

ABHAṄG – THE DEVOTIONAL FORM

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INTRODUCTION

Mahārāṣṭra is considered as the ***Bhakti-land*** of India. In Mahārāṣṭra, the bhakti cult was spread by saints like Jnānēṣwar, Nāmdev, Tukārām, Janābai, Cōkāmēlā, Ēknāth, Sāwatā Mālī, Narahari, Gōra, Sēna and many others. In Mahārāṣṭra, there is a well followed custom of devotional music which can date back to more than 1000 years. Paṇḍharpur is the most celebrated place for the cult of Viṭṭhōba / Viṭṭhala. The outpourings of these saints are the abhaṅgs, devotional poetry in Marāṭhi language which forms the basis for the Nāmasaṅkīrtan in Mahārāṣṭra. Thus Abhaṅgs also called as the Vaiṣṇava vēda served as the medium to spread devotion through music amongst all sections of the society, irrespective of caste and creed.

What is an Abhaṅg?

Abhaṅg is a form of devotional poetry essentially in Marāṭhi sung in praise of Lord Viṭṭhal of Paṇḍharpur. That which is free from Bhaṅgā or obstacle or deformity is abhaṅg. Abhaṅg means destruction-less or that which has no destruction. History says when the Lord came to give darśan to Puṇḍalīkā, who was serving his old parents, was made to stand on a brick. The Lord abided by the devotee's prayer and is said to be still standing on a brick and giving darśan to the numerous devotees. Brick in Marāṭhi is vēṭ. Lord standing on vēṭ is Viṭṭhal. The term Abhaṅg refers to the erect pose of Viṭṭhal and the songs composed by the Marāṭhi saints on Lord Viṭṭhal came to be known as Abhaṅgs.

Form, Structure and Characteristic Features of Abhañgs

Abhañg Lakṣaṇā stated by Sañt Nāmdēv

Abhañgāci kaḷā nāhī mī neṇat |
tvarā kēḷī prīt Kēśī rājē ||
Akṣharāñci sañkhyā bālilē udaṇḍ |
Mēru supracaṇḍ śar ādī ||
sahā sādē tēn caraṇa jāṇāvē |
akṣharē maujāvī caukacārī ||
pahilyā pāsōṇi tisyā paryant |
Aṭhrā gaṇit mōj ālē ||
Cauka cārī ādhī bōlilō mātṛkā |
bāvisāvi sañkhyā śēvṭēl ||
dēḍ caraṇāñce dīṛgha tē akṣar |
mumuskṣu vicār bōdh kēlā ||
nāmā mhaṇē maj swapna dilē harī |
prītīnē tvēcarī ajnā kēlī ||

Meaning: How to create abhañg that I do not know.

Lord Pāṇḍurañgā today granted me with love, permission to create one.

The numbers of letters are infinite.

Strength of these letters is like vast mountains and can pierce one like a sharp arrow.

The composition of caraṇā should be 3.5 ft.

4 lines (3.5 caraṇā) letters you must count.

Till 1-3 caraṇā, the total akṣarā should be 18 before the last letter of the word, the name of the creator of the abhañg should be there. In 22 akṣarās, the racana should be complete. (6+6+6+4 = 22). Towards the end of 1.5 caraṇā, dīṛgha akṣarā should be aligned. In the full composition, even common man should be bestowed with the knowledge of enlightenment. This entire example, Lord Pāṇḍurañgā, gave in my dream, thus proclaimed Nāmdēv Maharāj.

Abhañgs are poems of Marāṭhi saints in a 6-8 lined form with the chorus singing of dhīva pada.

They are rich in Advaitā philosophy involving all sections of the society and intertwined with “Pravacan” and “Kīrtan”.

The main emphasis is stress on the Nāmā - nāmasaṅkīrtan.

They are characterized by simple appealing tunes and meaningful words. Abhaṅgs are sung in melodious lyrics with smooth unbroken flow.

All songs or poems cannot be called Abhaṅgs. Compositions of Mahārāṣṭrian saints alone are called Abhaṅgs, since they are the outpouring of their feelings and they had their ability to appeal to the masses.

