

# *Bhakti*, a Faith for Rehabilitation

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## First acquaintance: fascination and fantasy

*Gaṅgubāī* was fifty seven when we came in touch with her in her village, *Tāḍkaḷas*,<sup>1</sup> in April 7, 1996. We<sup>2</sup> were for the first time in the village to record grindmill songs. A group of women gathered for that purpose at the invitation of Prof. Sham Pathak<sup>3</sup> and his family in their spacious ancient house within the walls of the old village. The Pathak family belongs to the Brahman community,

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<sup>1</sup> The village of *Tāḍkaḷas* (circa 10,000 population) is located on *Parbhaṇī-Pūrṇā* road, at 14 km from *Pūrṇām* the center of the taluka, and 38 km from *Parbham*, the district center, in *Mahārāshṭra*. It comprises of two distinct parts: inside the old walls: old impressive houses or *wāḍas* of landed gentry, huts of labourers' families and artisans, traditional activities; outside the walls: alleys of shops, go-downs (built up under Jawahar Rojgar Scheme), Primary Health Center, six private doctors, public primary school and high-school, one private high-school, three pre-primary schools, two nurseries, two banks, and modern administrative offices (Police Station, Post Office, Gram Panchayat, *Talāthī*), and many private concrete houses. A canal brings to the village fields the water of Gaykwadi dam (Paithan) and secures a relative agricultural prosperity: cotton, jowar, groundnut, vegetables. Cotton industry and also stone queries offer job opportunities. As a consequence *Tāḍkaḷas* has recently developed into an important commercial center with 30 small hotels, 25 *pān* centers and 5 general stores, a weekly general market and a daily trade of vegetables. 28 castes are represented in the village approximatively as follows:

Caste Name	Families	Caste Name	Families	Caste Name	Families	Caste Name	Families
<i>Bhoī</i>	3	<i>Gurāv</i>	4	<i>Liṅgāyat</i>	8	<i>Shimpī</i>	6
<i>Bhoudha</i>	75	<i>Haṭkar</i>	300	<i>Lohār</i>	4	<i>Sonār</i>	4
<i>Brāhmaṇ</i>	8	<i>Kaikaḍī</i>	2	<i>Māṅg</i>	75	<i>Sutār</i>	10
<i>Cāmbhār</i>	17	<i>Kāsar</i>	10	<i>Marāthā</i>	2000	<i>Telī</i>	15
<i>Ḍor</i>	3	<i>Komaṭhī</i>	10	<i>Mārvāḍī</i>	7	<i>Vaḍār</i>	4
<i>Ghisāḍī</i>	3	<i>Koṣṭī</i>	15	<i>Mhasanjogī</i>	6	<i>Vaṅjārī</i>	2
<i>Gosāvī</i>	2	<i>Kumbhār</i>	5	<i>Musulmans</i>	200	<i>Vārīk</i>	7

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Bel from CSH — Center for Human Sciences, Delhi — and Hema Rairkar, Jitendra Maid, Bhimsen Nanekar and Gajarabai Darekar, from CCRSS. This study was a part of the joint programme on *Culture, Communication and Power* of CSH and CCRSS.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Sham Pathak teaches *Marāthī* literature in the College of Majalgao (Beed district). Acquainted with the project of collection and valorisation of Grindmill songs during a seminar on the personage of *Sītā* held in Pune in December 1995, he volunteered to facilitate the collection of songs in his own native village, *Tāḍkaḷas*, where his parents and brothers reside.

but Prof. Pathak's mother<sup>4</sup> enjoys collecting women from various castes: *Bhoī*, *Marāṭhā*, *Dhaṅgar* and *Brāhmaṇ* women had enthusiastically assembled to sing with one mind, and be recorded.

A number of women had settled to grind and sing when the mother of Prof. Pathak sent a young girl to call and bring *Gaṅgā* from the *Rām Mandir*. A short while later, a woman enters into the room, wrapped in a six-meter green sari. Five feet tall. She keeps both the hands covered under the tail of her sari. Black tooth powder turned the teeth blackish. Deep wrinkles all over a dark face tell stories of endurance. The large eyes thrust whitish beams of disquieting light. She sits leaning with her back against the wall of the veranda. The songs of the grindmill bring gleams of joy on her face. When a singer makes a mistake, she intervenes to recall the correct word. She constantly raises the hands hidden under the end of the sari upon the face to wipe the water oozing from the eyes. She whispers songs for herself apart. Prof. Pathak's mother calls her: "Eh *Gaṅgā*, sing a song!" Gajarabai Darekar (from our group of visitors) insists that she should join the group, set to grind and sing loudly in the middle of the assembly. Then a smiling *Gaṅgubāī*, with her head keeping nodding gently strikes up a first verse followed by many other distichs:

*He has gone out of station, my dear one...*

Her marvellous voice surpasses the voices of other women. Words moreover come from the inmost depths. Her singing exerts an irresistible attraction.

Then we realised that she was hiding hands and feet for reason of leprosy. She had lost all fingers and toes. No question for her to come forward and grasp the handle of the grindmill while singing. We immediately felt a particular sympathy for her on this account. We learnt that she contracted the disease when she was ten. As a child, she used to sleep close to her maternal grand-mother who was affected by leprosy. The washer-woman, who was washing the clothes of the family, contracted also the disease. We were also told that she was staying absolutely alone in the temple of *Rām*, apart from relatives and villagers. We left the village, put under a spell and determined to come again and meet *Gaṅgubāī*, independently.

*Gaṅgubāī*'s singing was of such a quality that B. Bel could not but wish to make a special and prolonged recording of her personal performance as outstanding performer of grindmill songs. Considering the particular condition of the leprous *Gaṅgubāī* apparently abandoned by all and eventually left to seek refuge for herself in God alone, we were puzzled and curious to understand how the tradition of grindmill songs could help a deserted and stigmatized woman to cope

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<sup>4</sup> Prof. Pathak's mother is meticulously faithful to many domestic ritual observances while keen on mixing with women from other lower castes in which she keeps many friends. She likes to sing with them not only grindmill songs but also *bhajans* (she has formed a group of women belonging to different castes who enjoy coming together to sing *bhajan* among themselves) or even film songs: during our meeting she wanted to sing from a very popular Marathi film a song displaying the sorrow of a mother saying one's farewell to her daughter who leaves with in-laws after the wedding ceremony. Prof. Pathak's father is ninety-two, he is a traditional healer of wide repute.

up with and possibly overcome, a condition of extreme solitude and deprivation. The intention was not to only record a particularly significant wealth of tunes and songs for objectives of musical analysis and study of traditional musical creativity among peasant women. Above all we wanted to take *Gaṅgubāī*'s interview with the intention of getting her testimony about the particular relevance and meaning of that tradition of songs for herself, the deserted leprous. Meanwhile B. Bel directed Malavika Talukdar<sup>5</sup> to simultaneously realize a document of visual anthropology on *Gaṅgubāī*'s life experience with special focus on the singing performance as a significant example of spontaneous self-expression and assertion in a traditionally patriarchal social context.

In February 5-6, 1997 we<sup>6</sup> were again in *Tāḍkaḷas* for a second visit with definite purposes. We directly went to the *Rām* temple in the center of the old part of the village to meet *Gaṅgubāī*, personally. She was first reluctant to talk. It took us some time to obtain information from her. We spent all our time with her in the temple, exchanging, recording her interview and songs. M. Talukdar shot scenes in the temple and the village for a video document. *Gaṅgubāī* sang a great number of songs. She revealed her particular motives for singing. First, as a rule, she always expresses through songs to God what she carries in mind. Moreover, we had come to meet her personally and as she had nothing to offer to her hosts, neither tea nor meal, she felt that she should sing songs for us to tape them as this was our purpose and expectation. When we departed the next day, she confided:

If somebody like you comes I feel entertained. I feel peaceful now. Once alone, my mind is in a turmoil.

As the information that we got was not always corroborated by what we gathered from other village people, we<sup>7</sup> visited her again and her village a third time on March 22-24 and a fourth time<sup>8</sup> on May 3-4, 1997 to clarify several points.

The first visit had prompted us in particular to entertain serious misconceptions about the rapports obtaining between *Gaṅgubāī* and her relatives and villagers in

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<sup>5</sup> The project 'Autobiographies' of Malavika Talukdar from Communication Design, Department of Video, National Institute of Design (NID, Ahmedabad) takes advantage of the accuracy and reflexivity of audiovisual media to document the specific forms of expression and communication peculiar to women in rural areas through a representation of an individual's motivations, vision of life and patterns of communication. At the same time, paradoxically, it is an outsider's view of an intimate expression. The project attempts to portray the various social forces and events in the individual daily existence that appear as messages in songs, and thus provide deeper information about the emergence of female identity and individuality in a rural society. "My curiosity was aroused by these strong, resilient women who seem almost invisible in the texts of their songs. How did they live, what were they all about? What has brought on this poetry? This developed into the idea of doing portraits of these peasant women. My initial assumption of portraying two women who were different yet marginalised in their society, proved incorrect as I went on. Dharubai is very much part of the social hierarchy as a dai (traditional midwife), money-lender and land owner. Gangubai too is well integrated into her community by her melodious voice and repertoire of songs influenced by the *Bhakti* cult. As I got to know them better, both these women, though physically so apart, shared a zeal to keep the tradition of grindmill songs alive."

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Bel, Hema Rairkar, Bhimsen Nanekar, Jitendra Maid and Malavika Talukdar.

<sup>7</sup> Hema Rairkar, Andréine Bel, Malavika Talukdar, Jitendra Maid and Bhimsen Nanekar.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Poitevin, Datta Shinde, Jitendra Maid and Bhimsen Nanekar.

general on account of her disease. We had rashly ascribed to her condition as a leprous a kind of stigma explaining for her rejection and enforced isolation in the temple. We soon realised that we could not figure out *Gaṅgubāī*'s perceptions or the attitudes of relatives and village people in this respect with notions of taboo, social stigma, curse and the like. *Gaṅgubāī* is not rejected nor banished at the outskirts of the village for reason of ritual impurity due to her leprosy: she stays in the *Rām* temple, which is located in the heart of the old village. We may on the contrary regret the initial carelessness of a grand-mother keeping her young grand-daughter so close to her. *Gaṅgubāī* does not feel socially marginalised nor excluded or personally rejected either. Soon many events made us realise that this was a marvellous example of mere fantazising on the part of alien observers. We actually did not find any trace of stigma, pollution, quarantine and consequent symbolic rejection on account of leprosy. For instance, in February 5, we had just started recording *Gaṅgubāī*'s songs, when a teenage girl from the village entered the temple with a couple of friends of her age, stood on the staircase and forthwith addressed her:

Aunty<sup>9</sup>, I come to fetch you, our aunty is with a bad headache. She is calling you to give the mantra. Come to our house.  
- "I'll come after some time," replied *Gaṅgubāī*.

