

Saint Dnyaneshwar Jayanti

(Bhadrapad Krishna Paksha Ashtami, 1332 Vikram Samvat)

Saint Dnyaneshwar and social harmony

Saint Dnyaneshwar was a great saint, poet, philosopher, yogi and promoter of Bhagwat Dharma - Varkari Sampradaya under the aegis of Nath Vaishnav sect in 13th Century Maharashtra. His poetic literary works Bhavarthdeepika (Dnyaneshwari)- a commentary on Bhagavad Gita, Amrutanubhav -compilation of his compositions, Changdevpasashti-an immortal letter to Hathiyogi Shree Changdev and Haripathache Abhanga-devotional poetry sung in praise of the Hindu god Vitthala are believed to be milestones of Marathi literature..During those days, Sanskrit was considered an essential requirement to attain Godliness Through his literature, he created confidence among common people that spiritual and philosophical thoughts could be expressed in local Marathi language also and it would have rightful share in the Cosmic world.

Saint Dnyaneshwar was born in Apegaon on the bank of Godavari river near Paithan in Maharashtra during the reign of the Yadava king Ramadevaravain the year 1275AD to father Vitthalpant Kulkarni and mother Rukminibai. The couples had four children: Nivrutti, Dnyanadev, Sopandev and Muktabai.

Ancestors of Vitthalpant were known to be very holy, morally clean and righteous. His great-great-great-grandfather Hariharpant Kulkarni was a Kulkarni (hereditary accountant) of Apegaon. around 1138AD. Saint Dnyaneshwar's great-grandfather Tryambakpant had obtained a spiritual-initiation at the hands of Gorakshanath and Dnyaneshwar's grandfather Govindpant and grandmother Neerabai had obtained a spiritual-initiation at the hands of Gahininath,

In his young age, Vitthalpant became disgusted with life and went to Varanasi without consent of his wife and started living life of a Sanyasi (an ascetic). Later, knowing the truth his Guru Ramanand Swami ordered him to go back to the house holder's life. In obedience of orders of his Guru, he returned and continued his family life Vitthalpant had four children in twelve years of Grihasthashram. During this period, they faced a bitter struggle marked by calumny and ostracism by the society. When the kids became eligible for initiation in the life of a celibate, Vitthalpant decided to apologize before the Committee of Brahmins and atone. He said

" जातिकुळावेगळीपडियेलीनिराळी। माझीवंशावळीप्रायश्चित्त॥ "

meaning my children were severed from my caste, so I decided to reattach them by way of atonement.

The Brahmins of Alandi didn't consider his plea and rejected his request to reinstate his children in the Brahmin caste and ordered death penalty. Paithan's priest community too rejected to

expiate the children and perform the thread ceremony, which means that they were not allowed to re-enter the Vaidik Dharma. Thus Vitthalpant's lineage broke free from the steely and unyielding framework of the castes and formed the foundation stone of the spiritual way which promised the entire human race the absolving from parochial religious and social attitudes. These distinctly ostracized children formed the lineage of Siddhas. Dnyaneshwar has elaborated about this lineage in the last Chapter (Adhyay) of Dnyaneshwari (Chapter 19). The lineage goes like this: Adinath, Matsyendranath, Chauranginath, Gorakshanath, Gahininath, Nivruttinath and Dnyananath (Dnyaneshwar himself). This lineage is clearly a Guru-Shishya Parampara, a pure lineage of the teacher and disciple. The Nath Panth (sect) endeared these outcasted children. Gahininath extended divine bliss or exaltation to Nivruttinath who in turn offered the same to Dnyaneshwar. Dnyaneshwar became a liberated sage, however he was well aware of the problems of discrimination against womenfolk, shudra, downtrodden and hence their angst. He had already experienced cruel and heartless law of piety and religion and was convinced that useless erudition (deep knowledge) and traditions as well as outdated religious laws couldn't show the path and the light to the oppressed. This must have inspired him to establish the Bhagwat dharma and he guided the oppressed on the way to social upliftment. His teaching indicates that "not blood (caste at birth) but the tradition of true knowledge is a real basis and legacy (heritage) for the humanity".

