radically opposed to caste stigmatisation and oppression and to be working at uprooting the systemic injustices it perpetuates. As such, Cokhāmelā fails to qualify as a true Dalit poet. The *abhanga* most commonly cited to demonstrate Cokhāmelā’s acceptance that “the sufferings of Untouchables in the present life are inevitable and inexorable; [that] they are atonement for an ancient unpardonable offence...[that] they cannot be opposed but accepted,” states:

Pure Chokhamela, always chanting the Name.  
I am a low caste Mahar. Nila in a previous birth.  
He showed disrespect to Krishna, so my birth as a Mahar.  
Chokha says, this impurity is the fruit of our past.  
*abhanga*76 (Zelliot 1995: 217).



This reference to *karma* and transmigration as well as his apparent acceptance of his birth as Mahar being the fruition of an offence from some previous life, both of which are nearly absent in the rest of his corpus, sealed the fate of Cokhā's reception amongst the new generation of Dalit poets. For them, acceptance, passivity, and total devotion to a God who seemed to provide little solace from, and perhaps instead helped to sustain the sufferings of that old world, have no place in this brave, new one. In carrying the banner of Ambedkar and the Buddha, the Modern Dalit Movement has left Cokhā and Vithobā behind. However, despite his misgivings about the *Vārkarī* tradition, Ambedkar still recognised its liberating potency. Just as he made Nagpur the new Pandharpur, Ambedkar sought to transform Vithobā into the Buddha, even arguing that the image of Vithobā in Pandharpur is, in fact, the Buddha (Keer 482). So when he composed *The Untouchable: A Thesis on the Origin of Untouchability*, a follow-up to his 1946 work *Who are the Shudras?*, which he dedicated to Maharashtra, Mali reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, and sought to similarly dedicate this work, he wrote, "Inscribed in the memory of Nandnar, Ravidas, and Chokhamela: three renowned saints who were born among the untouchables and who by their piety and virtue won the esteem of all."

## II

'Time after how many times must I complain?' (*abhanga*135)

Both the Modern Dalit Movement as well as Dalit Christian Theology, which understands itself to be a critical theological project undertaken in the spirit of the movement, have achieved a great deal of success in bringing regional, national, and now even international attention to the Dalit plight in India (Nirmal 1991: 214). As Gopal Guru notes, "the Dalit cultural and literary movement ... played an important role in creating and conserving the critical political energies that were necessary for taking on the forces of hegemony and domination" (161). A collective of like-minded poets in the post-Ambedkar times crafted an identity that defied the old social, economic, and religious constructs and lifted the voices and the consciences of those persons and communities most on the margins. In choosing the name 'Dalit,' these increasingly politicised poets rejected any justification of caste oppression and stigmatisation that blamed Dalit persons themselves for their plight, including religious explanations such as *karma*. As their self-created and self-chosen name, constructed via the past participle form of the verbal root *dal* (to crush, grind, destroy), makes explicit, to be a Dalit is not the result of having done some wrong or evil in a previous life. Instead, it is to have

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some wrong or evil continually done to one in this life. To be Dalit is to experience the crushing oppression of caste stigmatisation and the grinding power of economic exploitation.

While both the Modern Dalit Movement and Dalit Christian Theology have excelled in helping Dalit and non-Dalit communities form critical consciences that are awakened to the socially and existentially destructive nature of caste, both have failed to bring about the revolutionary transformation of India that their first generations had hoped would soon follow. The prophetic lament ‘how long?’ is uttered only when a dream dreamt becomes a dream deferred. Guru writes:

Unfortunately, today what we experience is that the Dalit cultural movement, more particularly its literary component, represents the regression in the cultural landscape that once provided a radical context for emancipatory politics of the Dalits of Maharashtra. This cultural regression among the Dalits of Maharashtra is evident from the threat of Hindutva homogenisation of Dalit culture on the one hand and the literary stagnation and its co-optation by the state on the other (161).

