

## Translating Bhakti into Modernity: Dilip Chitre's Interpretation of Tukaram in Says Tuka

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### Abstract-

*This paper critically examines Dilip Chitre's interpretation and translation of Sant Tukaram in Says Tuka. The study argues that Chitre's work extends beyond linguistic translation and functions as a literary, cultural, and philosophical reinterpretation of Tukaram's Bhakti poetics for modern global readerships. Through Says Tuka, Chitre reconstructs Tukaram not merely as a regional saint-poet of Maharashtra but as a universal literary voice addressing themes such as existential suffering, spiritual anxiety, ethical consciousness, social inequality, and resistance to religious hypocrisy.*

*The paper explores the translational strategies employed by Chitre in rendering orally transmitted Marathi abhangas into modern English while preserving their emotional intensity, rhythmic simplicity, performative quality, and philosophical depth. It further investigates how Chitre's modernist literary sensibility shapes his representation of Tukaram within contemporary discourses of spirituality and literary modernity.*

*Drawing upon translation studies, hermeneutics, and postcolonial literary theory, the study demonstrates that Says Tuka functions as an act of cultural mediation rather than literal textual transfer. Chitre's translations reveal the translator's active role in reconstructing indigenous devotional literature within a transnational literary framework. Ultimately, the paper positions Says Tuka as a landmark contribution to Indian literature in English translation and to the globalization of vernacular Bhakti traditions.*

**Keywords :** Sant Tukaram, Dilip Chitre, Says Tuka, Bhakti Literature, Translation Studies, Marathi Literature, Spiritual Humanism, Literary Modernity, Postcolonial Translation, Abhanga

### Introduction

Sant Tukaram occupies a central position in the Bhakti tradition of Maharashtra and remains one of the most influential devotional poets in Indian literary history. His abhangas,

composed in colloquial Marathi, articulate devotion, spiritual introspection, ethical consciousness, and social criticism with remarkable emotional immediacy. Unlike elite Sanskrit literary traditions, Tukaram's poetry emerged from lived experience and reflected the concerns of ordinary people. His compositions challenged caste hierarchy, ritualistic religiosity, and social hypocrisy while emphasizing humility, equality, compassion, and direct devotion to God.

Despite Tukaram's immense literary and philosophical significance, his influence remained primarily confined to Marathi-speaking audiences for centuries. The contribution of Dilip Chitre becomes particularly significant in this context. Through *Says Tuka*, Chitre introduced Tukaram to global readerships and repositioned him within the sphere of world literature. Chitre's work represents not merely the translation of devotional poetry into English but also the reconstruction of Bhakti consciousness within modern literary discourse.

Dilip Chitre was not only a translator but also a poet, critic, filmmaker, and cultural intellectual deeply engaged with questions of language, identity, and literary modernity. His engagement with Tukaram was both personal and scholarly. In *Says Tuka*, Chitre attempts to preserve the spiritual intensity, emotional depth, oral quality, and rhythmic simplicity of Tukaram's abhangas while simultaneously making them accessible to contemporary readers unfamiliar with Marathi culture and Bhakti traditions.

This paper examines Chitre's interpretation of Tukaram in *Says Tuka* and investigates how translation becomes a form of cultural mediation and literary reinterpretation. The study further explores the relationship between spirituality and social criticism in Tukaram's poetry and analyzes how Chitre transforms Tukaram from a regional saint-poet into a universal literary consciousness relevant to modern global readers.

## **Sant Tukaram and the Bhakti Tradition**

Sant Tukaram was a seventeenth-century Marathi Bhakti poet associated with the Varkari devotional tradition of Maharashtra. His poetry was primarily dedicated to Lord Vitthal of Pandharpur, yet the scope of his abhangas extended beyond devotional worship into ethical, social, and philosophical reflection. Tukaram rejected caste discrimination, meaningless rituals, and superficial religiosity while advocating spiritual sincerity and moral integrity.

One of the defining features of Tukaram's poetry is its linguistic accessibility. Unlike classical Sanskrit literature restricted to elite audiences, Tukaram employed the language of ordinary people. This simplicity enabled his poetry to become part of oral and collective

traditions. The performative nature of abhangas contributed significantly to their emotional force and social reach.