Abhaṅg begins with “Naman” and continues with portraying the physical beauty of God in human form. Abhaṅg describes the importance or supremacy of a Guru. It also gives a spiritual and a moral message.

Rendering of Abhaṅgs attaches a great importance to the words, their diction and most importantly the bhāvā aspect. The quintessence of abhaṅgs was predominantly Bhakti. They sought to lay emphasis on devotion and love towards God and contrast to blind adherence to rituals and arcane religious practices. Besides this, individual sacrifices, nonviolence, compassion, peaceful co-existence, service to humanity was the values they underlined.

The Abhaṅgs have sections dhṛva pada and aṅtarā as the pallavi and caraṇa of the South Indian kīrtana. The caraṇās have identical music and sometimes the abhaṅg is begun in the first caraṇā. The music of the abhaṅg is mostly sung in tāra-sthāyī and only approximate tunes in a rāgā can be indicated.

There seem to be no restrictions in the choice of rāgā for abhaṅgs. Some of the common rāgās that are handled are Paṭṭadīp, Jhōṅpuri, Śivaraṅjani, Bhūp, Pūriya Dhanaśree, Bhaṭiyār and Ghōrkalyān.

Types of Abhañgs:

Tāticē Abhañgs – Tāṭi means a door. When Sant Jnānēśwar was not accepted in the society as a “Dwijan”, he was depressed and he went inside a small house and closed the door. That was the time when his sister Muktabai preached to him in 13 abhañgs about saint and sainthood and those abhañgs are called Thāticē Abhañg.

Saṅt tōci jagī | kṣamā dayā jyācē aṅgī ||
lōbha ahañtā na yē manā | jagī virakta tōci jāṇā ||
iha para lōkī sukhi | śuddha jnān jyāvē mukhī ||
mithyā kalpanā māgē sārā | taṭi ughaḍa Jnānēśwarā ||

Muktabai in this Thāticē Abhañg gives the definition of a Saint. Saint is he who is full of compassion and forgiveness, who does not have any greed and who is soft-spoken...He who is always in bliss...who always speaks wise....you are Thee. Please open the Door O Jnānēśwar ...

Saṅt Jnānēśwar Samādhi Sohalā – About 750 years back, Saṅt Jnānēśwar attained Jīva Samādhī on Kārtika Trayōdaśī day and Saṅt Nāmdēv composed 80 abhañgs depicting the jīva Samādhī. Every year, even now December 01 is observed as Saṅt Jnānēśwar Samādhī day and on this day, these 80 abhañgs are sung.

Kākaḍ āraṭi - Like in Dakṣiṇa bhajana sampradāyā how Dōlōṭsavam is sung, so also the Kākaḍ āraṭi is performed to wake up the Lord and Ṣēj Āraṭi is performed to put the Lord to sleep.

Virahinī – This is compared with the Jayadēvā aṣṭapadi explaining the Jīv-ātmā and Paramātmā concept. Example is :

Mājhē manōratha, pūrṇa kījē Dēvā, Kēśavā mādhavā nārāyanā ||
Nāhī nāhī maja āṇika sōyarā , na karī ahōra Pāṇḍuraṅgā ||
Anāthacā nāthā hōśī tū dayāḷā, kiti vēḷōvēḷā prāthu ātha ||
Nāmā mhaṇē jīvā hōtō kāsāvisa, keli tujhī āsa ātā varī ||

The meaning of this VIRAHINI is:

Saint Nāmdēv pleads Ō Kēśavā, Ō Mādhavā, kindly fulfil my desires. Ō Pāṇḍuraṅgā, how much do you want me to request you....I do not have any friend....do not despise me...you are Lord of the Destitutes. You have made my life joyous.

The other types include Gauḷan which is like the Ōtukādu songs depicting Kṛṣṇa līla, Bhārūḍ of Sañt Ēknāth, Kālā ; Vāsudēv is like Cākiyār Kūttu and Jōgua is sung by the married women.