Peniel Rajkumar and other Dalit Christian theologians have expressed similar concerns regarding the liberating efficacy of their project (Rajkumar 2010; Lour-dusamy; Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock). Rajkumar states:

Though one cannot make Dalit theology entirely responsible for the slow progress with regard to Dalit emancipation, one should not refrain from critically evaluating the pertinence of Dalit theology in enabling a change in Christian attitude towards the caste-based discrimination ( 59).

One is able to see two interesting parallels between these two movements that help to explain why each has become rather flat in the last decade. These parallels relate to the inability that both the Modern Dalit Movement and Dalit Christian theology have had in translating their respective transformative and liberative social visions so as to be intelligible to their two target audiences: their fellow Dalits and savarna (non-Dalit/with-caste) persons.

With respects to the former, in 1973 the Dalit Panthers, a political extension of the Dalit Literary movement, had produced and promulgated a manifesto that aimed to conscientise and radicalise Dalit youths well beyond Maharashtra. The spirit of the manifesto travelled much more successfully than its letter. As one youth on the fringes of the movement remarked, “We didn’t know what [is] in the manifesto; all we know [is]—if anyone puts his hand on your sister, cut it

off!” (Omvedt 1993: 57). The failure to articulate a liberative social vision—a robust conception of what a post-revolution, liberated society would look like was coupled with an elitist retreat into the fineries of literary theory. The life-giving and sustaining literary endeavour articulated as being by Dalits, about Dalits, and for Dalits transitioned from the mud house to the academy. Lamenting how the movement has failed to actualize its potential, Guru writes:

This stagnation is indicative of the fact that mainstream Dalit literature has been unable to pitch the Dalit literary creation from the mere notion of ‘how they have become Dalits’ to ‘how they can transcend the level of literature by providing fresh cultural resources that would reactivate at least the urban audience for the counter-hegemonic purposes (189).

Guru is especially critical of the Dalit literati’s disconnect exemplified in its denigration of popular Dalit media, including Hindi cinema and the bhakti tradition (188). Referring to the time when Dalit political and literary movements were more coordinated and so more effective, he observes:

The cultural and literary activists derived their intellectual inputs from Ambedkar when they borrowed their forms from similar emancipatory traditions of Kabir and Bhakti, particularly the wakari [*Vārkarī*] tradition. This also shows the cultural overlap rather than discontinuity in emancipatory traditions (191).

Guru is here advocating for not just an appreciation, but also an appropriation of the bhakti tradition, notably including Cokhāmēlā. Noting Dalit Christian theology’s similar ineffectiveness in bringing about a liberatory social transformation, particularly in the church and then more broadly in society, Sathianathan Clarke likewise critiques the first generation of Dalit theologians. Clarke’s project aims to re-contextualize Dalit Christian theology in the lived religiosity of Dalits themselves (Clarke 1998; 2002). Dalit worldviews, cultural symbols, and religious practices cannot be substituted simply for Christian concepts, but rather they need to inform Christian theology’s construction. Traditional Dalit religiosity has sustained the Dalit communities, provided them with meaningful modes of protest, and nourished them in stultifying conditions for millennia. Christianity needs to hear and learn from it. For A.P. Nirmal, credited by many to be the creator of Dalit Christian theology, the ‘Dalitness’ of this theology pertained to the pathos experience and epistemology, the particular way of knowledge known only to Dalits, from which it arose (1991). Clarke cites the influence of ‘liberationism’ on Nirmal’s and other Dalit theologians’ thinking as the reason for their failing

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to take seriously the symbols of traditional Dalit religion and culture by instead focusing on Christian-centric conceptions of God's liberating work. He states:

My criticism of the epistemology of 'liberationism' can be restated in the following way: while it affirms that the experience pain-pathos is the source of knowledge about God, it fails to take seriously the symbolization of this experience of pain-pathos that is manifested in Dalit religion. Therefore, there is an unwillingness to work under the directives of its own epistemological presuppositions (Clarke 47).