Tukaram's poetry also demonstrates an extraordinary synthesis of spirituality and social consciousness. Themes such as suffering, poverty, doubt, humiliation, hope, and divine surrender recur throughout his compositions. His poetry reflects both individual spiritual struggle and broader ethical concerns regarding human dignity and equality. It is precisely this universality that enables Tukaram's poetry to transcend regional and historical boundaries.

### **Dilip Chitre as Translator and Cultural Mediator**

Dilip Chitre occupies a distinctive position in modern Indian literature due to his bilingual literary practice and engagement with translation as a creative process. His translation of Tukaram emerged not merely from academic interest but from a deep intellectual and emotional relationship with Marathi literary culture.

In Says Tuka, Chitre approaches translation as interpretation rather than literal reproduction. He recognizes that poetry cannot be translated mechanically because poetic meaning is inseparable from rhythm, cultural context, symbolism, and emotional resonance. Consequently, Chitre prioritizes experiential and aesthetic equivalence over lexical fidelity.

Chitre's modernist literary background significantly shapes his interpretation of Tukaram. He presents Tukaram as a poet of existential anxiety, spiritual rebellion, and ethical resistance. Through this interpretative framework, Tukaram becomes more than a devotional saint; he emerges as a questioning consciousness confronting suffering, alienation, hypocrisy, and injustice.

At the same time, Chitre remains attentive to the oral and musical qualities of Tukaram's abhangas. His translations preserve brevity, conversational directness, irony, and emotional immediacy. Through this balance between creative freedom and textual sensitivity, Chitre succeeds in making Tukaram relevant to modern English-speaking audiences.

### **Translation as Cultural Reconstruction**

Translation in Says Tuka functions as a process of cultural reconstruction rather than simple linguistic transfer. Translating Tukaram from Marathi into English involves negotiating significant differences in language, philosophy, literary tradition, and cultural experience.

One of the major challenges concerns the oral nature of abhangas. Tukaram's poetry was composed for collective singing and devotional performance. English literary traditions differ considerably from Marathi Bhakti oral culture, making the preservation of rhythm and performative energy difficult. Chitre addresses this challenge through concise syntax and fluid poetic rhythm.

Another challenge involves culturally specific references related to Varkari traditions, village life, mythology, and Marathi idioms. Literal translation of such elements risks alienating non-Marathi readers. Chitre therefore adapts expressions while retaining their symbolic and emotional significance.

Importantly, Chitre avoids excessive ornamentation and maintains linguistic simplicity because simplicity constitutes the core of Tukaram's poetic identity. His translations use lucid and modern English that preserves the emotional and spiritual force of the original poetry.

Through this process, translation becomes an act of reinterpretation and cultural mediation. Chitre reconstructs Tukaram not as an exotic religious figure but as a universal human voice speaking about suffering, devotion, moral conflict, and self-realization.

### **Spirituality and Existential Consciousness in Says Tuka**

Spirituality forms the central axis of Tukaram's poetry, and Chitre effectively communicates this dimension through translation. Tukaram's devotion to Vitthal is deeply personal and emotionally intense. God in his poetry is not distant or abstract but intimately involved in human suffering and emotional experience.

Chitre preserves this personal devotional voice while simultaneously foregrounding its existential dimensions. Tukaram's spiritual journey appears as a search for meaning, peace, and self-understanding amid worldly suffering and moral uncertainty. This interpretation allows modern readers to engage with Tukaram beyond strictly religious contexts.

Humility represents another important aspect of Tukaram's spirituality. The poet repeatedly presents himself as weak, flawed, and insignificant before God. Chitre translates these expressions with emotional honesty and simplicity, thereby preserving their authenticity.

Furthermore, Chitre highlights the universal dimensions of Tukaram's spiritual reflections. Themes such as impermanence, ego, suffering, longing, and self-awareness resonate across cultures and historical periods. Through translation, Tukaram's spirituality acquires global literary relevance.

## Social Criticism and Ethical Resistance

One of the most powerful aspects of Tukaram's poetry is its critique of social inequality and religious hypocrisy. Tukaram challenged caste hierarchy, priestly corruption, and ritualistic spirituality while emphasizing ethical conduct and inner purity.

