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Sant Gadge Maharaj, A person who cleaned our society

Debuji Zhingraji Janorkar, also known as Sant Gadge Baba, was a social reformer who worked to transform our society with the help of his broom and devotional songs. Even today, his hymn "Gopala... Gopala... Devaki Nandan Gopala..." is sung across Maharashtra. At a time when our society was plagued by addiction, superstition, illiteracy, and untouchability, Gadge Baba made it his mission to bring about change through his devotional songs and discourses.



Debuji was born in 1876 in a small village called Shendgaon in Amravati. He was born into the Parit community, known as "Dhobi" in Maharashtra. His childhood was neither pleasant nor easy. From a young age, Debuji witnessed many people indulging in intoxication, illiteracy, and superstition. He lost his father early in life, and as a result, he had to live with his maternal uncle along with his mother. Life at his uncle's home became even more challenging for him. During

that time, the practice of child marriage was prevalent in Vidarbha, and Debuji was also married in his childhood. A few years after the marriage, his wife, Kuntabai, gave birth to their first daughter. Debuji and his family were leading a simple life. However, Debuji felt a sense of incompleteness in his life. It is often said that if someone is born to serve society, a normal life doesn't satisfy them. The same was true for Debuji.

One day, when Debuji went to the village temple to listen to a *kirtan* (devotional discourse), he heard the *kirtankar* (performer) say, "Our body is a temple; we should use it for the welfare of others. We do not get human life repeatedly, so we must do something for society in this life. Death does not differentiate between big and small, rich and poor, or color, form, and caste. It comes for everyone. Therefore, we should do as much good as possible before death."

Many people were listening to the *kirtankar* that day, but only Debuji's heart deeply absorbed those words. Even after returning home, Debuji kept pondering over the *kirtankar's* message. While everyone else in the house slept, the words of the *kirtankar* robbed Debuji of his sleep.

As the new day's sun began to rise over the horizon, Debuji made a firm decision. He removed his new clothes and wore some old, tattered ones. He picked up a *tambora* (a string instrument) and a clay pot placed near the door. He took one last look at his family, bowed his head in gratitude, and left his home with a resolve never to return. At that moment, Debuji's old self ceased to exist, and the journey of Sant Gadge Baba began.

Gadge Baba dedicated his life to the service of society. His travels extended in all directions, yet they were purposeful and guided. During that time, various forms of folk arts were prevalent in Maharashtra. Gadge Baba used *kirtan* (devotional storytelling and singing) as a medium to convey his ideas to the people and bring about societal change.

He made it his life's mission to promote de-addiction, eliminate untouchability, end caste discrimination, and spread education. He always worked in exchange for alms rather than simply begging. Over time, he constructed several ghats (riverbank steps) along the banks of the Purna River. Gradually, people began assisting him in cleaning their villages and surrounding areas. Gadge Baba actively advocated for de-addiction, cleanliness, avoidance of blind faith, and the importance of children's education, inspiring people to lead better lives.

Gadge Baba worked tirelessly for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes. Once, during a visit to Pandharpur, he witnessed the untouchability practiced against the Harijans. He observed how Harijans were not allowed to stay in the dharmashala (pilgrim rest house) and were forced to rest outside in the cold, either huddled together or under the open sky. Moved by their plight, Gadge Baba collected donations and constructed a dharmashala for them. Similarly, during his lifetime, he built dharmashalas in Pune, Nashik, Alandi, and Dehu. He also established several community kitchens (*annachatras*) where people of any caste could receive food. For the elderly, he built old-age homes, and to protect cows from slaughter, he founded numerous cow shelters (*goshala*).

Gadge Baba dedicated his life to making people understand the importance of education. He always said, ***"If you have money, use it for education. Educate your children. Who knows, maybe one of them could become the next Ambedkar or Gandhi."***

His deep desire for promoting education was evident in his *kirtans*. He would often emphasize the importance of education and say:

जयाचे मनी लालसा शिक्षणाची
गरिबीमुळे होतसे हाय त्याची
अशा इच्छिती लावूनी हातभार
करा श्रेष्ठ हे दान सर्वात थोर

Meaning: If someone has a strong desire to gain education but is unable to do so due to poverty, we should wholeheartedly and graciously donate to help that eager individual.

Gadge Baba never accepted the concept of untouchability. He always worked for the Scheduled Castes and for anyone whom society considered untouchable. According to him, serving humanity was the greatest form of worship. Gadge Baba often said, ***"There is no greater sin than one human considering another inferior. God creates all humans as equals. It is we, humans, who divide each other into castes—not God. We are all children of the same God."***

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Sant Gadge Baba shared a unique relationship rooted in their shared vision for social reform and upliftment of marginalized communities in India. Though their approaches were different, their goals aligned—eradicating caste-based discrimination, promoting education, and fostering equality.

Gadge Baba was a spiritual leader and social reformer who worked tirelessly to eliminate untouchability and spread awareness about cleanliness, education, and moral values. Dr. Ambedkar, on the other hand, was a political leader, economist, and principal architect of the Indian Constitution, who fought for the rights of the oppressed through legal and systemic reforms.

Dr. Ambedkar deeply admired Gadge Baba's grassroots work. Gadge Baba's emphasis on education and his message of equality resonated strongly with Dr. Ambedkar, who himself believed that education was the key to empowerment. Both figures were committed to eradicating caste-based discrimination but employed different strategies—Dr. Ambedkar through legal and political means, and Gadge Baba through spiritual discourse and community service.

The mutual respect between them was evident. Gadge Baba often supported Dr. Ambedkar's cause, encouraging people to follow Dr. Ambedkar's path of education and self-respect. He urged

communities to shed superstitions and embrace progressive ideas, aligning with Dr. Ambedkar's vision of a rational and just society.

Dr. Ambedkar, in turn, recognized Gadge Baba's contributions as complementary to his own efforts. Gadge Baba's ability to reach the rural masses and inspire them to change their lives created a strong foundation for Dr. Ambedkar's broader socio-political reforms. Their relationship symbolized the confluence of spiritual and political efforts in the fight for social justice. Together, they inspired millions to envision a society free from oppression, marked by equality and opportunity for all.

Gadge Baba served society for 50 years. While his body may have grown weary, his spirit remained as enthusiastic as ever. He continued his work without complaint. During this time, he was invited to deliver a *kirtan* in Bandra, Mumbai. He accepted the request and, with great effort, delivered his final *kirtan* on November 8, 1956. A Sant had begun the final journey of his life. Gadge Baba departed from this world on December 20, 1956, at 12:30 a.m. Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly to eradicate harmful practices from society and promote virtuous habits.

We bow to this great Sant and hope that his teachings and ideals continue to inspire us always.

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Reference:

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