Dalit Christian theologians are especially mindful of the ways in which Christian theology was enculturated on the subcontinent. Indian Christian theology often meant Christian theology constructed in dialogue with high-caste Hindus and high-caste Hindu texts. The vast majority of Indian Christians had converted from low-caste and Dalit communities. Therefore, Dalit means for making meaning and for knowing, that is the 'rich communal religious reflectivity expressed in non-textual/ non-scripted forms,' had been replaced by a system that many had either never encountered before or would have been prohibited from encountering (22). Clarke seeks to interject traditional Dalit religiosity into theological reflection by incorporating Dalit symbols like the drum and exploring the liberating potential of Dalit beliefs like the Paraiyars' devotion to the goddess Ellaiyamman. Like Guru's reflection on the state of the Dalit Literary Movement, Clarke and others are searching for ways to make Dalit theology ever more relevant to Dalits.

In an interview with Alok Mukherjee, Sharankumar Limbale, the renowned Dalit literary theorist, identifies two dimensions to Dalit literature. The first dimension is that project of Dalit conscientisation: a familiarization with their past, an explanation of their present condition, a demonstration of their dignity, and a recognition of "their duty and right to fight for the rights of a human being" (Mukherjee 125). The second dimension is oriented towards savarna society. Committed to nonviolence, Limbale states, "our war is a war of ideas. Dalit literature seeks to transform *savarna* society, to bring about change in the heart and mind of the savarna individual." He continues:

The other dimension of Dalit literature will involve working on the hearts and minds of savarna society in order to persuade them about the rights and entitlements of Dalits, to make them see that these are human beings and have been suppressed, and convince them that they must change (125).

Theorists like Limbale and theologians like Goodwin Shiri, K. Wilson, and

Rajkumar have recognized the need to cultivate liberative partnerships with other persons and communities, Dalits and non-Dalits; Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, or Hindus, in order to realize a meaningful and lasting transformative social vision (Rajkumar; Shiri; Wilson). The Bangkok Declaration issued by the Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits (2009) provides one vision for what such liberative partnerships and humanizing relationships might look like. It states:

Today, regardless of where we come from, which church we represent, we all become Dalits. Not only for today and during this conference, but also for our life until Dalits are liberated, we all become Dalits ... We look for a caste-free world, in which the human dignity and rights of everyone are affirmed irrespective of their social origin and identity (quoted in Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock 13).

Ecumenically, or one could say intra-religiously, such a statement carries some weight. It is a public theological appeal that grounds the individual and the church's commitment to being in solidarity with all Dalit persons until all Dalit persons are liberated in the idea of a shared, essential human dignity—perhaps the *imago Dei* (created in the image of God)—that extends beyond the accidents of one's 'origin and identity,' or name and form. It is to this theological anthropological teaching that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India's recently issued document, *Policy of Dalit Empowerment in the Catholic Church of India: An Ethical Imperative to Build Inclusive Communities* (2016) builds upon. Recognizing the pervasiveness of the untouchability and caste-based discrimination occurring within the Church, the policy document states, "Despite possessing commendable credentials, the fact of being a Dalit — Dalitness — is considered as inferior. This mindset is against the core belief of Christianity, that every human person is created in the image of God" (C.B.C.I.: 10-11). The question then becomes, how do such particular pronouncements carry weight extra-religiously, which is to say inter-religiously? Jacques Maritain's quip regarding the production of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that, 'Yes, we agree about the rights, but on condition no one asks us why,' would seem to suggest the practical efficacy of such pronouncements is independent of any shared philosophical or religious foundation. This may be true of a top-down declarations, but what of a bottom-up affirmations, what Limbale sees as the working on the hearts and minds of savarna society in order to persuade that Dalit persons possess such rights and dignity? A common grammar may not ultimately be possible, but perhaps a congruous one would suffice. Cokhāmelā's liminality might provide such a grammar of congruity.