Chitre's translations strongly foreground this rebellious and critical dimension. In *Says Tuka*, Tukaram emerges as a poet of ethical resistance whose voice challenges oppressive social structures. Chitre effectively preserves the irony, sarcasm, and sharpness of the original *abhangas*.

This aspect of Tukaram becomes especially relevant within contemporary discussions of equality, justice, and human dignity. Chitre presents Tukaram not merely as a mystical saint but as a socially conscious thinker whose poetry continues to address modern ethical concerns.

By emphasizing the coexistence of devotion and social criticism, Chitre challenges the assumption that Bhakti poetry is purely mystical or escapist. Instead, he demonstrates that spirituality can function as a form of moral and social resistance.

## Tukaram as a Universal Literary Figure

A major achievement of *Says Tuka* lies in its transformation of Tukaram into a universal literary figure. Chitre does not confine Tukaram within regional or sectarian frameworks. Instead, he positions him alongside global poets concerned with suffering, spiritual conflict, and existential inquiry.

This universalization becomes possible because Chitre emphasizes themes that transcend specific cultural contexts. Tukaram's reflections on mortality, loneliness, ego, suffering, and hope possess universal human significance. Chitre's modern English translations enable these concerns to reach international audiences.

At the same time, Chitre does not erase Tukaram's Marathi identity or Bhakti context. The translations retain cultural specificity while remaining accessible to non-Marathi readers. Thus, *Says Tuka* successfully balances universality and cultural rootedness.

The work also contributed significantly to the inclusion of Tukaram within comparative literature and translation studies. Scholars increasingly began to study Tukaram not merely as a regional devotional poet but as a major literary voice within world literature.

## Literary Style and Poetic Technique

Chitre's poetic skill plays a crucial role in the success of *Says Tuka*. His translations are literary recreations rather than literal reproductions. He carefully selects words capable of conveying emotional intensity without becoming excessively ornamental.

The language of the translations is modern, direct, and fluid. Chitre avoids archaic English because he intends Tukaram's poetry to appear contemporary and alive. This stylistic strategy enhances accessibility and emotional immediacy.

Another notable feature is Chitre's preservation of brevity. Tukaram's abhangas are concise yet powerful, and Chitre successfully retains this compactness in translation. He also captures the conversational tone and performative energy of Tukaram's voice.

Additionally, Chitre effectively translates imagery and symbolism derived from rural life, nature, and everyday experience. These images retain both simplicity and philosophical resonance in English translation.

## Critical Reception of *Says Tuka*

*Says Tuka* received widespread critical acclaim for introducing Tukaram into English literary discourse. Scholars and critics praised Chitre for balancing poetic creativity with cultural authenticity. The work became a landmark contribution to Indian literature in English translation.

However, some critics argue that Chitre's modernist interpretation occasionally reshapes Tukaram according to contemporary literary sensibilities. Since translation inevitably involves interpretation, complete neutrality remains impossible. Chitre's philosophical and literary perspectives undeniably influence his representation of Tukaram.

Nevertheless, *Says Tuka* continues to be regarded as one of the most important English translations of Bhakti poetry. Its significance extends beyond literary achievement into the realms of cultural preservation, comparative literature, and translation studies.

## Conclusion:

Dilip Chitre's *Says Tuka* represents a landmark achievement in Indian literary translation and cultural mediation. Through this work, Chitre successfully introduces Sant Tukaram to global audiences while preserving the emotional intensity, spiritual depth, and ethical consciousness of the original abhangas.

Chitre's interpretation transcends literal translation and reimagines Tukaram as a universal poetic voice addressing existential suffering, social injustice, humility, devotion, and human dignity. By bridging medieval Marathi Bhakti traditions with contemporary literary modernity, Chitre demonstrates the transformative power of translation as a form of cultural dialogue and literary reconstruction.

Ultimately, Says Tuka illustrates how regional devotional literature can attain universal literary significance through sensitive and intellectually rigorous translation. Tukaram's poetry, as interpreted by Chitre, continues to inspire readers across cultures through its profound synthesis of spirituality, ethical resistance, and human compassion.