Styles of Abhaṅg rendition:

In the present day world, there have been changes in the style of rendering of abhaṅgs to suit the modern day tastes of platform rendering. Thus plain singing is converted into a unique musical experience. Abhaṅg is truly an art form that propagates devotion and high ideals through beautiful poetry set to soul stirring music. It is indeed an integral part of Indian music. Rendition of abhaṅgs in all segments of the musical field can be seen from Hindustani concerts to Carnatic concerts and to Nāmasaṅkīrtanams in the Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāyā. There are lots of abhaṅg-mēlās and abhaṅg divya-nāmās being performed.

Abhaṅgs in the Vārkarī Sampradāyā

Vārkarī tradition consists of paying regular visits to Paṇḍharpūr, the sacred place collectively in group called “Ḍinḍi”. It was ‘Nārāyan Maharāj’, the youngest son of Sañt Tukārām, who introduced the palanquin into Wārī. “Wārī” means visit. This was usually understood as the visit of the devotees from Āḷaṅḍī (Samādhi-stal of Sañt Jnānēṣwar) to Paṇḍharpur. The custom of singing the Bhārūḍ of Sañt Jnānēṣwar, Tukārām and Ēknāth during the pilgrimages of the members of the vārkarī sect to Paṇḍharpur is practiced even today. These devotees performed bhajans and nāmasaṅkīrtan all the way indulging in congregational singing and worship. In this style, the philosophical truths are narrated with suitable songs. Melody here is a vehicle to compliment the literature while Bhakti reigns supreme. The prime nature of Vārkarī tradition is congregational singing, hence the music is kept simple so that the masses could sing in unison. Musical variations are limited to the bare minimum. The participants sing and dance in devotional ecstasy. Singing the praise of the Lord, interpreting the songs interspersed with philosophical doctrines in simple tune is

its speciality. Kīrtaṅs as a variety of nine-fold bhakti is evident in Vārkarī-paddhati where more songs are heard. This congregational aspect of singing is very cosmopolitan in nature and it is obviously open to one and all without barriers of caste or creed. The sole purpose of the Vārkarī-paddhati was to spread the fragrance of bhakti and to sing the praise of the Lord in unison. This was a very popular form especially during the time of Sañt Tukārām and thousands of people gathered to listen to those performances.

Normally the Vārkarī tradition starts with ‘Jai Jai Rāmkr̥ṣṇa Hari’ and then followed by abhaṅgs like ‘Suñdarate Dhyān’, ‘Rūpa Pāhatā Lōcanī’ and then followed by ‘Jai Jai Rāmkr̥ṣṇa Hari’. The Vārkarī singers then move on to other abhaṅgs and in their rendition, they follow an unwritten order through convention and render abhaṅgs of Sañt Jnānēśwar or Sañt Nāmdēv, or Sañt Ēknāth and then of Sañt Tukārām and then they move on to the abhaṅgs of other saints and towards the end, they take up some ‘Gauḷans’ (Kṛṣṇa playful songs). Unlike in the Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāyā Nāmasaṅkīrtanam, there is no God oriented sequence like Vināyakā, Saraswati and then Murugā and so on. Marāṭhi abhaṅgs are mostly on Lord Viṭṭhal.

Abhaṅgs in Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāyā (Nāmasaṅkīrtanam)

Satguru Maruthānallur Swāmigaḷ, the architect of Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāyā had already inducted Marāṭhi Abhaṅgs into the Sampradāyā and they were already popular in the remotest corners of South India. Sri Kōdaṇḍarāma Swāmigaḷ, builder of Sri Pāṇḍuraṅgā temple at Triplicane, Chennai, had brought out a book in Telugu ‘Sampradāya Bhajanotsava Paddhati’ in the year 1935. The fifth part of this book contains only abhaṅgs. Srivāṅgal Iyeṅgār Swāmigaḷ, an exponent in the Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāyā has handled more than 300 abhaṅgs. Pudukkoṭṭai Sri Gōpālakṛṣṇa Bhāgavathar and his son Sri Sanjīvi Bhāgavathar have brought out the bhāvārtha in abhaṅgs by means of ‘Abhinayam’. Sri Mōhan Pai and his associate Sri Govindrao Veṛlēkar have brought the vārkarī way of rendering abhaṅgs to South India. Swami Haridāsgiri took this over and spread it to all corners in South India. In recent times, this is followed by the disciple of Shri Mōhan Pai, Mahārāṣṭra Abhaṅ Ratna, Sri Ganēṣhkumār, Sri Jayakṛṣṇa Dikshitar and Sri Tukārām Gaṇapati Maharāj. Sri T. V. Nārāyana Śāstri and Shri T.S. Kṛṣṇamurthy Bhāgavathar have been monumental