III

Should the wicked come here, they too would be purified, So Cokha proclaims, beating his drum! (*abhanga* 28)

The turn to bhakti here in general and to the *Vārkarī* tradition with Cokhāmelā specifically would hardly classify as original. Patton Burchett demonstrates well how an appeal to bhakti as a “transformatory avalanche in terms of devotion and social reform” (Nandakumar 2003: 794), “a democratic doctrine which consolidates all people without distinction of caste, community, nationality, or sex” (Raghavan 1966: 32), or “a movement that had swept over northern and western India, bringing together women of low caste to proclaim equality and reject Brahminic ritualism and caste hierarchy” (Omvedt 2003: 277) has become quite commonplace. He has convincingly argued that such a trope might at times be too reductionistic and perhaps even too simplistic (Burchett 2009: 115). Bhakti, the bhakti movements, and the bhakti movement as the panacea to India’s problem of caste oppression may likewise be excessively optimistic and counter to their lived, on-the-ground reality. Karen Pechilis offers the caveat that “indeed, the failure of not only low-caste but also especially untouchable persons to ‘effect any change of place’ through bhakti has been noted in contemporary scholarship” (29). What Burchett, Pechilis, David Lorenzen and John S. Hawley all note is that bhakti’s revolutionary tendencies often remain confined to the spiritual and ideological realms rather than practical and ethical (Lorenzen 2004; Hawley 1988). Had their revolutionary potential been actual, change would have arrived long ago. As Burchett notes:

In the end these bhakti texts demonstrate that sincerity and intensity of devotion may allow one to transcend all impurities and social distinction in the spiritual sphere, but caste is much less easily discarded in the ordinary social sphere (130).

With respects to Cokhāmelā’s own *Vārkarī* community, that is “those who actually wear the *tulsi* beads [and] go on pilgrimage to Pandharpur,” Zelliott notes that they too continue to affirm the distinction “between equality in the sight of God and equality in daily life” (Zelliott 1981: 153). Though now more than fifty years old, Iravati Karve provides an intimate look at what happens on the way to Pandharpur. Witnessing and giving witness to how this distinction manifests in the pilgrimage’s ceremonial procession, Karve’s essay occupies the liminal space between emic and etic. She is an insider, familiar with the *abhanga*s and the hagiographies, who is an outsider when it comes to the practice of pilgrimage. The

lengthy quote below offers a window into the experience of devotional dissonance when the distinctions noted above are encountered in a disconcerting and disorienting way. Karve writes:

Every day I regretted the fact that one and the same *dindī* was divided into these two sections [Brahmins and Marathas]. All of the people were clean, and ate their food only after taking a bath. Then why this separateness? Was all this walking together, singing together, and reciting the poetry of the saints together directed only towards union in the other world while retaining separateness in this world? ... Why is this so? Are the Brahmins so heartless? Oh no! Most definitely not. If one of the Maratha women were hurt, the Brahmins would at once go to her aid and give her medicine. If some Maratha man had been hungry, the Brahmins would certainly have fed him well. But they would not take food sitting in the same row, or accept food or water from a Maratha ... The tradition of the Vārkarī pilgrims, the rebellion of the saints against giving importance to external matters and against hypocritical following of prescribed behaviour, the teaching of the oneness of man and deity, and above all the modern city life—how could one reconcile these with regard for ritual purity and impurity? (Karve: 19-20).

Writing twenty years later, Erik Reenberg Sand offers a similar, if more theoretically grounded assessment of the Pandharpur pilgrimage. Sand acknowledges that *Vārkarī* sants and *vārkarīs* have spoken and continue to speak out against caste and certain Brahminical practices, and that Marathi's linguistic place in the life of *samprādaya* has even had a "softening effect" on inter-caste relationships (90). However, having observed the pilgrimage practices and in particular the 'ritual complex'—those rituals performed "on the road" and in Pandharpur—Sand concludes that his analysis, "does not seem to support the view that the *Vārkarī Samprādaya* is and was a revolutionary religious movement which is and has been strongly opposed to Brahmanic religion" (90). In the *samprādaya*'s continued maintenance of and reliance on this distinction between the spiritual/metaphysical and the practical/physical there occurs an unfortunate essentialisation and reification of the accidental. Cokhā captures this problematic tendency in what is arguably his second most quoted *abhangā*. He writes:

The sugarcane is crooked, but not its juice.  
Why are you drawn to the shape of a thing?  
The bow is curved, not the arrow.  
Why are you drawn to the shape of a thing?  
The river is bent, but not its water.