Our curiosity was aroused: *Gaṅgubāī* replied to all our questions about her competence to give *mantra* and heal. Meanwhile, instead of immediately going back home, the young girl and her friends had sat with us and requested *Gaṅgubāī* to sing the following song:

*The bullock-cart with bells, from my mother's place  
My dear brother is here, today I shall go to my mother's place.*

Then *Gaṅgubāī* explained to us how young girls are very fond of her songs, especially the one that she was just requested to sing.

They come, sit and enjoy listening. All of them call me aunty, *ātyā!*

*Gaṅgubāī* is certainly not in the least stigmatised and cast out as a leprous by anybody, relative or villager.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ātyā* "paternal aunty," usual address for a lady like *Gaṅgubāī* till recently staying in her brothers' house with the latters' children.

## Family bonds

*Gaṅgubāī* belongs to the *Marāṭhā* community. She was born in the village of *Airandeśvar*, village of her maternal grand-mother<sup>10</sup>, in the same district of *Parbhanī*. Her parents were from the farmers' community of *Tāḍkaḷas* and among its leading *Pāṭiḷ*<sup>11</sup> families. They owned and were cultivating twelve acres of rainfed land. *Gaṅgubāī* remembers with pride:

In this village of *Tāḍkaḷas* my father had a *vāḍā*<sup>12</sup> of sixteen *khans*<sup>13</sup>. As number three of the *Pāṭiḷ* House, I used to strut around.

*Gaṅgubāī* was not taught to read and write. She occasionally heard about the wider world through others. She knows of two important events of her time: the *razakar* movement<sup>14</sup> when she was about five or six years old (the movement was at its peak between 1946 and 1950):

Their men were plundering and looting the houses, and detaining people. They were marching past at the charge in the streets of the village. I remember the fighting that was going on. People were terror-stricken.

The second event present to her mind is the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (1948) when “the houses of Brahman people were set to fire.” She heard also about Indira Gandhi's assassination.

*Gaṅgubāī* had three brothers and one sister.

We are four altogether: my elder brother Saybu, Gyandev the number two, myself the number three and my younger brother, Shahu. There was no small girl of my age in the neighbourhood to play with. My uncle too had no daughter. Women used to go and work in the fields. I was also going with them. I used to keep busy with small works. Women were singing while working. They used to sing *abhaṅgas*.<sup>15</sup>

Before I got married, my mother took me to *Paṅḍharpūr*. Since then, my mind is filled with the *bhakti*<sup>16</sup> of God. Also after my marriage I went with a neighbour woman again to *Paṅḍharpūr*.

*Gaṅgubāī* was given in marriage at the age of eleven to a man of thirty five *Dājībā Cavhāṅ* from a village called *Āḍgāv*.

He was from our caste, from our lineage, not from outside. He had lost both his parents within the eleven days which followed his birth. He had been looked after by a paternal

<sup>10</sup> A pregnant woman usually comes back to her mother's place for delivery.

<sup>11</sup> Headman, traditional village authority, leading landed *Marāṭhā* families.

<sup>12</sup> A sort of mansion or manor resembling a stronghold: enclosed within a high stone-wall with one single decorated gate as entry, houses are built up around a central open courtyard for the members of the joint family.

<sup>13</sup> Architectural unit: the space between the main wooden pillars of the house structure, usually four or five by ten or twelve feet.

<sup>14</sup> Movement of the Muslim population faithful to the Nizam of Hyderabad — in whose territory that part of India, a region known as Marathwada, belonged at that time — raised against merging into the new political entity of independent India (1947).

<sup>15</sup> *Abhaṅga*: a particular metrical composition in praise of the deity, usually in the vernacular language; a hymn.

<sup>16</sup> Devotional love: as a generic term, in common parlance, the noun *bhakti* refers to an emotive state and suggests no ideology, no doctrine nor particular representation of the divine, but “engagedness of heart.”

aunt living in *Tāḍkaḷas*, where his parents had come. He then stayed permanently in *Tāḍkaḷas*.

My *mālak* (lit. owner, husband) had no father, no mother, no brother, no sister. This is the reason why he opened a retail shop in the village of my parents. He had no land. Our marriage took place in the temple of *Rām*.

*Gaṅgubāī* never visited her in-laws' family at *Āḍgāv* where they had some land. Her husband either never went back there. He was keeping a woman, *Pārvatī*, who was coming from the village of *Khadaḱ Kānhegāv* (of *Parbhaṇī* District). "She might have been from a *Marāṭhā*, a *Māṅg* or a *Vārīk* (*Nhāvī*, barber) community, but nobody knew more about her." They were living together but they had not been duely wedded. According to Hindu religion, a man must get married to obtain salvation. Therefore considering that he was already beyond thirty five and that no one would agree to marry his daughter to him, village people conceived the idea of marrying *Gaṅgubāī* to this man. *Gaṅgubāī* was physically handicapped and no one would have accepted her as a wife. Still no parents would keep home for long a girl who reached maturity, she had also to be married — a woman can no more stay alone in life than a young man remain home unmarried. Therefore village people thought convenient to arrange their marriage. At the beginning *Gaṅgubāī*'s father was reluctant to give her to a man much older, but he had to abide by the decision of the villagers.

*Gaṅgubāī* gave birth to three daughters at her mother's place. *Māyā*, the first one, died when she was four months old. The second one *Chabu* died when she was one and a half years old. The third of them only survives, *Śilā* also called *Sūlocanā*.

Though I had not offered the slightest thing at all to any god, this daughter survived.

*Sūlocanā* was given in marriage in the village of *Ukhalpimpolī*, taluka of Jintur, in the same district of *Parbhaṇī*. She has presently two daughters who attend school, the elder *Mānikā*, in eight standard, and the cadet *Svātī* in fifth standard.

*Pārvatī* remained with *Gaṅgubāī* as a co-wife. She had no child. She took care of the domestic works, looked after *Gaṅgubāī*'s children, entertained close and good relations with *Gaṅgubāī*'s parents who, says *Gaṅgubāī*, never harassed her. The co-wife was visiting *Gaṅgubāī*'s parents every now and then but nobody from *Gaṅgubāī*'s family had ever any contact with the co-wife's family.

*Pārvatī* never delivered. She never gave me any trouble. *Pārvatī* had nobody close to her like her husband. She had no issue.

*Gaṅgubāī*'s sister had two co-wives and no children. According to *Gaṅgubāī* she was killed by her husband. Nowadays, *Gaṅgubāī*'s family keeps no relation whatsoever with her sister's family. "The handmill is broken, the rapports are broken," says *Gaṅgubāī*.

"I disagree:" for the sole reason that her husband murdered her. During her life, he married three times.

## Support and desertion

*Gaṅgubāī* says that her parents used to help her: she delivered all the three times with the assistance of her mother in their house; she got her daughter married

with her parents and brothers' cooperation; her daughter went for delivery to the house of *Gaṅgubāī*'s mother. To all our questions about her husband's attitudes and behaviour *Gaṅgubāī*'s replies are always that her husband was behaving with her very nicely; he was very tolerant and considerate as regards her disease too. When he died after a serious fever, *Gaṅgubāī* came back home and started staying with her parents while the co-wife went back to her own parents.

I used to go and work in the fields with other women, discharging any sort of tasks except stitching. I could do all works: washing, cooking... As long as I had strength, I was accompanying women in the fields, helping out, looking after the cattle, bringing fuel, searching for fodder, but now I am worn out.

While we were conversing, a distant and elder female relative of *Gaṅgubāī* came and visited the temple. She told us:

We are from a *Pāṭil* lineage. Formerly, when we were going to our fields, we used to wrap our head and face with a *dhoti*.<sup>17</sup> Once we had reached the fields we used to take off and keep aside the *dhoti*, and start working.

All such practices were commonly observed. We were reminded also that women were not allowed to visit shops and purchase any thing on their own. That was men's domain and prerogative. But women were sent on fields to work. They had similarly to cover themselves while crossing the village.

When *Gaṅgubāī*'s brothers got married, her disease did not come at all as a hurdle in the marriage arrangements although everybody knew about it. *Gaṅgubāī* tells us that her brothers' wives though coming from alien houses accepted her very well. Her disease did not come as a barrier at the time of the marriage of *Gaṅgubāī*'s sister. Her disease did not either come as an obstacle for the marriage of her own daughter. *Gaṅgubāī* tells us that her son-in-law came and met her before her daughter's marriage. After marriage, she once went and visited her daughter in her new village. No body from the daughter-in-law's house raised any objection.

When we asked *Gaṅgubāī* whether her parents had given her any medicine either allopathic or indigenous, we were amazed by the very matter of fact reaction of *Gaṅgubāī*:

At that time, forty years ago, my parents did not have the idea of going to a doctor and be giving medicine. My parents took me two times to Tuljapur, (place of the Goddess *Āmbābāī* famous all over Maharashtra). My mother offered to the Goddess as ex-voto hands made of silver. Once I had lost my fingers, what is the point of offering hands to the Goddess? What is the use of this?

Once a guru came to the village. He advised my mother to take me to a village where there is a lake and give me a bath in it. But my mother did not take me to that village.

Once a *Mahārāj* came from Phadkal and told me to take juice of *mendī* (a plant, lawsonia inermis). I drank it for twenty one days but it proved to be of no use.

Barring these incidences, *Gaṅgubāī* does not remember to have been given any medicine. Now under the Government programme of eradication of leprosy a doctor visits the village. He examines the school children and distributes medicines. "He gave some to *Gaṅgubāī* too," confirmed a schoolboy of twelve.

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<sup>17</sup> A piece of cloth wrapped by men around the waist as common dress.

According to a villager, *Gaṅgubāī* had some land, but her second brother sold it and then drove her out of her parents' house. *Gaṅgubāī* confirmed that her father did not put any land under her name. We asked her again in different ways about any land in her name but her answer was the same:

My father happened to pass away seven years after my husband. When he was dying I asked him: "Father, give me one acre from the share of each of my three brothers. I shall live on it." But my father did not agree. While dying my father told Saybu and Gyandev: "After me, take care of my daughter." Now the three brothers stay separately. I got nothing from my father's property. I have nothing under my control. I became dependent upon other people. Those two drunkards, Shahu and Gyandev, went on drinking and seven acres of land were sold. But Saybu does not drink that much. Everything went under the control of my brothers. As long as I was able and could walk and work in the fields, my brothers took care of me.

- You did so many things for the family, and still they have not given you a share in the property?

- Why should they give me a share? Yesterday an old lady died in the village. She was the owner of a field. She had seven brothers. Every brother had been saying that the other brother would look after her. But she died alone. What is the use of an estate after all?

To our question about the reasons which obliged her to come and stay in the temple, she explains:

Our *karma*<sup>18</sup> is like that. What can we do about it? What's the use of incriminating anybody for it, and whom to blame? The destiny (*daivagati*) decides. What can we do. Now, I feel no shame nor any fear. This disease was in store (*samcit*) from a previous life. Such is the wish of God. It grieves me inwardly to be sick. I do not share this suffering with anybody: I do not even confide this grief to my daughter. I would have shared it with my son if I had got a boy.

