

Subaltern Voices in the Abhang Literature of Sant Chokhamela

*¹ Dr. Dilip M Bawane

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr. Khatri Mahavidyalaya, Tukum, Chandrapur, Maharashtra, India.

Article Info.

E-ISSN: 2583-6528
 Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.876
 Peer Reviewed Journal
 Available online:
www.alladvancejournal.com

Received: 06/Nov/2025
 Accepted: 04/Dec/2025

Abstract

The paper analyses the Abhang literature of Sant Chokhamela as a crucial locus of subaltern expression within the mediaeval Bhakti tradition of Maharashtra. Chokhamela was born into the Mahar community, which is one of the most oppressed castes in the hierarchical varnashrama system. His poetry tells a rare first-person story of caste brutality, humiliation, existential pain, and spiritual strength. His Abhangs contest Brahminical hegemony, reveal the brutality of untouchability, and affirm divine closeness despite social ostracism. Employing Subaltern Studies theory, Ambedkarite hermeneutics, Dalit literary criticism, and Bhakti studies, this dissertation contends that Chokhamela's work represents one of the first expressions of Dalit consciousness in Indian literature. His Abhangs provide a counter-hegemonic discourse that reasserts agency for marginalized bodies, sanctifies real pain, and reconceptualizes devotion as a form of resistance. So, Chokhamela is not just a saint-poet, but also a strong subaltern historian of caste tyranny.

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Dilip M Bawane
 Assistant Professor, Department of English, Dr. Khatri Mahavidyalaya, Tukum, Chandrapur, Maharashtra, India.

Keywords: Abhang literature, Bhakti tradition, varnashrama system, Brahminical hegemony, Subaltern Studies, Ambedkarite hermeneutics, etc.

Introduction

The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra created some of the most important spiritual works in Indian literature. Sant Chokhamela (14th century) is a rare saint whose poetry comes straight from his own experience of being oppressed because of his caste. Chokhamela was born into the Mahar group, which was considered "untouchable" by caste doctrine. He suffered a childhood full of social marginalization and physical assault. His Abhangs, in contrast to the works of other Varkari saints, do not only express abstract devotion; they are grounded in the existential problems of a subaltern individual navigating religion under an oppressive societal structure.

Chokhamela's work is an early, real, and strong example of subaltern agency. Gayatri Spivak famously says that "the subaltern cannot speak" because dominant epistemic structures silence marginalized voices (Spivak 28). Chokhamela's poetry is one of the few times in premodern India when the subaltern not only speaks but also turns suffering into spiritual authority. Eleanor Zelliot says, "Chokhamela is the first explicit Dalit voice in Marathi literature, coming from inside the reality of untouchability" (Zelliot 76). His Abhangs constitute an essential literary repository for comprehending the initial expressions of caste critique from a subordinate perspective.

Chokhamela's Societal Position and Subaltern Awareness

To comprehend Chokhamela's contribution, it is imperative to contextualize his actual experience. As a Mahar, he faced geographical isolation, vocational limitations, and punishing societal conventions. Manusmriti and other Brahminical literature strengthened the belief that Dalits' bodies and work were dirty, which is why they had to reside on the outside of the community (Omvedt 104). Chokhamela takes on this forced identity and then fights against it via his poems. He cries in one Abhang:

"काय मोल माझे जगात?/देवा, मी पायातील धूळ"
 "What value do I have in this world?" O God, I am the dirt under your feet."

This seemingly simple metaphor serves two purposes: it recognizes his social insignificance and claims a spiritual affinity to Vithoba that Brahmins could not challenge. This self-positioning at the feet of God reveals caste injustice while also affirming divine dignity.

These expressions exemplify what Subaltern Studies researchers refer to as the "autonomous domain" of subaltern consciousness-manifestations of resistance that emerge organically rather than via elite mediation (Guha 40).

Chokhamela's Abhangs express this awareness using a vocabulary that combines spiritual yearning with societal criticism.

Abhang as Testimony: The Body as an Archive of Violence

Chokhamela's poetry frequently alludes to the body—not as an abstract metaphor, but as a corporeally harmed, degraded, and exploited entity. His experiences transform the body into an archive of caste violence, providing historical evidence through metaphor and recollection.

He says:

"देह माझा चिखल झाला/तरी मन विठ्ठलाशी जोडिले."

"Even though my body has become mud, my mind is still connected to Vithoba."

The line shows how caste discrimination makes the body feel terrible, yet commitment lets the intellect go above these limits. The phrase reflects what Dalit literary critics refer to as "embodied writing," wherein corporeal suffering serves as a medium for political expression (Dangle 22).

Another Abhang says the same thing:

"फाटला मी देहाने/समाजाच्या मार्याने."

"My body is ravaged by the assaults of society."

This is not an exaggeration; it is a fact: historical records show that Chokhamela was physically attacked for trying to go inside temples or actively engage in Varkari meetings (Zelliott 79). His poems are like societal chronicles because they show the brutality that official history doesn't talk about. These statements foreshadow what Gail Omvedt subsequently refers to as "the Dalit experience of the damaged body," in which spirituality serves as a counterforce against shame (Omvedt 88).

Voice of Protest: Subaltern Politics in a Devotional Way

Chokhamela's Abhangs, albeit framed in religious language, include a strong protest against caste discrimination. His vocabulary is clear, straightforward, and based on everyday pain, which gives voice to a political subjectivity that has been silenced.