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Why are you drawn to the shape of a thing?  
Chokha is twisted, not his faith.  
Why are you drawn to the shape of things? (240).

For Cokhā what matters is not the physical/accidental appearance of something or someone, but instead their essential nature. As the examples reveal, the physical is just a container, even constrainer, for what really and ultimately matters. Cokhā is drawing a distinction between himself as a physical being that possesses such markings and shaping as ‘twisted’ (*donga*, which is used in every foot of the poem) and who he is and how is to be distinguished essentially: a devotee who professes his love for Vithobā. Can ‘twisted’ be construed as caste, and would this mean Cokhā readily accepts his Mahar status? Perhaps, and Zelliott states, “protest and question as he did, it would seem that Chokhamela lived in his traditional role as a Mahar and with its traditional limitations” (Zelliott 139). At the very least then Cokhā can take some solace in the truth that faith and devotion provide. Similarly, in an *abhanga* connected to the previous one, he writes, in an especially traditional Indian fashion:

Fragrance lingers in a flower;  
that is lost quite once it dries.  
Varied vessels made of clay  
are named pot, urn, pitcher.  
The clay wears, the pot breaks  
why does a being grieve in vain,  
Seeing this mirage, Chokha says,  
the wise are never caught here (234).

Such language evokes, if not also invokes, the *Upanishads* and their teachings on the true nature of the self. Name and form comprise the mirage produced by ignorance, which can only be overcome by the liberating knowledge of one’s self and one’s self’s relation to the divine. This liberative insight into his true, essential nature, over and against the illusion of name and form, provides the platform for his powerful theological critique of Brahminical hypocrisy made most manifest in the language of purity and pollution. This liberative insight that happens to be metaphysical launches a liberative insight that is actually practical and communal.



IV

On the market of Pandhari, in the Kavula borough, the *Varakaris* of all castes are assembled (28)

Zelliot concludes one of her essays on Cokhā with a hint of reserved optimism. She writes that it is “clear that the bhakti movement and its literature is still a reservoir of living ideas ... [and] although he no longer serves as model for emulation, he may very well become once again a theme of inspiration” (Zelliot 1981: 153). Cokhā matters, and Cokhā matters precisely because of the uniquely liminal space he occupies. For much of his reception history, his liminality has been detrimental. As Rohini Mokashi-Punekar rightly observes, “If Chokhamela’s Dalit identity lessens his importance as *varkari* saint-poet, his association with Hinduism detracts from his identity” (131). Although the liberative potential present in his poems has remained often unrealised, it remains present, albeit latently, precisely because Cokhā occupies a space so few do. He maintains the tension between Dalit and *savarna* communities that elsewhere has snapped in violence or grown slack in apathy. His devotion, his poetry, and his *samādhi* disrupt the status quo; they create an uncomfortable dissonance that Dalit and *savarna* communities can try their best to discount, and do by attempting to discern the Dalitness of his Dalitness. But as the tradition still lives, inspiration may still be found, and dry bones may still yet speak. Let us end where we began, footsteps from the footsteps of the feet of Vithobā in Pandharpur.

In order to enter the Vithobā Temple, one must pass by Cokhā’s *samādhi*. It is located atop his grave and at the spot of his devotion, outside the temple where in life he would strain to see God and be seen by God. In a song that drowns in pathos, Cokhā recounts his daily experience. He sings:

My condition, I shall tell at Your feet,  
Though You, the Holy One, know it well!  
My caste is rated the lowest of all  
All the time, people shout at me: ‘Pollution, pollution!’  
There is none who welcomes me—  
They all cry: ‘Keep away! Keep away!’  
Says Cokhā, only then shall I find solace,  
When you gather me in the loose end of Your garment! (Vaudeville 230)

This is the life of Cokhā; this is the life of a Mahar. It is a life in which the only solace one can find in this world is being pulled in and gathered up by “he who is so tender: his devotees know him as a fond mother” (*abhanga* 284). The follow-

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ing songs, composed by Nāmdev, the Shudra tailor who was Cokhā's friend and teacher, recount the death of the sant. He writes:

A surrounding wall was to be built around Mangalvedha  
so messengers were sent to bring the Mahars.  
Cokhāmelā went with the other Mahars  
and he began to work on it.  
While working, Cokhā was singing the Name of Vitthala  
ceaselessly remembering Govind again and again.  
Four months passed this way  
when suddenly the wall collapsed.  
A number of Mahars were crushed under it  
and Cokhāmelā offered his last breath to God.  
Said God: 'O Nāmā, you should go over there  
and bring back Cokhāmelā's bones here.  
Said Nāmā: 'O God, how am I to recognize them?  
replied God: 'Pick only those bones  
which give out the name of Vitthala.  
God said: 'Cokhā is my very life, the heart of my heart,  
he is the deity of my family!  
How great was his devotion! How great his spiritual strength!  
It was for his sake that I had assumed a visible Form.  
The men who meditate on my Cokhā  
I will protect them from all dangers!  
So Nāmdev brought back the bones after testing them  
and Cakrapānī took them into the fold of His yellow garment.  
From God's garment then a loud sound arose:  
the name Vitthala was resounding up to the sky!  
A number of saints, carrying their flags  
came rushing to listen to that resounding noise.  
On the thirteenth of the dark half of Vaisakha, a Friday,  
the sounding of the Name was heard at the great Gate:  
In such a way did Cokhāmelā enter into samādhi at the great gate  
through the bliss of the resounding Name.  
The eternal performed the burial with His own hands  
and placed the stone over his tomb. (Vaudeville: 238-239)

Cokhā died a Dalit death, crushed under the wall that an oppressive system required him to build. Cokhā died a devotee's death, breathing the name of God with his last breath. His death too holds these identities in tension. As a devotee

his very bones intoned the name of God, who with the same hands he used to weed the beds of Saavata the gardener, to fire the pots for Gora, to grind the grain, sweep the dirt, and bring in the cow dung at Jani's home (abhanga 284), buried Cokhā "the heart of [his] heart, the deity of [his] family" outside his temple. But why outside?

Any answer would necessarily need to emphasize the speculative of speculative theology. However, one can rule out concerns over ritual purity. If there is one thing that the relationship between Vithobā and Cokhā dramatically displays it is that Vithobā routinely flaunts and transgresses the supposed strictures of purity and pollution in order to be with Cokhā. It is He who sneaks Cokhā into the temple under the cover of night and places his garland around Cokhā's neck. And when the brahmin priests exile Cokhā across the river, it is He who visits and takes a meal with him (Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar 189-194). Offering her own speculative take, Charlotte Vaudeville writes:

It is characteristic in the legends related to the encounters between Vitthala and Chokhamela, it is always the god who takes the initiative. The Mahar knows his place and makes no attempt to break the rules set by his masters; it is Vitthala who plays tricks on the temple Brahmins making a mockery of their pretensions to 'purity,' delighting in the company of the 'polluting' mahar. It is though He actually resented being a prisoner in His own temple, bound by the endless pretentious rituals of the priests (Vaudeville 226).

This is to say that Cokhā is not buried outside to protect purity. Theologically, perhaps Vithobā has buried Cokhā outside as a physical reminder, a memorial to the fact that metaphysics and spirituality do not actually liberate persons from caste. To walk by Cokhā on the way to see Vithobā is to force the awkward acknowledgment that despite Vithobā's desire, Cokhā remains outside because there are people who do not want Cokhā and Cokhā's people inside, at their table or at their temple. It is to juxtapose a song that questions:

Wholly pure or impure?  
My Vitthal of course is strange beyond both.  
What is pollution really, who polluted by what, when  
the centre is spirit-shaped, pure.  
Five senses polluting this body,  
who, in the midst of the world remains pure?  
Says Chokha only my Vitthal is spirit,  
formless, yet different, waiting on the brick. (*abhanga* 281)

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with a community that offers a definitive answer to the question: Cokhā is impure. To free Cokhā is to see his body as one sees his spirit. Surely, his bones sing the name of the Lord because Vithobā pervades not only spirit, but matter as well. To free Cokhā is to free all those who suffer under caste oppression. It is to say with Dalit Christian theology and its liberative partners:

Today, regardless of where we come from, which church we represent, we all become Dalits. Not only for today and during this conference, but also for our life until Dalits are liberated, we all become Dalits ... We look for a caste-free world, in which the human dignity and rights of everyone is affirmed irrespective of their social origin and identity (quoted in Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock 13).