At these words *Gaṅgubāī* straightaway strikes up the following song:

*I sang my first verse on the mill, Rām on your charriot, I greet you,  
My second verse I sing it every now and then at a stretch in my heart.*

*Gaṅgubāī* tells us that she was not driven out of the house, but left on her own:

My second brother drinks too much. He gives trouble to every body, above all to his wife. He breaks utensils, he beats the floor, he shouts. I have not been able to bear this. Then I started living in this temple.

When my brother drinks and comes to the temple, he also says to me: "Sing a song!" In the beginning when I started staying in the temple, for the first six months, I refused to talk with my brother. But then I thought in myself, "why should I be so proud, I am a simple person." One day he came drunk in the temple. I was afraid and I hid behind the statue of god Datta. He went back. Next time, he came and stood before me. He said: "Come and eat with me." I told him: "Today I am on fast." Then he said: "I cannot give you anything to eat for your fast. I do not have money in my pocket. At home, nobody cares for me, what can I give you? But you sing songs. Why have you learnt singing? Is it only to keep songs in your mind or to sing? I want to listen to your songs."

Once in our presence, the youngest brother happened to enter in the temple and talk with her. Still none of the three brothers seemingly wants to take her back home.

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<sup>18</sup> Law of retribution for acts of a previous life, explains for the present lot of hardship or happiness, the merits or otherwise of previous actions accumulate and bring about their effects in due time with an inescapable necessity.

When my brothers got married, the daughters-in-law entered the house. They gave birth to children. The disease that I had made them uneasy. I was putting my hands in the flour, handling the salt, dipping my hands in the water, fondling the children. The new daughters-in-law got restive with me, that old lady who was moreover doing nothing. Therefore, two years ago, I came to stay in this temple.

Village women confirm that she used to go and deliberately touch the cooked food. In her family she was advised to keep her plate aside but she did not agree with this.

*Gaṅgubāī* is suffering from bleeding since childhood, explains Prof. Pathak's mother. Though she lost fingers and toes, she does perform all works herself. When her brothers had children, she was putting her hands in the flour. The daughters-in-law wondered what might happen to their children if she behaves like this. This is what fuelled the quarrels. It is for this reason that they drove her out of the house. We invite her to our place. People give her food. As long as she had still enough strength to work, they kept her at home, explains Prof. Pathak's brother. When they felt that they could not get work from her, they expelled her. I gave her medicines myself. The disease is now under control.

When we went to meet her in February 6, 1997 she took Malavika Talukdar and Jitendra Maid with her and entered her family house. This made her younger brother very angry, he hurled a number of abuses at *Gaṅgubāī*:

That damned nuisance, *pīḍā!* Why has she come? What shrew is this one, *avadasā!*

*Gaṅgubāī* felt hurt. She said:

Woman, the moon from the sky is in my house, *Pāṇḍuraṅga*<sup>19</sup> from *Paṇḍharī* is in my heart. I came for nothing in this idiot's house. There is nobody at night in that temple but myself and my God.

The brother's son and his wife though did not show any anger. *Gaṅgubāī* took the small children in her arms. The three of them came out twenty minutes later. We learnt from Prof. Pathak's mother that after our departure from the village the brother quarrelled with her and abused her because she had taken some of us in the house.

In the village, Prof. Pathak's brother successfully recommend her name for the Sanjay Gandhi's scheme of assistance to persons with no support. As a result she gets fifty rupees per month. When her daughter comes and visits her, she gives her clothes. *Gaṅgubāī's* daughter visits the village once a year and stays for about a fortnight in the house of *Gaṅgubāī's* brothers. We asked *Gaṅgubāī* whether, at least when her daughter comes to see her, her brothers invite her:

- Why do you not go and visit all your brothers?
- If they invite me, I will go. But if there is no will from their side, why should I go? If I had wealth, then they would have bowed down to my feet. Really speaking, they do not want to invite me. Had I some money, they would invite me. But I have nothing. Why should people invite me?

## Guest in the temple of Ram

*Gaṅgubāī* now permanently resides in the *Rām* temple, on the first floor.

The God has ruined my life but the same God has given me gladness and happiness. I feel happy in the temple now.

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<sup>19</sup> Common name of *Viṭṭhal*, the deity of *Paṇḍharpūr* or *Paṇḍhrī*, centre of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra.

The temple is roughly constructed after the pattern of the local *vādās* or mansions, which in that region follow a moghul design. Four walls without a door nor window isolate completely the internal structures from the street and the world outside. An impressive gate gives access to a vast inner courtyard surrounded by verandahs which run on the four sides upon an elevated platform. Walls are erected upon these platforms with a door and windows which open on the courtyard as to offer independent rooms as per the number of distinct residential places needed. These rooms give the residents privacy and isolate them from the crowded courtyard; they first of all protect them from sun, wind or rain as the courtyard remains normally wide open on the sky for allowing light and air to pour inside but open as well to bad weather in general. The *vādās* may have one storey or more and rooms of any design built at the level of the floors to serve any purpose, all these spaces opening always exclusively onto the inner courtyard. The veranda of the temple's groundfloor has small rooms built for giving shelter to the gods in the middle of spacious verandas where the devotees can roam about, walk around the gods' sanctuaries or assemble for listening to preach or performing collective prayer rituals.

*Gaṅgubāī* usually stays on the first floor of the temple where there is no wall or partition to give her an independent room and protect her from the external changing weather conditions. She comes down to welcome the visitors who call on her. She sleeps alone at night on the first floor where one climbs through a ladder, no door either separating the ground floor veranda from the first storey.

One tiny earthen pot (for filling water), a couple of earthen pots (to keep water or occasionally foodstuff), two or three metallic plates (for meals), a metallic pot as jug, a couple of old saris, a patchwork blanket, two old saris, some worn out gunny sacks, this is all *Gaṅgubāī*'s property. She wears the saris with simple brocade presented to her at the time of feasts: their colour is blue, dark pink or green of various shades. Every morning, whence she gets up and takes bath, she first waters the sacred basil, *tulsi* in the courtyard of the temple and then walks around the idol of god Datta. She takes the *darśan*<sup>20</sup> of all the gods present in the temple. We asked her:

- What do you murmur when you walk around the gods and pray them?
- Take me soon, liberate me, this is what I say.
- You do not feel like living?
- What's the use of living now?

Previously, at the time of the severe drought which held sway in 1972, a villager *Tātyārāo Āmbore Pāṭīl*, his family people and their relatives built up a small structure dedicated to the god Datta. Later, villagers erected there a small memorial, *samādhī*, to the *Jagadguru Mahārāj Motīrām*. The people's devotion happened to be on the increase: villagers started assembling and performing several sorts of collective religious functions such as *pujā* (ritual worshipping of the idol), seven-day *Harīnām* (predication with chanting of the God's name, *Harī*), *pāṭh* (recitation of the Scriptures), *āratī* (prayer of praise with a ritual of

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<sup>20</sup> Lit. "take the vision," to gaze at the god: meet him, stand in front of him, look at him and address him with confidence and faith.

lights waved in front of god), etc. Eventually, all villagers together raised funds to construct a big temple surrounded by a compound wall, and dedicated it to *Rām*. The place is now known to everybody under the name of *Rām Mandir*. Though the plot still belongs to *Tātyārāo Āmbore Pātīl* and his relatives, the temple is a public space and the adjacent street carries the name of *Rām Mandir* alley. Sometimes a pre-primary school opens in the temple premises. *Āmbore Pātīl*'s wife gives *Gaṅgubāi* meals two times a day and his daughter-in-law serves her tea.

Each time we visited *Gaṅgubāi*, sat around her in the temple and conversed with her, children or school girls used to come and play noisily and make themselves the centre of attraction. Elder women too whose domestic chores were over especially in the free hours of the afternoon rest, often joined us together with their children to chitchat and spend some time with *Gaṅgubāi*, while possibly mending a blouse, breastfeeding or rocking a baby in one's lap.

*Digambar Āmbore*, a distant relative, brings me pan cakes of millet, *bhākrī*. He is not from an alien caste. He is one from among us. He accordingly behaves very kindly with me. Women from neighbouring houses come and give me company. There is a whole circle around me to chitchat. This makes me feel better. On the occasion of feasts, other women present me with saris and blouses. They show a lot of love for me.

We give alms to people from outside (from different castes), what is wrong then to give to *Gaṅgubāi*," comments *Digambar Āmbore*.

At night, from ten to eleven, there is *bhajan* in the temple. This is then a real moment of delight for my mind. Since childhood, *bhakti* is haunting my mind. My time is spent in remembering the name of God, *nāmasmaraṇ*," confides *Gaṅgubāi*.

The day we went and took *Gaṅgubāi*'s interview in February was a Thursday. She told us that this was her fasting day. Women, who had assembled with us to meet *Gaṅgubāi*, confirmed in this regard that together with some other ladies she had been given a *gurumantra*, vz. a *mantra* by the guru *Śivlikar Mahārāj Dattupant*.

This *gurumantra* is a right, confirms *Gaṅgubāi*.

- You say that you have a guru, we do not understand what does this mean. What procedures should one follow to have a guru, ask J. Maid and B. Nanekar.

- The initiation ought to be performed on a day with a solar eclipse. First of all, we had to stand in the river, *Gaṅgā*, with water reaching up to the chest, otherwise one does not remember the mantra and the latter would prove of no efficiency. Then each of us sat on the guru's lap. While beating cymbals the guru blew into everyone's ears and uttered a *mantra*. That *mantra* can not be used for oneself. The disciple should not reveal it to others. Every one had to present the guru with a full dress and on the top of it anything that they would wish to offer. Since then, the *mantra* must be correctly remembered and recited everyday after taking bath. Thursday is considered as the guru's day and disciples fast on that day. There is a string of one hundred and eight beads, we join hands and recite the mantra.

I observe two more fasts. One day, Tuesday, I fast for Goddess Amba, as it is the Goddess's day; and I observe fast on every full moon day.

*Gaṅgubāi* learnt another type of *mantra* from Prof. Pathak's father. Prof. Pathak's eldest sister and *Gaṅgubāi*, both of them together, learnt this *mantra*. *Gaṅgubāi* administers it in the temple to those affected by some one's bad eye, *dṛṣṭa*, to patients suffering from migraine, sprain, back-aches. The *mantra* is expected to take the ache or spell away. This explains that people may throng around

*Gaṅgubāī*. (We felt surprised to know that a traditional Brahman taught the *mantra* at the same time to his daughter and a *Marāṭhā* woman.)

The *mantra* is administered to those who suffer from sprain with the following ritual: the hand is waved upon the head, then both the palms are placed upon the chest of the patient and a strong push is given. The patient should make moves and gestures with his limbs. Then the sprain disappears. In the case of *karaḷ*, the hand is waved upon the front with a pinch of ashes while reciting the *mantra*. In the case of cataract, the patient should come to *Gaṅgubāī*'s in the morning. Three lumps of salt are thrown in a glass where seeds of sesamun are mixed with oil, the mixture is stirred with weed, *haralī*, and waved three times upon the patient, then thrown upon a bush of acacia, *bābhul*. The sight become sharp as a thorn of acacia. Nine dry dates are given: three of them are to be eaten for three days. *Gaṅgubāī* administers the *mantra* to patients in the temple or at their home when people call on her.

