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Sant Traditions of Maharashtra: Insights into Environmental Ethics, Health Consciousness, and Protection of Mother Earth

Ritika Sonar and Sandesh Jaybhaye

B. K. Birla College (Empowered Autonomous Status), Kalyan, M.S., India

Abstract

The Sant tradition of Maharashtra represents a unique synthesis of spirituality, social reform, and ethical living deeply rooted in everyday life. Saints such as Sant Dnyaneshwar, Sant Tukaram, Sant Eknath, and Sant Gadge Maharaj conveyed profound messages on environmental harmony, cleanliness, social equality, and respect for nature through simple language and accessible literary forms such as Abhang, Ovi, Bharud, Pasaydan, and Kirtan. This review article explores how the teachings of these Sants contribute to environmental ethics, health and hygiene awareness, and the protection of Mother Earth. By analyzing their philosophical perspectives and practical social initiatives, the paper highlights the relevance of Sant literature and practices in addressing contemporary environmental and public health challenges. The study underscores that the Sant movement offers timeless ecological wisdom promoting sustainable living and collective responsibility toward nature.

Keywords

Sant Tradition, Environmental Ethics, Health and Hygiene Awareness, Mother Earth, Maharashtra

Introduction

Environmental degradation, public health crises, and declining ethical values have become pressing global concerns. While modern science offers technological solutions, traditional knowledge systems provide moral and philosophical foundations for sustainable living. In Maharashtra, the Sant tradition has played a transformative role in shaping ethical behavior, social harmony, and ecological consciousness. The Bhakti movement saints emphasized the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the divine. Their teachings rejected exploitation, promoted simplicity, cleanliness, compassion, and respect for all forms of life. Through devotional literature and social engagement, these saints addressed issues that align closely with modern concepts of environmental ethics, public health, and sustainability [1][2]. This review examines how Sant teachings contribute to environmental awareness and health consciousness and how they remain relevant in contemporary society.

Methods:

This review is based on a qualitative analysis of:

- Sant literature such as Dnyaneshwari, Abhang Gatha, Bharuds, Pasaydan, and oral traditions.
- Secondary sources including scholarly articles, books, and journals focusing on Bhakti philosophy, environmental ethics, and social reform.
- Interpretative analysis of symbolic and practical messages related to nature conservation, cleanliness, and social responsibility.

The teachings are thematically analyzed under three major domains, Environmental Ethics, Health and Hygiene Awareness and Protection of Mother Earth

Results and Discussion

Key Teachings of Maharashtrian Sants Related to Environment and Health shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Teachings of Maharashtrian Sants Related to Environment and Health

Sant	Key Teachings	Environmental & Health Relevance
Sant Dnyaneshwar	Unity of all creation	Ecological balance, harmony with nature
Sant Tukaram	Simplicity, non-greed	Sustainable living, reduced consumption
Sant Eknath	Social cleanliness, equality	Hygiene, sanitation, public health
Sant Gadge Maharaj	Cleanliness drives, service	Environmental sanitation, health awareness

Environmental Ethics in Sant Literature

Sant Dnyaneshwar's Pasaydan envisions a world where all beings live in harmony, free from suffering and exploitation.

Table 2: Environmental Ethics in Maharashtrian Sant Abhang Literature

Sr. No.	Sant Name	Abhang / Theme (Marathi)	Interpretation	Reference Source
1	Sant Tukaram	“वृक्षवल्ली आम्हा सोयरी वनचरे”	Trees, animals, and humans are interconnected; promotes biodiversity conservation	Tukaram Gatha, Abhang No. 339
2	Sant Dnyaneshwar	<i>Pasaydan</i> : “भूतां परस्परे पडो मैत्र जीवांचे”	Advocates compassion among all living beings and balance in nature	Dnyaneshwari (Pasaydan)
3	Sant Eknath	Cleanliness and purity in abhangs	Clean surroundings linked to moral and spiritual discipline	Eknathi Bhagwat
4	Sant Namdev	Rivers and nature as divine	Natural elements like rivers seen as sacred and worthy of protection	Namdev Gatha
5	Sant Janabai	Simple living through daily chores	Minimalism and harmony with nature in everyday life	Janabai Abhang
6	Sant Savata Mali	Farming devotion	Ethical farming practices and respect for soil	Savata Mali Abhang
7	Sant Chokhamela	Earth and humility	Earth as mother; promotes non-exploitation	Chokhamela Abhang
8	Sant Gora Kumbhar	Clay as sacred	Natural resources should be used responsibly	Gora Kumbhar Abhang
9	Sant Bahinabai	Rural ecological wisdom	Traditional ecological knowledge and conserv	

His philosophy recognizes nature as sacred and inseparable from human existence [3].