in bringing the concept of ‘Abhañg Divyanāmā’ in the Dakṣiṇa Sampradāyā. Abhañgs handled in the nāmasaṅkīrtanam includes those of Saint Rāmadās.

Abhañgs In Carnatic Music Concerts

In recent decades, Abhañgs also takes its place in carnatic music concerts by different artists and the rendition of abhañgs in the later half of the concert after the tani āvartanam has become the trend. Abhañgs had already entered the carnatic field as Dr M.L.Vasaṅtakumārī used to handle this form and even Bhārat Ratna M. S. Subbalakṣmi has sung quite a few abhañgs.

The reason for adopting this form in carnatic music tradition is to bring in variety and to emulate the nāmasaṅkīrtan which attracts the crowd, gives an opportunity to involve the rasikas to sing.

Difference between carnatic and Marāṭhi style of abhañg rendition is that abhañgs sung in carnatic are either copies of recorded abhañgs sung by Hindustani classical musicians eg. Pt Bhīmsēn Jōshi or they may not strictly adhere to vārkarī tradition. Also the ragas in which they are rendered are carnatic in nature. Some popular abhañgs rendered in carnatic concerts are ‘Bhakta jana vatsalē’, ‘Tīrtha Viṭthal Kṣētra Viṭthal’, ‘Sāwale Suṅdara Rūpa manōhara’ to mention a few.

Abhañgs in the Hindustani Tradition

Abhañgs are rendered in a classical way in this tradition. Many Hindustani singers have popularized this form and the foremost among them is Pt Bhīmsēn Jōshi. Kishōri Amōnkar, Sanjīv Abhayaṅkar, Surēsh Wāḍkar, Ajit Kaḍkaḍē, Jayatīrth Mevuṅḍi are among the many others who handle the Hindustani style of rendition.

Analysis of one of the most popular abhañg of Saṅt Tukārām in terms of the style of rendition in various areas of the musical field

Saṅt Tukārām’s very popular abhañg “Suṅdara tē dhyāna” is taken for this analysis.

Suṅdara tē dhyāna ubhē viṭēvarī | Kara kaṭāvarī ṭhēvuniyā ||

Tuḷasīhāra gaḷā kāse pītāmbara | Āvaḍē niraṅtara tēcī rūpa ||

Makara kuṅḍalē taḷapati śravaṅī | Kaṅṭhi Kaustubhamaṅi virājita ||

Tukā mhaṅē majhē hēci sarva sukha | pāhina śrīmukha āvaḍīnē ||

Roughly translated, each verse in this abhańg means as follows:

Beautiful, is the object of my meditation; standing on a brick, with hands on hips and elbows bent outward

A garland of "tulasi" leaves adorns his neck; yellow silk draped around His waist. I adore His form, always.....

Crocodile shaped ornaments, shine brilliantly on His ears; a shiny pearl "Kaustubha" adorns His necklace

Tukārām says, this is my entire happiness; I see His glorious face with enthusiasm

Rendition of the Abhańg in Vārkarī style

***1 Musical passage rendered in the vārkarī style.**

Pallavi:

, , m , r m m ,	p , , , p , , ,	, , p d , m , ,	m , g , r , , ,	
Suń da ra te	dhyā na	, , Ubhē Viṭē	Va rī , , ,	
, , r , , m p ,	n , n , ś , ś ,	, , n ś , ř ś ř	n , d p p m g r	
Ka ra ka	ṭā va rī	ṭhe vu	ni .yā	