When Andréine Bel and Malavika Talukdar reached the place on March 22, and entered the temple for a third visit, Gangubai was alone, busy performing her ablutions and prayers. Then, she took them along with her by the ladder up in her attic. When M. Talukdar took shots of Gangubai having her food, Gangubai was not at all bothered. One had the feeling that she was, as it were, 'reconciled' with her leprosy. Then Gangubai inquired whether Malavika would be willing to record her songs, saying that she had a number of them to sing. Malavika acquiesced and said that she was to go and fetch the recording equipment; but before climbing down the ladder she asked Gangubai whether she could cure her headaches with incantations. Gangubai replied that she could utter the mantras only during a moon's eclipse. When Malavika had left, Gangubai confided to Andréine Bel that she had an awful headache.

Then, I found myself instead attending to Gangubai, reports A. Bel. I laid my hands on her head: a furnace, indeed! When I so practice the 'breathing' I cannot guess in advance how much time will be required. It took possibly forty-five minutes till the sensation in my hand became again neutral. Going by the sensation I can say that I found Gangubai's body absolutely sane, remarkably energetic as far as muscles are concerned, but gripped by tensions. I would say that according to the sensation, though I am not a physician, Gangubai is cured from leprosy. During that time, H. Rairkar and M. Talukdar were waiting downstairs with women from the village, and children keeping the contact between the scene upstairs and the group below. After the 'breathing' I asked Gangubai to lie for a while and take rest, and joined down the group. Other village women came and we recorded their songs. Some strong and loudly nasal voices were very keen to be recorded. We gave them full attention. Gangubai had remained alone in her roost, but she soon came down to stretch herself and rest at a few meters distance from the group. She then came closer and sat behind the other women, sometimes encouraging them or friendly reminding them of the correct words and tunes. Other women seemingly appreciated her suggestions. When all stood up and departed, one of them put her arm round Gangubai's waist. Both smiled to each other with all their heart.

When we took her leave on the May 8, 1997 *Gaṅgubāī* was in a turmoil. Her mind was grief-stricken. She was remembering the previous visitors and saying:

One feels disgusted with leading such a dog's life. If you have your own house you can prepare and eat your own food. Now, without relatives, those other women who have pity on me look after me. You come and visit me, talk with me and inquire about me. I feel

better. Give sisters<sup>21</sup> my regards. They are marvellous people. Give my regards to the elder brother<sup>22</sup> from Delhi too. Do come again, I feel better.

*Gaṅgubāī* got up and stood when we departed.

### A compulsion to sing and confide

*Gaṅgubāī*'s knowledge of songs is her wealth and the reason why village women need her, enjoy her company and hold her in high regard. They appreciate her songs so much that when we initially inquired about who could give songs in the village, the name of *Gaṅgubāī* came immediately on all the lips. At the time of our third visit, on March 3, 1997 a few Brahman women had gathered around us in the *Rām* temple and were singing songs for us. *Gaṅgubāī* was then sitting apart. When she set to break into songs from where she was sitting, all Brahman women invited her to come and sit near them, and sing. When she came close, a couple of them touched her feet and sat next to her. At another moment, another Brahman lady, Mrs Joshi, after meeting us in the temple, went and brought also her neighbour woman from a *Kāsar* community (bangle sellers) telling her "Sing songs, you know so many". They all broke into songs in unison.

*Gaṅgubāī* sings with a very melodious and trained voice. To our question about when and how she learnt music, her reply was that she likes to sing since her childhood. She would remember and preserve in her heart tunes and words heard even from a distance.

I stored in my mind the songs of the grindmill that I was hearing. As soon as somebody was singing a song, I would keep it in my heart.

My father was very traditional. He never allowed me to go out. We were not even allowed to go and enter the shop of the village. We used only to go to our fields where women and men use to sing work-songs. As I liked to sing I was participating and remembering all those songs.

My father used to send me to the fields to protect the crops or to stay on the thrashing ground when the crop was brought in. To keep myself awake, I used to sing all night. Father used to come in between to check whether I was sleeping or not.

- People say that your songs have become sour.

- I cannot read and write. What can I do. I do not pay attention to the people.

- We find your voice very melodious.

- My voice was very clear. When I started singing at home my voice carried very far. When I used to sing in the field, at a mile distance from here, my voice was reaching here.

I was singing when I was working in the field, when I was sweeping, when I was grinding, always my voice carried over a long distance. My paternal aunt says that "her whole life is ruined, still she sings." When my husband died, I did not sing for a year.

After death of parents, I also discontinued singing for a year. My uncle likes my singing and listening to music, he always asks me to sing songs. He lives in the village. I go and visit him when I wish. I have a cordial relationship with him. He is the one who asks for me sometimes.

When there was a *bhajan* in the village and people invited *Gaṅgubāī*, her father used to accompany her, that is to say he allowed her to attend the *bhajan* as this was a religious programme. Whatever may be the norm, this provided *Gaṅgubāī* with the opportunity to learn and sing *bhajans*. Though she had no

<sup>21</sup> Hema Rairkar and Malavika Talukdar.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Bel.

fingers, she used to help her mother grind the flour and sing with her: her mother knew many grindmill songs.

One distressing incident remains vivid in her memory:

Both myself and my mother were grinding and singing. I was singing in a loud voice. My brother rushed home angry and scolded me: “Your voice reaches up to the boundaries of the village. You want to go and sing in *tamāsā*<sup>23</sup>? Are you a prostitute? Everybody is listening to your song.” I felt very hurt. I replied: “I never go out of the house. I do not belong to the caste of *Gondhalī*.<sup>24</sup> I was grinding with mother, moreover singing on the grindmill. If I join *tamāsā*, whose name will be ruined?” Then my father pacified me. But the scar remained deep in the mind.

When we ponder over the recorded interviews that *Gaṅgubāī* eventually accepted to give us, we can not resist making a parallel between her testimony and the *abhaṅgas* of *sant Janābāī*<sup>25</sup>. Both are immersed in the same feeling of human loneliness. Whom can one communicate with in such a solitary helplessness but God alone? Dialogue turns into a soliloquy with God as witness. *Janābāī* and *Gaṅgubāī*'s wish to go, meet and see God. At times the desire not to live any longer forcefully articulates that depressed state of mind desperately in search of a confidant to talk with. This has nothing to do either with philosophy or otherworldliness.

In this respect one should not either be misled by the fact that *Gaṅgubāī* is suffering from leprosy. We already pointed at this misrepresentation. Leprosy for *Gaṅgubāī* and people around her is one particular hardship among others, a calamity similar to other serious physical handicaps or social disabilities such as the death of a husband, desertion, lack or loss of a son, widowhood, in short one serious kind of misfortune among those to which human beings are liable.

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<sup>23</sup> Form of popular comedy which women of good repute were not supposed to attend let alone play in: the actors use to belong mainly to untouchable and other low castes, women actors being looked down upon as prostitutes.

<sup>24</sup> A caste of musicians and singers, traditional performers of *Gondhalī*, a popular religious performance defined as “tumultuous festivity in propitiation of *devī*, the goddess” by Molesworth dictionary (1831, 1857), the noun is commonly used to mean disorder and confusion.

<sup>25</sup> One of the female *Bhakti* poet-saints of the 14th c., servant of the *sant*-poet Namdev (1270-1350) who rescued her as a girl child abandoned by her poor parents on the threshold of *Vīṭhobā*'s temple at *Paṇḍharpūr*, and left with no one but *Vīṭhobā* and his saints to be taken care of. The usual *marāṭhī* term *sant* is purposely retained for his flexible meaning, being in particular associated with all the holy figures of the *bhakti* tradition, including those devotees themselves who regularly perform the yearly pilgrimage to *Paṇḍharpūr* or *Paṇḍharī* (see in the section 4 of the third volume of this series the essay *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Paṇḍharī*).

It is against that wide background that the universal import of *Gaṅgubāī*'s constant engrossment in singing should be understood when her heart burns and smarts within, at times out of anger, at times out of despair. The religious idiom of sin and *karma* carries that deep suffering of which one intensely wishes to get rid of, while singing opens up a way towards achieving what seven births or suicide can not possibly grant: a state of peace and a foretaste of liberation:

What sin have I done? I shall finish with it in seven births. How can I finish with it in one birth. Destitute commit women suicide. But I do not want to commit suicide, because that sin would follow me. I tell God: "What you want to do, do it in this birth. I am ready to repay everything in this birth. I want to carry nothing from this birth into another one."

My youth was spent under my fathers' control. Now I have to bow down in front of other people. My father never gave me a good sari. Now my brother has given me a good one. My father gave me birth and became a *Vāṇī* (a rich shopkeeper<sup>26</sup>). I stayed in my father's place with my daughter.

My brother once beat my daughter. I felt very much hurt that day. I felt like a destitute. I felt like committing suicide that day, along with my daughter. But I did not because I realised that people will say: "She was a sinner." My father had kept me under check as I was of that "race of girls," but he never put any check on my singing. He never put constraints on my religious practices and took me three times to *Paṇḍharpūr*.

The urge to confide oneself and open up one's heart is pressing. But how to express one's feelings? Moreover to whom?

Like many of her sisters in a similar plight, *Gaṅgubāī* after *Janābāī* expresses her feelings through grindmill songs, *bhajans*<sup>27</sup>, *abhaṅgas* and *gavḷaṅs*<sup>28</sup> — forms of religious songs specific of the *bhakti* movement in Maharashtra — in an allocation mainly addressed to God taken as witness and confidant. The reason is that no other interlocutor is available for *Gaṅgubāī*'s secret thoughts. Her mention of a father putting no constraint on her religious practices and taking her three times to *Paṇḍharpūr*, as well as the notions of sin, *karma*, destiny are clear references to the prevailing discourse of *bhakti*, while providing a pattern of allocation or a model of address to a compassionate and merciful, intimate and divine, motherly entity. The reference to God under a number of various names of familiar gods in the songs sung by *Gaṅgubāī* during the interview, is of the nature of the call or invocation written at the top of any letter, or made at the beginning of any undertaking — such as the appeal to the god *Gaṇeś* at the start of a dramatic performance by the actors, or by a student at the start of his homework — in order to bring god's attention upon one's human endeavours. This formal cultural set-up inscribes the singer, the performer, the writer, the student

<sup>26</sup> This sentence comes from a grindmill song seemingly known all over the *Marāṭhī* speaking area: it refers to a father who "gave away" in marriage against "one hundred rupees" (the dowry system did not exit at that time) his daughter, "the beautiful cow now tied up at the door of the butcher's house," in the same way as the village shopkeeper from a merchant caste, *Vāṇī*, trades off goods from his shop against payment made by a customer who becomes the next owner.

<sup>27</sup> *Bhajan*: worship through repeating the name of a god or singing hymns in his praise, such hymn or piece of verses.