In life Cokhā laments his status as ‘the Mahar of your Mahars,’ but in death, he may have become just that. If one tends more towards theological skepticism than speculation, one may very well doubt the veracity of a story that includes bones speaking and deities burying. If a wall came down and if Cokhā’s bones were subsequently gathered up independent of some miraculous intervention that allowed Nāmdev and others to re-member Cokhā perfectly and totally amidst the carnage of broken bodies, then in all likelihood the bones beneath Chokhā’s grave are composed of more than one individual. This likelihood would mean that in death, Chokhā has become ‘the Mahar of your Mahars,’ not as the lowliest of the lowliest or the most despised among the most despised, but instead the Mahar who is literally made whole and complete by the community of Mahars. In such an interpretation this community-body would be comprised not just of Mahars who are devoted to Vithobā, but many more who would be devoted to Śiva, the *ista-deva* for most Mahars at that time (Vaudeville 206). Chokhā’s *samādhi* is itself a testament to interreligious and inter-caste cooperation. Both communities do not wish to let him go, and so it was constructed just outside Vithobā’s temple and ‘is marked only by a standing dark-grey stone bearing horizontal Śaiva marks’ (Vaudeville 229). Perhaps such a detente could be reached today that would allow Chokhā’s life and legacy to occupy the same liminal space his body does.

The final, and most important, challenge and possibility Chokhā and Vithobā offer the Modern Dalit Movement and Dalit Christian theology is its presentation of Vithobā as an agent of conscientisation. Vaudeville writes, “it is as if God Himself were sowing the seeds of social rebellion in the hearts of the downtrodden” (226). For much of their history both movements, understandably so, have presented Hinduism and its deities to be antagonistic to Dalit liberation. In this paradigm, authentic liberation, spiritually and practically, is most fully realised in the act of conversion. For it is in this decision that a conscientized agent acts.

Vithobā's actions emboldened Chokhā to see and critique the hypocrisy beset all around him. They create an opportunity for conversion, to live liberated--spiritually and practically. Such a conversion does not entail leaving one tradition for another, but instead realising the full liberative potential of one's own and living a life so as to actualise it.

For Nirmal and Dalit Christian theology this means that:

The ultimate goal of this liberation movement ... cannot be simply the gaining of the rights, reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely our full divinity, the ideal of the imago Dei, the image of God, in us. (1988:77)

For Baburao Bagul and Dalit Sahitya this means that:

Dalit Sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity ... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit literature. We want literature heroically full of life for the creation of a new society (188-189).

Here the life, death, and poetry of Chokhāmelā has the potential to actualise such liberative visions, and it does so by suggesting liberative partnerships. At the heart of the *Vārkarī sampradāya* is the praxis of pilgrimage to Pandharpur. To be a pilgrim is to be part of a community that is on the way, to be beginning to actualise potentiality. However, to be a pilgrim is to be also part of a community that exists in a state of liminality, between home and destination. To use the language of Christian theology, it is akin to the 'already/not yet' advent of the Kingdom of God. The seeds of liberation have been sown and they are being cultivated and they are beginning to bear fruit. They are being planted and cared for by all those who long for 'the creation of a new society' whose vision of freedom extends well beyond 'rights, reservations, and privileges.' The challenge is to recognize that all human persons (oppressor and oppressed) yearn for this authentic freedom. And as Chokhā, and Christ, and the Buddha remind us, it is only to be found on the way. Away from the comforts of home, from the false binaries of savarana and avarna, of touchable and untouchable, of Jew and Greek, of free and slave that prohibit us from seeing the suffering inherent in inhuman and inhumane relationships. The potential for such liberation is ever present, as humanity always images, intones, and reflects the fullness of this potency. However, it is only ever actualised in so far as we make it realized in other persons.

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