Carañā:

, , m , r m m ,	p , , , p , , ,	, , p d , m , ,	m , g , r , , ,	
, , Tu ḷa si hār	ga ḷā	k ā sē	pī tām bara	
, , r , , m p ,	n , n , ś , ś ,	, , n ś , ř ś ř	n , d p p m g r	
ā va ḍē	ni rań ta ra	te ci.....	rū pa	

In this style, the format is that of 'call' and 'response'. The lead singer sings and is followed by the chorus. Here, the main singer while singing, plucks the single stringed vīṇa (also known as the ēktār) to maintain the śruti. Big sized cymbals are used for rhythm and are played by everyone who joins the group and not by a select few. They are played in unison and all the players start and end at the same point in the same style. When the dhṛva pada is sung in chorus-three times, the tala is in double speed up to the thīrmānam (thōḍ as is called in Marāṭhi) and after this, the carañās are sung

***1 Sung by Kadayanallūr Tukārām Ganapati Maharāj**

by the main singer. When the song ends there is a particular thīrmānam played thrice denoting that the song has ended. The nature of music in this style is very simple with limited variations thereby bringing out the bhāva aspect of this abhaṅg. Normally in the Vārkarī style, the third line becomes the dhṛva pada. In this, the line ‘Tuḷasīhāra gaḷā kāse pītāmbara’, is the dhṛva pada and is sung by the chorus after every caraṇā. The ragas employed in this style are not complex but they are best suited to enhance the lyrical aspect. This abhaṅg is rendered in Dēś Raga. Rendition is done in a standing posture.

Rendition of the Abhaṅg in Carnatic style

*2 Musical passage rendered in carnatic style

Pallavi:

, , ṇ s , ḍ ṇ , s , , , s , , ,	, , ṇ r , g m m g g r s s ṇ , ,	
Suṅ da ra te dhyā na	Ubhē Vi ṭē Va ri	
, , ṇ s , r r , s , g , r , , ,	, , m g r s ṇ r ṇ r s r s s ṇ ,	
Ka ra ka ṭā va rī	ṭhe vu nī yā	
 (Suṅdara tē dhyāna)

Caraṇā:

, , ṇ ḍ , s r , g , , , g , , ,	, , g m , g m , r , g , r , ,	
Ma ka ra kuṇ ḍalē	tal pa tī śra va ṇī	
, , , ṇ , s r , , , s g r , , ,	, , m g r s ṇ r ṇ r s r s s ṇ ,	
Kaṇ ṭi kaustu bha ma ṇi	vi rā ji ta	

In this carnatic style of rendition, the abhaṅg is rendered in the Rāgā Kalyāṇi set to Ādi tala.

All the caraṇās have identical tunes and the first two lines are repeated after every caraṇā.

This abhaṅg is presented in carnatic style accompanied by mridhangam and violin.

The tempo is maintained evenly throughout the composition.

Abhaṅgs are normally set to simple tunes, so also the abhaṅg in this style is rendered with simple phrasings, not involving too much of bṛgā-s and gamakā-s.

* 2 Sung by Bhārat Ratna M S Subbalakṣmi

Rendition of the Abhaṅg in Bhajana Sampradāya Nāma-saṅkīrtanam style

*3 The musical passage rendered in Bhajana Sampradāyam style

Pallavi:

, , ř š , n d , n , n , ś , ś ,	, , ś ś , ř ġ , m , ġ , , ř ś ,	
Suń da ra te dhyā na	ub hē vi ðe va ri	
, , n ś ř , , , ś , ġ , ř , , ,	, , ġ , , , ř , n , n , ś , , ,	
Ka ra ka ða va ri	ðe vu ni ya	

In Dakṣiṇa Bhajana Sampradāya, O S Suńdar Bhāgavathar has rendered in a bhajanā style so as to enable the chorus to follow the lead singer.