<sup>28</sup> Lit. a female from the caste of herdsmen, *Gavāī*, usually songs referring to the milkmaids infatuated with the youthful prankster Lord *Kṛṣṇa* and their mutual erotic plays but reappropriated by the *bhakti sant*-poets as an idiom for a mental state of frantic attachment to God or simply of affective religious fervour.

etc., in a frame-work of relationship and communication, in which God is a sort of encompassing and reassuring pole of relation. *Gaṅgubāī*, the lonely one, sets forth her thoughts in the presence of this pervading reality, true witness to her lot and benevolent addressee.

Why should I blame others? I am suffering from disease. One feels sad about it. I can not say that I am not upset. But my *karma* was bad. I committed some sin. To whom should I give it? Why should I feel grief and sorrow now? Such is the path of my destiny, *daivagati*. Why should I blame some one else? I get all this because of my *karma*. My mind is burning. But I have not felt aggrieved.

- You sing *bhajans* or grindmill songs when you feel lonely or restless?

- Yes, I sing both.

- Don't you feel that you should go and stay with your daughter?

- No. I do not feel so. Because of my illness. Till now I was not realising the seriousness of my disease. Now I understand and I think that I should not give anybody trouble. Moreover, if I go and stay in my daughter's village then a blame will fall on my brothers. So I do not go.

- You stay in the temple. Does this not bring blame on your brothers?

- Yes, it does. But if I leave the village, they will have to suffer a much bigger blame.

- Do you sometimes open your heart? Whom do you confide the secrets of your mind to?

- Once I have thrown the dirty cobwebs away out of my mind, then my mind becomes clean. With whom should I share my thoughts? I go to God. I go to *bor* (jujube tree, *zizyphus jujuba*) and *bābhaḷ* (gum-arabic tree)<sup>29</sup>. I have no son. Had I given birth to a son I would have talked the whole song (*gītā*) of my life to him. I have not told anything to my daughter.

- *Sant Janābāī* was abusing God. Do you feel like doing as she did? Don't you wish to give vent to your anger?

- I become angry with my mind. My mind smarts. In such a mood I do not eat, I do not drink, I let my body wither away, it is drought, a want of love.

- Tell us how that drought of love is. You have not experienced the tenderness of maternal love?

- I did experience it.

- Do you enjoy singing on the grindmill? Sing grindmill songs which you like.

- If you say "which I like," then I remember God.

*My first verse, I sing on the grindmill<sup>30</sup>  
I sing on your chariot, Rām, on the mill.*

*My first verse, I sing on the grindmill  
My first salute, Rām, on your chariot.*

*My first verse, Gaṇarāyā Gaṇapatī with sweets in hands  
I perform āratī to Raghupati with sweets in hands.*

*My first verse, I sing here and there  
Rāmcandra's mūrtī<sup>31</sup> in my heart eternally.*

*My first verse, I sing to my clan (gote)  
My salute to the father who gave me birth.*

-Do you know whether songs tell us something about the birth of a girl, asked J. Maid.

<sup>29</sup> These are thorny trees which grow in arid zones and drought prone areas of Maharashtra. They are names of the feminine gender.

<sup>30</sup> UVS-33-02, CD GAN-01-01.

<sup>31</sup> A statue, an idol, an image, any figure of divine shape, here the *Rām* figure.

*The birth of a girl is like a bed of carrots* <sup>32</sup>  
*My father and mother, what do you get fondling me.*

*Oh God Father, do not let me come to life as a girl*  
*Foolish father and mother, what do you get fondling me.*

*In the Arunya forest; listen! who is weeping?* <sup>33</sup>  
*To console Sītā, jujube and acacia trees, her women friends.*

H. Rairkar inquired from *Gaṅgubāī* whether she had ever gone and opened up her heart to these trees in the field. B. Nanekar asked her which songs she preferably sings when she feels unhappy. *Gaṅgubāī* replied with a personal testimony of hardship followed by songs of lamentation.

When my heart is full of sorrow, where to confide? I talk with these trees. One feels like pouring out one's grief. If father or sister-in-law hurt us, we express our pain. If mother or sister hurt us, we feel angry about it. If some one is sarcastic, we feel hurt in our mind. My husband died. What a grief it was to my mind! What God did was right. But I remained back alone without him. I put the matter before God: "Oh God, I am alone, in a forest exile, *vanavāsī*."<sup>34</sup>

*In the childhood, father and mother give us sorrow* <sup>35</sup>  
*In the youth, father-in-law and mother-in-law harass us*  
*What kind of Kali Yuga is this, the dharma is decaying*  
*What to tell you, woman, what has come to my lot!*  
*Do not give me again a woman's birth, oh God*  
*Don't give! I am serving you with all my heart.*  
*Kṛṣṇa is playing flute in the temple*  
*Oh God, let me serve my husband*  
*Brothers-in-law are heartless and they beat*  
*Sisters-in-law look at me with contempt*  
*Rādhā asks with respect the God with lotus-like eyes*  
*What sort of sin did I commit to get a woman's birth.*

*Gaṅgubāī* revealed that she had herself composed this song. We asked her why she had the feeling that women resent having been brought into existence. She answered that parents are always angry against their daughters and keep them in bondage.

My father had not allowed me to enter the village shop. But I must admit one fact: my father had never put any hurdle to my singing. He allowed me to sing *bhajans*, there was no constraint as far as religious practices were concerned. Now the young women do not listen to what others tell them. They behave according to their own wish. Even our daughters behave like this.

*Gaṅgubāī* resents the modern trends of life.

<sup>32</sup> CD GAN-01-02

<sup>33</sup> UVS-33-03, CD GAN-01-02.

<sup>34</sup> Reference to *Sītā* rejected by *Rām* and sent into a forest exile, essentially symbol of helpless solitude and desertion; refers also by extension to the harassment meted out to a daughter-in-law by her in-laws.

<sup>35</sup> UVS-33-04, CD GAN-01-03.

## Verses for all seasons

B. Nanekar asked her whether she had personally composed other songs. *Gaṅgubāī* confided that she had actually composed some songs but was in no mood to sing them. “Still, I will sing them now”, she added. The songs<sup>36</sup> were composed when she remembered her husband after his death:

*Oh God, keep happy the lord of my kuṁku* <sup>37</sup>  
*My life partner is my repose. Refr.*

*I have gone to live in my in-laws' house*  
*In their kingdom, sorrow in plenty*  
*Now and then I recite his name.*

*This night he came in my dream*  
*His moon-like face looked tired*  
*My heart started beating fast.*

*I was telling you, “do not go away from me”*  
*In sorrow and happiness, let's stay here only*  
*He listened to no one and departed.*

*I don't want gold, I don't want silver*  
*I don't want wealth, I don't want kingdom*  
*I want a loving friend close to my mind.*

*Let my eyes close before his*  
*Let my voice be silent before his*  
*Oh God, keep happy the lord of my kuṁku.*

- What you have described in the song was a very sad event in your life, said B. Nanekar. Still we face in life events which are still worse than those you have described. We become grief-stricken. Then what thought comes in your mind, what sort of song do you sing?

- There is no use just repeating songs by heart, these songs twist the heart, pierce the mind, replied *Gaṅgubāī*, who right away sang:

*Morning evening I take your name* <sup>38</sup>  
*I forget myself altogether. Refr.*  
*Strike with a stick, water does not part*  
*Such is our relationship, unbreakable.*  
*Who will save the one whom you kill*  
*In the same way, I challenge the world.*  
*When I come on stage, I take Lord Viṭṭhal name*  
*I forget myself altogether.*

*Gaṅgubāī* told us that this was an *abhaṅga* of Tukaram.<sup>39</sup>

B. Nanekar asked *Gaṅgubāī* about the songs that she usually likes to sing when, on account of the disease that affects her, she feels unable to do what she would otherwise have enjoyed doing. The question about possible feelings of anger or

<sup>36</sup> UVS-33-05, CD GAN-01-04

<sup>37</sup> Red power smeared by spouses on the forehead as symbol of their status of married women.

<sup>38</sup> UVS-33-06, CD GAN-01-05

<sup>39</sup> One of the most famous *Bhakti sant*-poet (1608-1649), a *śudra* from Dehu, near Pune.

frustration apparently did not attract her attention. Engrossed in a realm of songs, *Gaṅgubāī* continued her singing with a *gavḷaṇ*<sup>40</sup> on *Rādhā*.

*Look, Kṛṣṇa, I have come to see you  
Do not tell my mother-in-law. Refr.*

*Kṛṣṇa has sent me a yellow cloth woven at Yewala  
Mother-in-law does not allow me to wear it.*

*I do not feel at rest either inside the house or at the door,  
I say, I will come at your feet, do not tell my mother-in-law.*

*Rādhā was thinking, blaming her mother in law  
My mind is running after you, I feel like meeting you.*

Gaṅgubai told us that this was a *gavḷaṇ* of Eknath.<sup>41</sup>

Which verses were you murmuring this morning, alone, standing in front of the god? asked J. Maid. Were you not reciting that prayer: *For your sake, I give up my Self. Do not desert me, Perfect, Eternal. This is my sole demand from You, Raghunāyak.* Were you meaning that the world having rejected you, you expected God not to reject you?

- When you wish to convey the secrets of your mind, how do you express them? With whom do you open your heart? asked B. Nanekar. Do you open your heart through songs?

- I sing songs, replied *Gaṅgubāī*. I tell my mind to songs. If I reveal my feelings to a woman-friend, she may disclose it to others. Therefore I do not share my mind with a friend. As a consequence I always talk to songs.

- How can you open your mind to songs?

*Gaṅgubāī* answered with a *bhajan*:

*My mind finds delight in the praise of God Hari<sup>42</sup> Refr.  
I do not want useless mansion, one can stay in a hut.  
Mattress and pillow are of no use, we can use patch blankets  
This is what Tukadā begs keeping his hands on the feet of God.*

B. Bel stressed the fact of the melodious musicality of the tune.

- From where did you listen this *bhajan* of Tukadoji Maharaj (a reformist *sant* of the twentieth century), asked B. Nanekar.

*Gaṅgubāī* continued with another *abhaṅga* of the same Maharaj:

*Oh God! to whom tell my grief but you<sup>43</sup> Refr.  
My soul knows no repose, saṃsāra<sup>44</sup> spells fright  
Walking through thorns distress sweeps along my mind  
The mountain is so huge! My feet ache, I was born in vain  
Looking at the world I became blind  
I am useless, says Tukadā.*

- Why did you feel that you should learn these songs, asked B. Nanekar.

- Just now Bernard said that he was impressed by the tunes. It is like that. I have attended *bhajans*. I listened. The words and tunes captured my mind.

<sup>40</sup> UVS-33-07, CD GAN-01-06.

<sup>41</sup> A leading exponent of *Bhakti* and *sant*-poet (1548-1600), a Brahman from Paithan.

<sup>42</sup> UVS-33-08, CD GAN-01-07.

<sup>43</sup> UVS-33-09, CD GAN-01-08.

<sup>44</sup> Daily wordly life with all its duties and chores.

- Why did you find these *bhajan* beautiful and good. Did you not find also other things beautiful?

*Gaṅgubāī* simply continued with a *gavḷaṇ*:

*Let me go and fetch water, why do you stop the milkmaid* <sup>45</sup> 1st Refr.

