



BODHI

International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

An online, Peer reviewed, Refereed and Quarterly Journal

Vol : 1

No : 4

July 2017

ISSN : 2456-5571



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in | www.bodhijournals.com

THE MYSTIC SAINT POETS AND POETESS OF VARKARI SAMPRADAYA

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Abstract

Mysticism is that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate first hand, intuitive apprehension of God. Bhakti-margins or mystics have full experience of God through 'intellect', 'feeling', and 'will'. They form eternal Divine Society in all times and everywhere. There was a resplendent galaxy of poet saints in Maharashtra from the 13th to the 17th Century, from Jnandev (1275-'96) down to Turkaram (1608-'90). The path of devotion is related to mysticism. Mystics have the 'unity of spirit', that leads to 'spirit of unity'. The mystics are open to all. It is nicely explained by Dr. S. RadhaKāñēan, "Whatever religions they may profess, the mystics are spiritual kinsmen. While the different religions in their historical forms bind us to limited groups and militate against the development of loyalty to the world community, the mystics have always stood for the fellow-ship of humanity. These mystic Saints from Varkari Sampradaya have preached the values and virtues of service, sacrifice, generosity, equality and fraternity. Dignity of labour is the main feature of these mystics. Whatever the profession is, in front of Lord's eyes everyone is the same.

Key Words: *Mystics, poet saints of Varkari Sampradaya, Vasudaiva kutumbakam, Lord Panduranga, bhakti margins, Vishvatmaka Ishvara.*

Introduction

Mysticism is that attitude of mind which involves a direct, immediate first hand, intuitive apprehension of God. Bhakti- margins or mystics have full experience of God through 'intellect', 'feeling', and 'will'. They form eternal Divine Society in all times and everywhere.

There was a resplendent galaxy of poet saints in Maharashtra from the 13th to the 17th Century, from Jnandev (1275-'96) down to Turkaram (1608-'90). Altogether this was a time of great national vitality, covering the Maratha struggle for independence of the Mughul Empire and its final achievement under Shivaji. On the whole, however, the poet-saints showed no concern with such matters.

They were a strong, rugged, outspoken dynasty drawn from all social classes. Jnandeva was a Brahmin, but there were also Namdev, a tailor; Gora, a potter; Savanta, a gardener; Chokha, a sweeper; and Tukaram, a tradesman. There were women too among them: Jnandev's sister Muktabai, Namdeva's servant Jani, Chokha's wife Soyara. Their outstanding quality is a beautiful fusing of bhakti (devotion) with Jnana (knowledge). They worshipped and merged into Oneness

with the God they worshipped. This is especially prominent in Tukaram. He declares for instance, "When I meditate on the Lord of Pandhari the body becomes transformed together with the mind. Where is there room for speech then? My I-ness is become Hari (God). With the mind merging in Divine Consciousness all creation looks divine. Tukaram says: 'how shall I put it? All at once I became lost in God-consciousness.'" And again, "The glory of the bhaktas is known only to themselves. It is hard for others to understand. In order to increase the happiness of love in this world they display duality without actually dividing. This is understood only by those who have experienced Unity through faith."

Jnandev with his sister Muktabai and his two brothers, all four of them poet-saints, had an unhappy childhood. Their father, after living the life of an ascetic, returned to married life, and on that account the orthodox Brahmins ostracised the whole family. They were orphaned young and their genius blazed forth while still in their teens. Jnandev, the greatest of them, is better known as Jnaneshwara, the 'Lord of Wisdom'. His great work, the Jnaneshwari is a monumental verse commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. Apart from this there are also his

Anubhavamrita or 'Elixir of Experience'. Having himself attained this elixir, he says,

"The distinction between liberated, aspirant and bound subsists only so long as this Elixir of Experience is unknown to one. The enjoyer and the enjoyed, the seer and the seen, are merged in the non-dual, which is indivisible. The devotee has become God, the Goal has become God, the Goal has become the path; this indeed is solitude in the universe.'

This magnificent achievement was completed by the age of 22, when he declared that his life's work was finished and ceremoniously entered into samadhi in a specially prepared crypt, having given instruction that it was to be bricked up. This was in the village of Alandi in Poona district. There is a beautiful atmosphere of sanctity and serenity there. It contains a tree under which an unending chain of recitation of the Jnaneshwari has gone until the present day. Jnaneshwara has remained a perennial fount of inspiration for Maharashtra. He was at once the foundation and crown of this amazing dynasty.

