Janabai /Jana Bai / Jani (~1270~1350)

Janabai was born in a Maharashtra village in a family known in those times as the lowest, sudra, caste. When she was still a young child, her mother died and her father (shortly before his own death) took her to the city of Pandharpur, where she became a servant in the household of Varakari devotees of Pandhari Vitthal, an incarnation of Vishnu. A son of the family, Namdev, became one of the chief Varakari poets, writing in vernacular Marathi and preaching the nobility of equality of all human creation, regardless of caste or gender, before God. Janabai cared for the young Namdev and remained his servant, his dAsi, throughout her life. Tradition says that they died on the same day.

Janabai composed over 340 devotional songs, abhangas; they survived by being included in collections of Namdev's own works. Some of Janabai's songs extoll the lives of her fellow Varakari and of the various incarnations of Vishnu, but the most distinctive are those that detail her personal relationship with the Lord Vitthal. Janabai seldom speaks of erotic desire for the God (as some of the other Vaishnavaite saints/bhakta kavis/poets do); she more often sees Vitthal as her mother (a view not uncommon among the Varakaris), but also as her fellow-serving maid, and ultimately herself.

Although Janabai's abhangas are still widely sung in Maharashta, only about 40 appear to have been published in English. But from these, you can hear her distinctive approach to realization.