*Let go! Let me go to Mathurā, why do you stop the milkmaid  
When I took earthen pots and went to fetch water  
Kṛṣṇa obstructed my way, he threw stones and broke my pots.*

*He threw stones and broke my earthen pots.* 2nd Refr.

*While carrying milk and curds and going to Mathurā  
Kṛṣṇa obstructed my way, Rādhā implores  
Yekā Janārdanī,<sup>46</sup> Rādhā is enamoured with Hari.*

-What is your daily routine? asked J. Maid.

*Gaṅgubāī* paid no heed to the question. She was just carried along by the songs, immersed in her own dialogue with herself. She continued her singing with the following *bhajan*:

*Why are you going to Paṇḍharī, Viṭṭhal has come to my house.* <sup>47</sup> Refr.  
*On the eleventh day of āṣāḍh and kārtik sants come to meet you.*

*Garlands, basil and black powder are offered to you  
Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*Cymbals, drum are resounding, your court is full of tunes  
Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*God, saviour of sinners, husband of Rukhmini, beautiful Sham  
Without form, holding hands at the waist, Viṭṭhal has come to my house.*

*Shankaracharya, the great one, incarnation of Brahma<sup>48</sup>  
Came as avatār guru of the world, he just sat on the mat of salvation.* Refr.

*In śrāvaṇ, right from the first day of the month  
He decided on his observances<sup>49</sup>, sitting on the wooden stool.*

*Worship in every house, bel<sup>50</sup> and basil are offered  
The āratī is performed with loud acclamation of god.*

*Ninadas says: "May Mother-Saḍguru have pity on me  
At the feet of the guru, I, a simple human being, what can I say."*

<sup>45</sup> UVS-33-10, CD GAN-01-09.

<sup>46</sup> *Sant* Eknath ends his compositions of *gavḷaṇ* with these words, which are his signature, namely, "Eknath, disciple of guru *Janārdan*."

<sup>47</sup> UVS-33-11, CD GAN-01-10.

<sup>48</sup> UVS-33-12, CD GAN-01-11. This is a song in praise of the guru.

<sup>49</sup> Religious observances performed by devotees during the holy month of *śrāvaṇ* and in general the four holy months of the rainy season, such as vegetarianism, wearing white dress, taking one meal only.

<sup>50</sup> *Bel*: a tree sacred to god *Śiva*, generally the leaves of it (aegle marmelos or *crataeva religiosa*).

The disease affects *Gaṅgubāī*'s eyes, water runs down her eyes. B. Nanekar advised her to consult a doctor. She replied that this was due to a cold. She was reluctant to take medical advise. Then she forthwith entered again in her world of tunes:

*Oh, Bhagavan, give me your darśan* <sup>51</sup>  
*How long will you try my patience, Eternal. Refr.*

*You saw Puṇḍalik*<sup>52</sup> *attending to mother and father.*  
*You saw the devotion of Gora the Kumbhār.*  
*In the same way come, you, my dear saint.*

*When he heard the voice of sant Cokhobā*  
*God Viṭṭhal! himself appeared to him*  
*What a gift you grant to your dear sants.*

*You who give existence, create the universe*  
*While singing your virtues mind gets peace*  
*This is my hope, fulfil it. Now.*

I stay the whole day in the temple. If I feel like singing, I do sing. If I feel like visiting someone, I go and visit him. I go and fetch drinking water for myself but I do not cook. If somebody invites me I go. If they do not invite me I do not go.

- Why do eople invite you?
- To sing or to chitchat.
- Which type of songs people ask you to sing?
- They ask me to sing *bhajans*. They do not tell me to sing any other song.

*Now, let us go to Paṇḍharī and take the darśan of Viṭṭhal.*<sup>53</sup> *Refr.*

*On the eleventh day of āṣādh and kārṭik devotees go to meet you*  
*Let us offer abīr*<sup>54</sup> *and bukkā to you.*

*On the bank of Caṇḍrabhāghā a town is constructed*  
*It's name is Paṇḍharpūr. We see him with full eyes.*

*He settled on the bank of the Caṇḍrabhāghā*

<sup>51</sup> UVS-33-13, CD GAN-01-12. This is a song well-known in rural areas and urban popular classes, to the devotees of *Paṇḍharpūr*, it is sung by Mr Pralhad Shinde and available in an audio cassette.

<sup>52</sup> *Puṇḍalik*, a 12th c. Brahman, model of godliness, was devoutly attending to his aged parents when god *Viṣṇu* came to visit him: he threw him a brick for the god to stand on with hands held up to the waist till he finished. The god was so pleased that, as a boon, he acceded to *Puṇḍalik*'s request to appear in his presence henceforth in that form only (the characteristic posture of the popular figure under which devotees recognise and worship *Viṭṭhal*), and stay for ever at that place to be named as "the city of the one who fulfilled *Puṇḍalik*'s entreaty," an expression from which *Paṇḍharpūr* derived its name. Gora is a potter of the 13th c. and Cokhoba an untouchable Mahar of the 14th c.: these poor and destitute devotees have become exemplary *bhakti sants* on account of their unbounded faith in *Viṭṭhal*, who reciprocates with the support of his loving presence.

<sup>53</sup> UVS-33-14, CD GAN-01-13. This song is an *abhaṅga*. About *Paṇḍharī* s see in section 4 of the third volume of this series the study *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Paṇḍharī*.

<sup>54</sup> *Abīr*, a fragrant powder composed of sandal (zedoary cyperus rotandum), *bukka* (black powder)

*Let us wear a string of basil beads and go.*

*He is the friend of the poor, he sides with the weak  
All of you, youngsters and elders, come on! let us go!*

*Give me sight, Shri Harī! Let me see your Paṇḍharī!<sup>55</sup> Refr.*

*It is on the bank of Bhiwara, people assembled in the desert  
Among them the tan-skinned Viṭṭū, he puts his hands at the waist.*

*He keeps cattle with Cokha, he grinds flour with Jani  
He sings verses on the grindmill.*

### **Talking through songs, an enjoyment**

We were amazed by *Gaṅgubāī*'s indefatigable enthusiasm and unflinching compulsion to sing. We asked her: "Why do you feel like singing today? Why do you feel like talking through songs?" She just continued singing with the same resoluteness:

*Hurry up, Gaṇa, without you the temple remains empty<sup>56</sup> Refr.*

*Let us prepare strings of bel fowers,  
let us put them to day around Gaṇa's neck.*

*Let us kindle lamps of camphor.  
Let us make āratī to Gaṇa's murtī.*

*Let us spread red powder<sup>57</sup> on Gaṇa.  
Let us perform āratī to Gaṇa's murtī.*

*Gaṇarāyā, you know fourteen wisdoms  
I glorify you, I bow down to your feet.*

*Oh! Oh! At Gundagaon I saw Datta!<sup>58</sup>  
I saw the Lord! Joy! I saw Datta! Refr.*

*He wears no brocade cloth round his waist or various ornaments  
His head is decorated with a crown  
He who guards his devotees, I bow down to him, I glorify him.*

*In this saṃsāra<sup>59</sup> no happiness no success  
One should go and stick to Datta  
He who guards his devotees, I bow down to him, I glorify him.*

*Whom should I call Rāma? Whom should I call Lord, Prabhū?<sup>60</sup> Refr.*

<sup>55</sup> UVS-33-17, CD GAN-01-14. This song is an *abhaṅga*.

<sup>56</sup> UVS-33-19, CD GAN-01-15. This is a song to the praise of *Gaṇapati*.

<sup>57</sup> *Gulal*: the red powder which the Hindus throw about during festivals. It is made with flour of millet (*bājarī, nācṇī*) dyed with a decoction of red sanders wood. Now it is prepared with chemicals.

<sup>58</sup> UVS-33-20, CD GAN-01-16. This song belongs to the tradition of god Datta cult.

<sup>59</sup> Worldly life with all duties prescribed by one's condition and status.

<sup>60</sup> UVS-33-21, CD GAN-01-17.

*Silver stool, bucket with precious stones, whom to bath now?  
Yellow cloth with brocade border, whom to give it to wear?  
Silver pot and golden cup, whom to present with milk to drink?  
I have prepared rice with saffron, whom to serve with the dish?  
Jasmin buds in full bloom, whom to give the string of them?*

*Say: Shri Rām! Jay Rām! I want no worry in my mind.<sup>61</sup> Refr.*

*When I recite Rām's name all sins vanish, happiness spread all over  
Ājāmelā,<sup>62</sup> his sins vanished, the prostitute was saved<sup>63</sup>  
Ahilyā<sup>64</sup> was raised from stone  
I seek liberation, I bow down at your feet., Das Ganu <sup>65</sup> says:  
“Say Hari! Hari! Stop worrying! Your deeds will bear fruit.”*

*Have you become deaf, oh Lakṣman!  
I recognised the voice of Rāghava.<sup>66</sup> Refr.*

*The master of my kumku is in danger  
Oh Lakṣman! there is some sin in your mind  
The king of Ayodhya will felicitate you.*

*Oh moon in the sky, help me!  
Sītā is bothering her head, she exerts herself  
Have you become deaf, oh Lakṣman!*

- Should I sing grindmill songs?

*Sāsurvās<sup>67</sup>for Sītā because of the aunt of Rāma<sup>68</sup>  
At the door the basil garden of Rāma's aunt has dried up.*

*Sītā is going towards her forest exile her forehead filled with kumku  
Rāma observes from distance, it brought tears to his eyes.*

<sup>61</sup> UVS-33-22, CD GAN-01-18.

<sup>62</sup> Ājāmelā was a Brahman from Kanyakubja, he fell in love with a śudra (servile caste) woman, but repented; when he called his son, whose name was Nārāyaṇa, by his name, he thus happened to “take the name of god”: his sin vanished.

<sup>63</sup> According to a puranic story, the prostitute had a parrot named Rām: she was saved simply because while calling her parrot she thus happened to “take the name of god.”

<sup>64</sup> Story from the epics Rāmāyaṇa: Ahilyā was cursed and transformed by her husband into a stone for her mental infidelity: she was accused of entertaining in her mind the thought of Indra, the king of gods. She asked pardon. Her husband lightened his curse: Ahilyā would retrieve her usual human form when Rām, the incarnation of Viṣṇu, while passing through the forest, would touch her with his foot.

<sup>65</sup> Das Ganu is a poet from the early twentieth century, who wrote in verses hagiographies of such holy men as Sai Baba from Shirdi and Gajanana Maharaj from Shegao.

<sup>66</sup> UVS-33-23, CD GAN-01-19. This popular song (*lok gīta*) refers to the story from the Rāmāyaṇa when Sītā has sent Rāma (Rāghava) to bring the skin of a golden deer for her to prepare a blouse out of it. The deer is a demon, who imitates the voice of Rāma. Sītā feels that Rāma is in danger. She tells Lakṣman to go and help Rāma. Lakṣman knows the trick of the demon but cannot convince Sītā. Sītā blames Lakṣman that there is a sin in his mind. Ultimately Lakṣman has to go. Then Rāvaṇ elopes Sītā.

<sup>67</sup> Lit. the residence of the daughter-in-law in her in-laws' house, by extension, harassment meted out by in-laws.