Namdev, who arose next, described the three brothers as manifestations of Para-Brahmin and spoke of them as shining suns. In his youth he had been a thief and murderer, until one day, hearing a young mother explain to her fatherless child that they had to live in penury because his father had been killed, he realised with sudden horror that it was he who was the killer, and with a violent revulsion of feeling he rushed to the nearby temple to take his own life. He was prevented, however, and he devoted the rest of his life to penance and worship. He wrote in Hindi as well as Marathi (two sister languages both derived from Sanskrit, as are most of those of North India), and it is interesting to note that some of his Hindi songs are included in the Granth Sahib, the scripture of the Sikhs, which their founder, Guru Nanak, partly wrote and partly compiled.

While he was still a simple devotee of God in the form of Vithoba it was Jnaneshwara's sister Muktabai who awoke him to deeper understanding. When he met her she astonished him:

What if you have become a devotee of the Lord?

*The Inner Refuge is beyond your ken;
Never have you turned your gaze Spiritward!
What use is your godly talk till then?
Your Self you have never found;
I-ness has you in its iron grip.
Yet, unmindful of your own failure,
You question us about our roots.*

She also wrote for him:

*All form is forever permeated with
formlessness.*

Shape it has none, but enveloped in Maya

The devotee does with form endow

The all-pervading Boundless That within.

Such was the celestial group of which one, the sweeper Chokha proclaimed:

'God neither has form nor is without form.'

Another, the servant-girl Janabai, felt that she 'ate God, drank God, slept on God and carried on all her activities with God.'

Namdev died in 1350. He desired his ashes to be buried under the doorstep to the main entrance of the temple of Vitobha at Pandharpur so that all devotees who went there might bless him with their holy feet. The following abhang throw the light on mystical aspect of Namadeva's philosophy.

माझी माडली मी वो तुझा तान्हा पाजी प्रेमपान्हा पांडुरंगे॥ तू माझी गाडली मी तुझे यासरु नको पान्हा
रु पांडुरंगे॥ तू माझी हरीण मी तुझे पाडस। तोडी भवपाश पांडुरंगे॥ तू माझी पक्षिणी मी तुझे अंडज चारा
ली मज पांडुरंगे॥ नामा म्हणे होसी भक्तीचा वल्लभा मागे पुढे उभा सांभाळीसी॥'

The next great saint of this galaxy was Eknath (1533-'99). He taught that bhakti and jnana are like flower and fruit, inconceivable in separation. He carried on the tradition of Jnaneshwar and Namdev. The text of the Jnaneshwari had become corrupted, so he re-edited it, and his recension has remained current to the present day. He was both scholar and poet, and his verse exposition of chapter XI of the Bhagavata is as illuminating and as popular as the Jnaneshwari. His copious and varied compositions (including folk-songs called 'Bharudas') have enriched Marathi literature with their unique quality. Eknath had a contemporary, Father Stephens, an English Jesuit from Oxford, living in Goa who composed

a Christa Purana in Marathi distinctly reminiscent of Eknath's Bhagavata.

There are many sayings that bring out the pure advaitic understanding of Eknath. "My body is Pandhari" (a place of pilgrimage) he says, and Atma is Vitthala (God) therein." And again: "When I bathe in the river the water is liquid consciousness!"

He was famed for his never-ending patience as well as for his tolerance and compassion. He was carrying holy water for his worship but gave it to a thirsty donkey. On the anniversary of his ancestors he called an untouchable for food and gave him the consecrated dishes prepared for the Brahmins.

The next great figure in this dynasty, Tukaram, (1608-'50) was a peasant trader by profession but ranks as the crown of Maratha sainthood after Jnaneshwara. The woman poet Bahinabai speaks of him as the steeple or pinnacle of the edifice whose foundation Jnaneshwara had laid. Rameshwar, a contemporary disciple, declared that "in jnana, bhakti and vairagya (dispassion) there was no one to match Tukaram". Even today his songs sway our emotions as they did his contemporaries.

The secret lies in the rustic simplicity and utter frankness on self-revelation in his songs together with their profound understanding and ardent devotion. He had not an easy life. He could not get up any interest in trade, with the result that he and his family often went hungry, and his wife developed into a scold, as well as she might. The local Brahmins declared that, being of low caste, he had no right to compose poems and ordered him to throw them into the river flowing through the town. Obediently he did so, but the waters washed them ashore undamaged. Abashed by this, his critics allowed them to be kept. He rose above body-consciousness while still in the body. In a well known poem he declares; "I witnessed with my own eyes my bodily death. That was indeed a unique sacrament!" He started (like his prototype Namdev) as an ordinary devotee of God as Vitthala but attained transcendent experience "I went to see God and there stood transfigured into God" he says. He is one of those rare saints who have disappeared bodily at the end of life. Since there was no body to

entomb there is no shrine to him to which pilgrims can repair. Instead they go to the spot on the river bank where his poems were washed ashore. There is a beautiful atmosphere there.