Sant Tukaram condemned material greed and excessive consumption, advocating minimal needs and contentment — principles closely aligned with modern sustainability concepts [4].

These teachings emphasize restraint, compassion, and coexistence, forming the ethical foundation for environmental stewardship, shown in Table 2 .

Health and Hygiene Awareness

Sant Eknath and Sant Gadge Maharaj directly addressed cleanliness and hygiene as social responsibilities. Sant Gadge Maharaj, in particular, transformed spiritual discourse into action by personally leading village cleanliness drives and promoting sanitation as a form of worship [5][6].

Their approach links physical cleanliness with mental and spiritual purity, anticipating modern public health frameworks that connect hygiene with well-being. Here's a table outlining how Maharashtra's Bhakti Movement saints conveyed health and hygiene awareness through their abhangas shown in Table 3:

Table 3 Maharashtra's saints, health and hygiene awareness through their abhangas:

Saint (Period)	Key Theme in Abhangas	Health/Hygiene Awareness Lesson
Sant Janabai (13th-14th Century)	Purity of the Soul vs. Body; Motherly Love of God [vivekavani.com] [bhashalab.com]	Challenging notions of impurity/untouchability, promoting spiritual cleanliness over physical status [roundtableindia.co.in].
Sant Soyarabai (13th-14th Century)	Protest against Untouchability; Internal Purity	Emphasizing that true impurity is spiritual or moral, not physical or caste-based.
Sant Eknath (16th Century)	God's Omnipresence; Equality; Devotion through Action [puneparthanasamaj.org]	The importance of mindful action and seeing divinity in all aspects of life, including mundane tasks.
Sant Tukaram (17th Century)	Rejection of Hypocrisy; Importance of True Action [bhashalab.com]	Caution against superficial purity and advocating for genuine ethical conduct.

These saints, while primarily focused on spiritual liberation and social reform, often embedded lessons about purity, conduct, and the nature of the body that touched upon aspects of personal and communal well-being. Their teachings often aimed to dismantle rigid social hierarchies and promote an inner sense of dignity and equality, which can be seen as foundational to a holistic understanding of health and hygiene.

Protection of Mother Earth

The Sant tradition views the Earth (Bhumi Mata) as a nurturing mother deserving reverence and protection. Exploitation of natural resources was implicitly criticized through teachings advocating moderation and gratitude. Community practices like Haripath, Kirtan, and Wari foster collective discipline, walking culture, and minimal ecological footprints, reinforcing sustainable lifestyles [7][8].

Maharashtrian saints emphasized co-existence with nature, much before modern environmental science. Concepts like sustainability, biodiversity, and ecological balance are deeply rooted in Bhakti literature. Their teachings align with modern ideas of environmental ethics and conservation, shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Maharashtrian Sant Abhangs on Protection of Mother Earth

Sr. No.	Sant Name	Abhang	Environmental Message	Key Concept	Reference Source
1	Sant Tukaram	“वृक्षवल्ली आम्हा सोयरी वनचरे”	Nature (trees, animals) are our relatives; harmony with environment	Ecological kinship	Tukaram Gatha, Abhang No. 339
2	Sant Dnyaneshwar	Nature described as divine manifestation in Pasaydan	Universal welfare includes environmental balance	Unity of life & nature	Dnyaneshwari (Pasaydan)
3	Sant Namdev	References to purity of rivers	Clean environment as	Sacred ecology	Namdev Gatha

		and devotion through nature	a path to spirituality		
4	Sant Eknath	Emphasis on cleanliness (physical & spiritual)	Clean surroundings reflect moral responsibility	Environmental ethics	Eknathi Bhagwat
5	Sant Chokhamela	Humility and connection with soil and land	Respect for earth and equality of all beings	Earth as mother	Chokhamela Abhang
6	Sant Janabai	Daily chores linked with nature and devotion	Sustainable living and simplicity	Eco-spiritual lifestyle	Janabai Abhang
7	Sant Savata Mali	Farming and devotion as one	Agriculture in harmony with nature	Sustainable agriculture	Savata Mali Abhang
8	Sant Gora Kumbhar	Clay (earth) as sacred and divine	Respect for natural resources	Earth as divine element	Gora Kumbhar Abhang

Conclusion

The Sant traditions of Maharashtra offer profound insights into environmental ethics, health consciousness, and the protection of Mother Earth. Their teachings emphasize harmony with nature, cleanliness as a moral duty, and sustainable living grounded in spiritual values. In an era of climate change and ecological crises, revisiting Sant philosophy can inspire ethical environmental behavior and community-based solutions. Integrating these teachings into education, environmental awareness programs, and policy discourse can strengthen sustainable development efforts rooted in indigenous wisdom.

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