<sup>68</sup> UVS-33-24, CD GAN-01-20.

*Sītā attaches pearls to the arrow  
The bag goes to hell.*

*In the Arunya forest, who is crying? listen!  
They are women jujube and acacia trees, to soothe Sītā.*

*In the Arunya forest what yellow is being seen  
What yellow is being seen, the ritual dress<sup>69</sup> of Sītā.*

*The shoes of father fit to the son's feet<sup>70</sup>  
My brother is my jewel, a king, a fortunate one.*

Then *Gaṅgubāī* reverted to her favorite *gavlaṅs*. She had told us that she knew a great number of grindmill songs; women from the village confirmed that she knew thousands of them. But staying now alone in a temple, her life environment has totally changed. Grindmill songs are sung in the context of a family life and in the company at home of close female relatives. *Gaṅgubāī* has for years now settled in god's house, aloof from housewife chores. She entertains rappers — but for casual visits of village girls and women friends — mainly with the divine hosts who share the temple with her, and those male and female devotees who assemble for chanting *bhakti* compositions. Her participation is then welcome and appreciated. Hymns and songlike poems of the Maharashtrian *bhakti* movement have henceforth become her essential means and milieu of communication.

*Nandalala, don't obstruct my way, let me go and fetch water<sup>71</sup>  
We are the wives of poor milkmen, Yādvāyā, let me go  
You are mischievous, malicious, black, do not wink your left eye  
Let me go and fetch water, Rāghurāyā, I bow down to your feet.*

*Vīthobā, how should I forget you, how should I forget you<sup>72</sup>  
You are a mother, I am your child  
When I am nine months pregnant to what extent can I have patience.  
When five, twenty five people follow me, how to make an about turn<sup>73</sup>  
Gaṇa, how should I forget you, how should I forget you  
Jñāndev says to friend Viṭṭhal, Nivrutti is my guru.*

*You should not put a roof of rotten bamboos<sup>74</sup>  
I will destroy your hut, beware!  
It is a hut with 360 joists, you installed nine doors for security  
When you come into this world, try to finish the work.*

<sup>69</sup> *Sovala*, a silk dress generally put on at the time of worship, women wear it for preparing ritual meals.

<sup>70</sup> UVS-33-25, CD GAN-01-21.

<sup>71</sup> UVS-33-26, CD GAN-01-22. This song is a *gavlaṅ*.

<sup>72</sup> UVS-33-27, CD GAN-01-24. This song is an *abhaṅga*.

<sup>73</sup> Once people are with you, devotee or guru, you cannot turn your back on the path of *bhakti*.

<sup>74</sup> UVS-33-28, CD GAN-01-25. There are 360 days in a year. "Nine doors" stand for the human body with its nine "receiving agents." When he takes birth, a human being must start taking god's name and never leave the path of *bhakti* lest its life remain unaccomplished.

*Vashistha the sage gave an admonition  
“You should not forget the name of Hari Rām Prabhū”  
Rām will grant you salvation.*

*He got engrossed in the bhajan  
During the beating of the drum he fell asleep<sup>75</sup>  
You will experience the blows of Time.*

*Let us offer to Sāraṅgharā a jasmin flower for his name<sup>76</sup>  
Let us not come back to this saṃsāra. Refr.  
Let us offer Lakṣmī’s husband a śevaṅṭī<sup>77</sup> of devotion  
Engrossed in saṃsāra errors may happen.  
Let us offer to Pānduraṅga a basil of renunciation  
Let us go to heaven Vaikuntha by the mercy of Hari.  
Let us offer basil and black powder and make a friend of Hari  
Then the danger of Time will not follow hot on our heels.  
The dāsī Bhāmā says: “Keep this in mind  
Let us remember Viṭṭhal time and again.”*

*Garlands of bel, basil and flowers, fragrant saffron, yellow dress<sup>78</sup>  
I like him, he is Nāganāth, say: “Hari! Hari!”  
Come on, let us go and take his darśan! Refr.  
In the big temple Tīrtharājā looks beautiful  
He is the innocent Śankar from Kailās  
Lacking in splendour and riches  
He has come to meet Datta, come on, let us take his darśan!  
The goddesses Gaṅgā, Pārvatī have come, grandeur of morning worship  
One recognises Nāmā, Khecarū<sup>79</sup>  
He inversed the temple direction, he made a revolution.  
He has come to meet Datta, come on, let us take his darśan  
Aundhe land is a holy place, Nāganāth is always holy  
Say the mantra “Hari! Hari!” Let us praise him!*

*Come on, come on, let us see the feet of Pānduraṅga!<sup>80</sup> Refr.*

<sup>75</sup> He discontinued practicing *bhakti*, with all its deadly consequences.

<sup>76</sup> UVS-33-29, CD GAN-01-26. lit. “holding the *sāraṅg*,” the bow and arrow prepared from a horn, metonym for the god *Viṣṇu*, whose name is also avoided, the god being presented and worshipped with a jasmin flower in lieu of the utterance of his name. This song is an *abhaṅga*.

<sup>77</sup> A flower, *rosa glandulifera*.

<sup>78</sup> UVS-33-31, CD GAN-02-01. This is a song of god Datta cult.

<sup>79</sup> *Nāmā* is the name of the *sant*-poet Namdev, a Shimpi or tailor. Khecaru stands for *sant* Visoba Khecar, a Brahman, the guru of Namdev. Once, in the assembly of all the saints, Namdev considered himself the most intelligent of all of them. *Jñāndev* (1275-1296, a Brahman, poet-philosopher from *Ālandī*, near Pune, considered the founding reference of *bhakti* tradition in Maharashtra) dispatched Gora Kumbhar, the potter, to ascertain whether Namdev was really so clever. To check whether their pots (*matke*) are properly baked, potters give them raps with fingers. Similarly Gora gave knocks on Namdev’s head (*matke*) and declared that it was not rightly baked, only a trash. Namdev was directed to improve and Visoba Khecar appointed to examine Namdev’s intellectual acumen. Once Namdev happened to enter the temple at Aundhe (a town in Marathwada, Parbhani District, with a temple of *Śankar* known under the name of *Nāganāth*, the Lord of snakes): he saw a man lying down near the *liṅga* of *śiva*, with legs stretched upon the *liṅga*. Namdev tried, several times, to put the man’s legs aside, but a new *liṅga* was regularly emerging under the feet. Namdev realised that god is everywhere. The man was Visoba Khecar.

*The group of sants stands near the pillar of Garuḍa<sup>81</sup>  
 Let us hurry to go and meet Viṭṭhal.  
 Keeping hands at the waist he stands on the brick  
 Come on, let us go quickly and meet Viṭṭhal.  
 Let us surrender to him, he will save us from rebirths and deaths  
 Let us offer to Viṭṭhal our body, our mind and our wealth.*

*Hari started the bhajan, the Lord started the bhajan in my hut<sup>82</sup> Refr.  
 Thieves have entered into the heap of goods  
 Thieves have stolen the wealth.  
 Goods are kept in the safe, still there is a theft  
 There are no strings to the door of my hut.  
 On the floor there is a bed, nobody is true.  
 One is to come alone in the world, one is to depart alone from the world  
 Carry with you Śivaliṅga and always take the name of god.*

*The parrot has gone, the cage remains empty<sup>83</sup>  
 You amass wealth, the cage is empty  
 A high mansion is built, a tender young woman kept in  
 The obstacle is not understood, the cage is empty  
 The parrot says: “Kṛṣṇa, listen! Take and repeat the name of Hari!”  
 Lift the corpse, there are crowds, people set it on fire, they return home  
 The obstacle is not understood.*

*Oh Gaṅgā, your water is pure<sup>84</sup>  
 The saint says to his friend: “Water flows  
 Gautam ṛṣi made penance and Gaṅgā is flowing.”*

*Oh! what a decaying condition is yours, do you not feel ashamed?<sup>85</sup> Refr.  
 There is abundance of tea, shortage of food  
 Tea comes from foreign land and it mesmerizes the world  
 If we take tea we do not feel like eating, we lose sleep  
 This is the root cause of diseases, leave the habit of taking tea  
 Look at your body, you cannot even stand or walk  
 Leave the habit of taking tea.*

Now, I feel tired. Still I feel like singing many songs. I shall sing one *gavḷaṅ*.

*Let me go, do not hold my hand, you will ruin me<sup>86</sup>  
 This night is a no-moon night.  
 Till today you were the spouse of an alien person  
 Now I have become your husband.*

<sup>80</sup> UVS-33-30, CD GAN-02-02. This song is an *abhaṅga*.

<sup>81</sup> In the temple of *Viṭṭhal* or *Viṭhobā*, at *Paṇḍharpūr*, there is a pillar called “Garuda (eagle) pillar” opposite to the statue of *Paṇḍuraṅga* or *Viṭṭhal*, from where devotees take *Viṭṭhal*’s *darśan*.

<sup>82</sup> UVS-33-32, CD GAN-02-03. The name of god alone is a secure and lasting value when all worldly goods are bound to go to thieves of sorts, namely, to be ruined. This is a song of *Tukadoji Maharaj*.

<sup>83</sup> UVS-33-33, CD GAN-02-04. Parrot is a metaphor of the soul which should free itself from the cage, the body, overcoming the hurdles of wordly concerns, life and sex pleasure.

<sup>84</sup> UVS-33-34, CD GAN-02-05. These lines are sung as *bhajan* as well as grindmill song.

<sup>85</sup> UVS-33-35, CD GAN-02-06. This is a song of the Independence National Movement.

<sup>86</sup> UVS-33-36, CD GAN-02-07.

*When we were going to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa came in the way<sup>87</sup>  
He obstructed our path with the sweet tunes of his flute. Refr.*

*He goes in the house, eats curds and milk, his lips are full of butter  
When we were going to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa came in the way  
He enthralled the milkmaids with the sweet tunes of his flute.  
Yaśodā<sup>88</sup>, tell him something, your Kṛṣṇa gives us troubles.  
Yekā Janārdanī. He captivated the milkmaids with the sweet tunes of his flute.*

*Raghunāth is standing on the way, how can I go to Vṛndāvan<sup>89</sup>  
My ears are full of the tunes of his flute, how can I go to Vṛndāvan. Refr.*

*I take a pot and go to fetch water, Kṛṣṇa is standing on the way  
How can I go to Kunjavan.  
When I went to Mathurā with milk and curds, Kṛṣṇa was standing on the way.  
My ears are full of the tunes of his flute, woman, how can I go to Vṛndāvan.*

*Kānhā, I don't go, Kānhā, I don't go to fetch water from the Yamunā<sup>90</sup> Refr.*

*My work is slackening at home, my attention is captured by you  
Without you I do not feel like doing anything  
Milk and curds in the house, my attention is captured by you  
I do not feel like eating them, Yekā Janārdanī  
You Kṛṣṇa, husband, you do not let me meet my innocent brother.*

*Rush up, Pāṇḍharināth! you are my saviour<sup>91</sup>  
In this world, I have no one, Bhagavant, give me your darśan. Refr.*

*Devotees come to Pāṇḍharī in āśādh and kārtik  
That tune reached my ear, accept me, Bhagavant.  
Nobody is immortal in the world, the person who takes birth dies  
My saṁsār is floating on rock and water, accept me Bhagavant.  
The lamp is burning at your door, with your name sin burns and runs off  
People say: "This is my saṁsār! This is my saṁsār!"*

*Let us take the path of true bhakti.  
Nārāyaṇ says: "This is the easy path."*

A young girl entered the temple, sat and requested Gaṅgubāī to sing the song of the bullock-cart. Gaṅgubāī obliged her with delight:

*The bullock-cart with bells from my mother's place<sup>92</sup>  
My dear brother is here today I shall go to my mother's place. Refr.*

*I bow down to mother-in-law's feet I go and meet my husband  
I take oath I will not stay there many days  
I go and meet everybody I will not stay there many days.*

<sup>87</sup> CD GAN-02-08.