He asks in one Abhang:

"देवा, तुझ्या दारी आम्हाला जागा नाही?"

"God, is there no room for us at your door?"

The rhetorical inquiry challenges the Brahminical assertion that Dalits are intrinsically unqualified for spiritual intimacy. Chokhamela directly addresses God, avoiding human middlemen. This is what academics call spiritual democracy, or the right of any person to contact the divine without caste restrictions (O'Hanlon 661).

Also, his criticism goes beyond just personal complaints. He shows that caste inequality is a systematic problem:

"जन्म घेतला नीचि जाती/म्हणून माझी झाली हाती."

"Society has me in its clutches since I was born into a low caste."

Using "नीचि जाती" (lower caste) directly brings forth the systemic basis of oppression.

Chokhamela does not view pain as a spiritual fate; he expressly identifies caste as its source. This shows that he is a

politically conscious subaltern voice, not just a passive follower.

Chokhamela and the Varkari Movement: Breaking the Silence

The Varkari movement advocated equality, but not all of its adherents lived by it all the time. The movement's doctrine said that dedication is more important than caste differences, although Dalits were often not allowed into temples or to take part in rituals. Chokhamela is at a strange place in this environment. People don't doubt his dedication, yet his social standing is still low. This tension is shown in his Abhangs:

"पंढरीच्या दारी आलो/तरी बाहेरच उभा राहिलो."

"I got to the door of Pandharpur but stayed outside."

The pictures are both symbolic and real. Chokhamela articulates both emotional longing and experienced marginalization. The Dalit body is still on the outside of spiritual democracy. This inconsistency between theology and practice shows how powerful caste is. But it also makes Chokhamela's voice stronger since he turns exclusion into a place of resistance. He shows the dishonesty of ceremonial systems and takes back spiritual power by saying how sad he is that he wasn't allowed inside Vithoba's temple.

Subaltern Aesthetics: Language, Tone, and Imagery

The way Chokhamela writes poetry is a big part of what makes his voice subaltern. His Abhangs are: short and to the point, without a lot of fancy Sanskrit decoration, based on oral tradition, making it easy to understand, plenty with metaphors for work, including muck, stones, wounds, and dust, talking directly to Vithoba, which made the conversation more personal.

His choice of words is simple, which is a political choice. Spivak observes that subaltern opposition frequently manifests through "vernacular expressivity" rather than elite literary forms (Spivak 34). Chokhamela's Marathi is plain yet powerful, and it is based on what he has been through. His use of repetition, invocation, and self-deprecating humor creates a distinct style that mixes humility with protest. For instance:

"मी भषॄ, मी निंद्या/तरी तुझा भक्त."

"I am corrupt, I am condemned, yet I am still your devotee."

The phrase makes fun of how society judges people while claiming spiritual justification. This mix of cynicism and commitment is a big part of who he is as a poet.

Death as a Narrative: Martyrdom and the Memory of the Subaltern

Tradition says that Chokhamela died when a wall fell down, which is said to be a metaphor of the heavy load of the caste system. The Varkari people took his bones to Pandharpur, where they became objects of devotion. The narrative, whether it is a myth or a true story, has a lot of meaning.

In subaltern history, martyrdom frequently emerges as a potent narrative of resistance (Guha 52). Chokhamela's death changes his body from something dirty to something holy. His death as a martyr strengthens the Dalit claim to holiness and goes against Brahminical assertions that Dalits are not suited for holy places. Chokhamela's tomb at Pandharpur is a sign of how much he still affects people today. Not via royal records, but through common oral remembering, which is a very subaltern way of writing history, is how we remember him.

Ambedkarite Reinterpretation of Chokhamela

In the 20th century, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Dalit intellectuals re-examined Chokhamela as a forerunner to contemporary Dalit awareness. Ambedkar criticized Bhakti traditions for promoting the acceptance of suffering; nonetheless, he saw that Chokhamela's candid expression of oppression signified the ethical inception of Dalit awareness (Omvedt 118).

Ambedkarite intellectuals saw Chokhamela's poetry as criticism of caste oppression, claiming that Dalits are human, a refusal of Brahminical supremacy, and confirmation of dignity by spiritual agency. So, Chokhamela connects the voices of the oppressed in the Middle Ages with the voices of the Dalits in present times.

Conclusion

Sant Chokhamela's Abhang literature is one of the oldest and most striking examples of a subaltern voice in Indian literature. His poems: record caste violence, show a hurt yet strong sense of self, fight against Brahminical control, say that everyone is spiritually equal, and turn personal pain into a group witness. Chokhamela uses simple but powerful images to convey the real-life experience of untouchability into the holy realm of devotional writing. His Abhangs provide a counter-narrative to elite historiography, presenting a unique insider's perspective on Dalit reality. He sets a precedent for Dalit writing even before the current Dalit literature came around. Chokhamela does not only talk as a devotee; he speaks as a subaltern who turns devotion into resistance. His work is still very important for understanding caste, spirituality, and how voice works in Indian politics.

References

1. Dangle Arjun. editor. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Longman, 1992.
2. Guha Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Duke UP, 1999.
3. O'Hanlon Rosalind. "Caste, Conflict and Ideology in Maharashtra." *Modern Asian Studies*. 1987; 21(3):649-671.
4. Omvedt Gail. *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India*. Scientific Socialist, 1994.
5. Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988.
6. Zelliot Eleanor. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. Manohar, 1992.