The exposition of the Rāgā Kalyāṇi is very simple here and all the caraṇās are set to the same tune. There is no repetition of the dhṛva pada. The caraṇās flow into the other simultaneously. The stress is more on nāmā chanting. The Bhāgavathar concludes the abhaṅg with a nāmāvaḷi. Therefore, in Bhajana Sampradāya, the importance is only to the nāmasaṅkīrtan and the melody plays the role of serving as a medium to enhance the nāmā. Tāl is also the same with 8-count beat. In this style, all the caraṇās are repeated by the chorus.

Rendition of the Abhaṅg in Semi classical style

*4 Musical passage rendered in semi classical style

Pallavi:

, , p , r g , r	s , , , s , s ,	, , s r , ṇ s ,	g , , , gmgr
Suń da ra tē	dhyā na	ubhē vi ðhē	va ri
, , g m p n , n	, ś n d p , , ,	, , p , , m , r	g , , , g , , ,
ka ra ka ðā	va ri	ðe vu ni ya	(Suńdara tē dhyāna)

Caraṇā:

, , m p , g m ,	d , , , d , d ,	, , m , d , ś , ,	, n d m g , r ,
Tulasi hāra	ga ḷā	kā sē	pī tām ba ra
, , m , d ś , ,	, ś ś n , m , ,	, , m , , g , r	, r g m g g r r
ā va ðe	ni ran ta ra	te ci	rū pa

*3 Sung by Shri O S Suńdar

*4 Sung by Latā Maṅgeśkar

This version reflects a lighter version of the Rāgā Kalyāṇi. The colour and mood of the song changes with the styles of rendition and execution of the notes. The tune is very soothing to hear and is of semi-classical in nature with melodious variations. Here too, the tune is similar in all the caraṇās with the first line being the dhṛva pada and is repeated after all the caraṇās. This song is set to Tīn Tāl.

The speciality of abhaṅgs is that whether simple or complex in nature, it elevates the singer as well as the listener to a higher level and makes one feel the bliss of ecstasy, irrespective of whether one knows or not, the inner meaning of it. Another great aspect of abhaṅg is that it caters to all classes of people right from villagers to the ethnic crowd of the classical arena.

THE DEVOTIONAL FORMS - ABHAṄG AND BHAJAN

Though Abhaṅgs and Bhajans both belong to the devotional category of Indian music, yet there are certain factors that differentiate one from the other.

Abhaṅg is a devotional poetry essentially in Marāṭhi sung in praise of Lord Viṭthal of Paṇḍharpur. They are simple six to eight lined verses, the outpourings of the Mahārāṣṭrian saints and are characterized by appealing tunes and meaningful words. Bhajans focus on the inward journey while abhaṅgs are more exuberant expressions of the communitarian experience. Abhaṅgs and bhajans not only differ in terms of language, but also in terms of structure, rendition, and the tunes in which they are set. Bhajan is on any God while Abhaṅg is centred around Viṭhala though there are songs on Gaṇēśa, Viṣnu and Śivā. Bhajan can be composed by anyone while abhaṅgs are the compositions composed by the saints. In Bhajan, all the caraṇams are repeated in chorus while in abhaṅg only the dhṛva pada is repeated in chorus.

Abhaṅgs are predominantly bhakti-oriented. Bhajans cover a large spectrum of the musical styles from the simple musical chant to highly developed versions. Bhajans are from North India. Bhajans can be complex in terms of composition and simple as well. Both abhaṅgs and bhajans can be deeply classical or semi classical.

Thus all the literary works be it Tēvāram of the Nāyañmārs, Divya prabañdhams of Āzhvārs, Tiruppugazh of Aruṇagirināthar, Bhajans of the North Indian saints or the Abhañgs of the Marāṭhi saints preach in unison the doctrines of philosophy through literature and music and chanting of God's name is the ultimate means of salvation.

Conclusion

Thus abhañgs are a well-known devotional form in Indian music that has captured millions of hearts and holds an important position for itself in all segments of the musical field. Owing to its devotional content and captivating musical format, the devotional form abhañg, though in Marāṭhi, ranks equally with other devotional works. While analyzing, the reason could be attributed to its devotional content and simple melodic appearance. Though the devotional form may be in any language, it is the musical path that makes them reach people.

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