<sup>88</sup> Yaśodā: mother of Kṛṣṇa.

<sup>89</sup> UVS-33-37, CD GAN-02-09. This song is a *gavḷaṇ*.

<sup>90</sup> UVS-33-38, CD GAN-02-10. This song is a *gavḷaṇ*.

<sup>91</sup> UVS-33-39, CD GAN-02-12. 'Saviour', lit. 'donor' *dātā*, the only "one who gives." This song is an *abhaṅga*.

<sup>92</sup> UVS-33-40 CD GAN-02-13. This son is popular song (*lokgīta*).

*The popcorns of the poor are offered to the cobra on pañcamī<sup>93</sup>  
Today I shall go to my mother's place  
My mother's mansion is colourful pillars windows on four sides.*

*Tuḷṣī vṛndāvan in the inner courtyard<sup>94</sup> my sister-in-law loves me  
We all four sisters let us go together to my mother's place.*

*Let us sing bhāubij songs!<sup>95</sup> oh god! keep my brother happy  
We all four sisters let us give water to nāgobā, the cobra.*

*Let us offer milk sweets to nāgobā! oh God! keep my brother happy  
Today I shall go to my mother's place.*

### A subtle mode of communicative defiance

We may roughly distinguish in *Gaṅgubāī*'s repertory four categories of songs.

The grindmill distichs and a few verses, which *Gaṅgubāī* declares to have composed in connection with her husband's demise, reflect mainly the daily life of a housewife lovingly dedicated to her considerate husband and family but none the less deeply hurt by her lot as a woman. They articulate feelings in consonance not only with *Gaṅgubāī*'s course of life but moreover the experience that peasant women for generations have been sharing in their immense tradition of grindmill songs.

Against this setting, the foremost significant and copious set of songs comprises those which centre round *Viṭṭhal*, the god of *bhakti par excellence*, and the common iconic, geographical, liturgical and ritual imagery or idioms, as well as gods and holy figures associated with the cult of *Viṭhobā*.<sup>96</sup> We here concern ourselves only with their semantics. These songs clearly lay open the intimate relation which currently unites the devotee to *Viṭṭhal*: no need of going to *Pañdharī* when *Viṭṭhal comes to my house*. That affective liaison prevails over rituals and pilgrimages or gives them their shape and inner motive. *Viṭṭhal* is recognised as the god who graciously takes the initiative to visit his dear *sants*. The latter long for his vision and eagerly wish in return his gaze upon them — *give me your darśan, we see him with full eyes, give me sight* — with the impatience of a nine months pregnant woman; they persistently and

<sup>93</sup> The fifth day of the holy month of *śrāvāṇ* (August) when the lord cobra, *nāgobā* or *nāganāth* is worshipped by women with offerings of curds, milk, popcorn, etc. made to him at the ant-hill; married girls come back to their mother's house for that purpose, they sing and dance the whole night; this continues over the whole month.

<sup>94</sup> In the courtyard of any house, upon a squared platform, a small structure is erected and filled with soil in which a sacred basil *tuḷṣī* is planted to be worshipped every morning by the women of the house, who maintain it; *vṛndāvan* is a reference to *Kṛṣṇa*'s native place at Mathura, and his joyful games and pranks with milkmaids.

<sup>95</sup> A part of the festival of *Divālī* (Oct.-Nov.) when the brother goes to meet his sister unless the sister is invited to her mother's place: the sister honours her brother with the ritual of *ārati* (waving of lamps), her brother presents her with gifts, then the sister composes songs about her dear brother, from whom she expects protection.

<sup>96</sup> The reader will find all clarifications wanted in this respect in *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Pañdharī*; section 4 of volume3 of this series.

unforgettably — almost as a fixation — remember his name, keen to rush up and stand in his presence in order to surrender to him, mind, body and wealth. Besides the Lord of *Paṇḍharī* there is no *giver* in a world where falseness, futility and shakiness eventually predominate. *Vitthal* is a mindful Mother who takes sides with *the poor and the weak*. The daughter-in-law's obsessive dream of mother's house is the crucial and most telling metaphor of the devotee's faith in a Mother Land<sup>97</sup> as sole Home Land, *let me see your Paṇḍharī*. The poetic and musical compositions are here mainly *bhajans* and *abhaṅgas*.

The second extensive and no less significant set of poetic and musical compositions — *gavḷans* — relates to the pranks of *Kṛṣṇa* with the milkmaids. The location has shifted to Mathura. The scenario is the love games of a naughty youth god with milkmaids on their way to the river. This well known popular theme is specific to the type of *bhakti* precisely qualified as krishnaite, wherein the god has enthralled his devotees and bewitched them, mind and body; it centres round *Kṛṣṇa* enamoured with *Rādhā*, the chosen one. Though embedded in a different, erotic symbolism, the semantics is here analogous to the previous one: the female lover, whose *ears are full of the tunes of his flute*, bows down — surrenders — to the feet of the beloved god, who sets on catching her not to let her go, as he has resolved to become her husband. The elected spouse cannot but desert her daily chores as the god had captivated all her attention, *Kṛṣṇa, my mind is running after you*.

Other songs, which refer to different gods, sages, cults, gurus and religious traditions, focus also on abstract concepts and philosophical allegories: Kali Yug, deeds bearing fruits, time as death and decay, *dharma*, sin which burns up or runs away and vanishes, anguish and fright as attributes of daily life, salvation and liberation at guru's feet, *avatār*, observances and penances, god's mercy, renunciation to sensuous gratifications, human condition as a cage for the soul, worldly wealth doomed to go to thieves, life as utter suffering and worry, cycle of rebirths. These representations are evidently at variance with the expressions and semantics of the two previous sets of songs. They recur less often but are by no means an anomaly. Two observations can be made in this regard: first, the devotional faith or *bhakti* in *Gaṅgubāī*'s songs is far from being a water-tight, ideological state of mind, competent or prone to adequately discriminate and dissociate itself from other religious representations; secondly, this state of mind actually does thoroughly enfold these other representations and discourses with its own idioms and perspectives, as much as it already marked with its specific inner quest of affective relation the common ritual practices.

On the whole, these sets feature *bhakti* as a quest of intimate intercourse developing into a blissful fusion, in which the devotee tends to forget herself altogether, against a background of solitude, hardship and helplessness, a state that the plurivalent word *samsāra* outlines. The passage from one state to the other one is through communication and trust, *To whom tell my grief but you?*

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<sup>97</sup> The semantics of this analogy and other related metaphors is critically discussed in the wider context of *The Cultural and Social Scene on the Way to Paṇḍharī*; section 4 of volume 3 of this series.

We are now in a position to sum up our analyses by taking a theoretical view of the testimony as a whole, and ponder over the function of *bhakti* as setup of communicative forms. The whole life-profile can be constructed in terms of two opposite semantic contexts which intertwine and overlap while contradicting one another. A context of *destitution*, which qualifies the social status of *Gaṅgubāī* as a state of social estrangement and denial of human dignity, in short of human non-entity, is constantly contested and substituted by a context of *rehabilitation*, which grants the wanted recognition and saves from social alienation, mental annihilation and sense of nothingness.

The contest of destitution is fourfold. It is firstly characterized by social processes of deprivation. *Gaṅgubāī* is not born in want. Society and environmental circumstances made her physically handicapped due to sheer carelessness, and socially marginalised due to lack of education, denial of property and wealth, desertion from family home and lack of private belongings, even of elementary facilities to offer tea as hospitality to visitors. *Gaṅgubāī* has been progressively deprived of elementary human facilities. Secondly, the stigma of solitude adds its suffering to the hardships of loneliness and desertion: marriage as a child to a much elder partner, himself an orphan with no family ties and looked down upon for entertaining only a keep, rejection by brothers and sisters-in-law, lonely life in a temple, gender incapacities and brothers' abuses, denial of land and home of one's own, death of daughters and husband, murder of sister. *Gaṅgubāī* has been progressively bereft of essential human bonds. Mainly she is thirdly deprived of autonomy and voice of her own by the control of deeply internalized representations, which explain and justify her condition as god's will and result of impersonal mechanisms. This preempts in her mind all reasons to object to and possibly rebel against, an adverse destiny, whatever be the ordeal that she endures. *Gaṅgubāī* is forcibly made to surrender and suffer a life that "God has ruined," being thus divested of a right to take another personal view of her whole existence. She eventually finds herself absolutely alone with no one in whom she might confide and with whom she could share: wishes of suicide and death come naturally to her mind prompted by the no-sense of "a dog's life."

This is precisely where *bhakti* comes as a response to the challenge of a deadly solitude through opening a space of symbolic communication. *Bhakti* effectuates the passage of a state of non-entity to a qualitatively inverse state of recognition, thanks to the construction of a privilege rapport of love intimacy with God. *Bhakti* as a form of personal relation with and attachment to, a Transcendent entity does not provide a religious discourse, let alone an ideological sanction to a state of deprivation. As such *bhakti* transcends even its rationalistic brahmanical appropriation — and repressive perversion — in terms of merit, sin, Kali Yuga, *karma*, *saṁcit*, *mokṣa* (as liberation from worldly time construed as deathly course), renunciation, god's will, rituals and subjection to the guru's constraining mediation, with which a philosophical tradition tries to identify it. This tradition successfully imbibes and pervades the devotees' minds. But through displaying modes and means of symbolic and direct relation to God, *bhakti* opens up a space of autonomous and spontaneous attachment to an affectionate and responsive Entity. It thus secures an assurance of recognition to those doomed to non-entity. This provides the devotee with that existential identity and sanctity otherwise

denied in human society, while invalidating the very Brahmanical *bhakti* ideology of absolute surrender to *karma*, impersonal destiny and guru.

Instead, *bhakti* constructs a context of rehabilitation, which pervades the whole testimony of *Gaṅgubāī*, while running parallel to social and ideological dynamics of destitution. *Bhakti* radically inverts despair into delight, emptiness into plenitude, suffering into joy, fatal solitude into love intimacy. That context is brought about by forms of communication which create a space of relation: singing and confiding, remembering and chanting the name, god's vision and dwelling in the heart. These forms monitor a rapture. They implicitly carry wishes of defiance and inversion of structures of dominance and repression, albeit in a subdued form.