Apart from this fraternity of saints centred on Pandharpur, there were two other contemporaries of Tukaram who were eminent Marathi poet-saints. One of them was a Muslim faqir, Sheikh Muhammed, whose tomb at Ahmednagar became a place of pilgrimage for Muslims and Hindus alike. The other was Samartha Ramdas, the powerful inspirer of Shivaji, whose shrine is at Sajjangad in Satara District.

Sheikh Muhammed is chiefly remembered today for his Yoga-sangrama, a long allegory in songs describing the spiritual struggle as a 'battle of yoga'. He confesses: "I do not know refined speech. Cultured pandits may laugh at my uncouth expression. But look into the core and understand my soul." Like Kabir he understood the basic unanimity of the religions and he could have said with Kabir: "Ram and Rahim, Ishwar and Allah are all the same." He regarded all sadhus as the same and not other than the Absolute, whatever their external forms or religions. "The peel of the jackfruit is rough and prickly but the pulp inside is sweet. The shell of the coconut is hard and rough, but the milk and kernel inside are delicious." He also said: "There is no difference between Paramatma (universal spirit) and saint. They are essentially the same although they appear different." Tukaram said in almost the same words: "All saints are the same. They appear different only in externals, just as milk is all the same though it comes from cows of different colour."

In fact the Namadeva Gatha, Tukaram's Gatha and the Jnaneshwari can be looked upon as the 'Triple Veda' of Maharashtra down to this day. Their appeal is both to the head and heart. They are couched in a form which some might consider more like rhythmical prose than verse. But they are all alike embodiments of Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram - 'Truth, Purity, Beauty'. The truth must be experienced, and these had experienced it and could indicate it for others to experience.

The tears of a mystic flow with liquid majesty – they are pearls of spiritual fervour descending from the depth of his soul. There is poetry in his eyes, music in his words and speech in his silence. What he utters is scripture. What he does not utter is truth waiting for discovery. Philosophy comes to him naturally. His company invokes purity in thought and transforms a person, as in the case of Narendranath who became Swami Vivekananda under the influence of Sri Ramkrishna Paramahansa.

The path of devotion is related to mysticism. Mystics have the 'unity of spirit', that leads to 'spirit of unity'. The mystics are open to all. It is nicely explained by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, "Whatever religions they may profess, the mystics are spiritual kinsmen. While the different religions in their historical forms bind us to limited groups and militate against the development of loyalty to the world community, the mystics have always stood for the fellow-ship of humanity. They transcend the tyranny of names and the rivalry of creeds as well as the conflict of races and the strife of nations. Mystics and bhakti-margins have had unorthodox, non-fanatic and non-superstitious approach towards religion.

The mystic saints from Varkari Sampradaya have accelerated the trend of reform. As a result what they experience and what they fought have fruitful consequence. These mystics have brought peace, harmony and social reform for the good in very subtle manner by working within the traditional frame work. I have tried to emphasize this kind of mysticism along with bhakti marga which is followed by the Varkari Saint-Philosophers, which may help in solidarity of all religions. Thus, social utility comes from within the fold of traditionalism as well. The understanding "God as Universal Spirit" (vishvatmaka, Ishvara) is a very important concept for understanding the real meaning of bhakti. "Vishvatmaka Ishvara" means that understanding of God as abiding in everything and in every human being.

By realizing the 'Oneness', the mystics are the best men in the society to bring about 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (the whole Universe is one family) and 'Sarva dharma

samabhava' (Equal regards for all religions) in the life of temporal world. In this process, they often suffer but without ever complaining. These mystic Saints from Varkari Sampradaya have preached the values and virtues of service, sacrifice, generosity, equality and fraternity. Dignity of labour is the main feature of these mystics. Whatever the profession is, in front of Lord's eyes everyone is the same. In the present day scenario of degradation of moral values, we are seeing indiscriminate use of natural resources.

The experiences of the mystics serve as the lighthouse for the devotees till now. In the age of dispute and differences on the grounds of religious diversity, the mystics and their message will be of great inspiration and succor for people seeking peace and harmony. This justifies the relevance of mystics in the present world. I plead in the words of the Vedic seer, "Let the world be a single nest to live in." and in the words of Saint Jnaneshwara, "Avaghachi Samsara Sukhacha Karin."

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