After the death of their parents, Dnyaneshwar and his three siblings went from village to village spreading the message of Bhaktimarga (the path of Bhakti), through Keertans and Pravachans (discourses). During this period, while at Mhalsapur (Nevase) which is about 2 km from Godavari, Dnyaneshwar completed Dnyanadevi or Dnyaneshwari in 1290 AD which was his commentary on the Bhagavad Geeta. He also composed Amrutanubhav or Anubhavamrut after instructions from his Guru, Nivruttinath. Then he set out for a nation-wide pilgrimage with Saint Namdev spreading Bhagwat Dharma - Varkari Sampradaya. The devotees and believers of Varkari Sampradaya and others too call Saint Dnyaneshwar as "Mauli" (a respectful compellation for one's mother) who cared for everyone and expected aspirations of all living beings to be fulfilled ('जोजेवांछील, तोतेलाहो'). He removed the futile pomp in the Dharma and made it much more meaningful by linking it to the duty. He successfully sowed the seeds of spiritual democracy apart from creating spiritual literature. He laid the foundation stone of Bhagwat Dharma and the Varkari sect, which was very precious deed of the times. Saint Dnyaneshwar performed an unparalleled task of bringing unity in the spiritual realm by informally leading such great saints as Saint Namdev, Saint Gora Kumbhar, Saint Savtamali, Saint Narahari Sonar, and Saint Chokhamela, etc.

In 1296AD, Saint Dnyaneshwar took 'Samadhi' at the young age of 21 at Alandion the shores of Indrayani river. After his Samadhi within a year's time his brothers Nivruttinath and Sopandev and sister Muktabai also left this mortal world.

Saint Dnyaneshwar's first biography can be found in Saint Namdev's Gatha, which is called "Adi, Teerthavali and Samadhi Abhangas".

Regardless of whether the biography is real or imaginary, the meaning it conveys is truly consistent with the principles of Bhagwat Dharma. It can easily be inferred that Saint Dnyaneshwar was a great seer of a non-Vedic tradition as he was neither initiated in Sanatan dharma by the orthodox Laws (the body of law as delivered originally by Manu) nor the purificatory rites or ceremonies were really required in his case. As described in 'Adi Abhangas' It can rightly be inferred and accepted by all that he preached the magnanimous Bhagwat Dharma in Maharashtra which tried to remove discrimination in the contemporary Hindu orthodox society and demanded right to spirituality for common people. If Nivrutti, Dnyandev and Sopan were initiated in Brahmacharyashram by performing threading ceremony and thereby they would have become Brahman (Dwij) or have been accepted by orthodox religion then it would have become extremely difficult for the lower castes to honour them and place them in to the divine order of the saints as the contemporary Hindu law considered it crime even to see or touch the lower caste people and there was punishment for such crime. Saint Namdev, who was among the followers of Saint Dnyandev, gave advice as a Guru to Chokha Mela, and asked him to recite the mantra "Ram Krishna Hari". It is very clear that saints like Dnyandev and others considered the casteism to be inappropriate and initiated those born in the down trodden lower class into spirituality; however the contemporary orthodox law forbidden the same. Saint Dnyaneshwar has clarified his viewpoint about this in Dnyaneshwari. He says:

म्हणोनिकुळउत्तमनोहावे।जातीअंत्याहिव्हावे।वरिदेहाचेनिनावें।पशूचेंहीलाभो॥ (अ. ९ : ४४१)

(For this, the clan/birth neednot have to be the best. The person may belong to the lowest class. Why just the lowest of classes, it could even be an animal.)

तेपापयोनीहीहोतुकां।तेश्रुताधीतहीहोतुकां।
परिमजसींतुकितांतुका।तुटीनाहीं॥ (अ. ९ : ४४९)

(It doesn't matter whether they were born in the unrighteous or wicked classes or learned or not they are no less than me.)

म्हणोनिकुळजातिवर्ण।हेआघवेचिगाअकारण।
एथअर्जुनामाझेपण।सार्थकएक॥ (अ. ९ : ४५६)

(Hence, O Arjuna, best caste, lineage or Varna is futile. Oneness with me alone will help you attain the divinity.)

जैसेतंवचिवहाळवोहळ| जंवनपवतीगंगाजळ|
मगहोऊनिठाकतीकेवळ| गंगारूप॥ (अ. ९ : ४५८)

कांखैरचंदनकाण्ठे| हेविवंचनातंवचिघटे|
जंवनघापतीएकवटे| अग्नीमार्जी॥ (अ. ९ : ४५९)

तैसेक्षत्रीवैश्यस्त्रिया| कांशूद्रअंत्यादिइया|
जातीतंवचिवेगळालिया| जंवनपवतीमार्ते॥ (अ. ९ : ४६०)

(Unless the brooks and streams will not flow in to Ganga, they will remain brooks and streams only; but once they unite with Ganga they become Ganga only. Similarly, the different existence of wood as Khair, Sandalwood etc. exists only until they are put in to fire. In the same way, the customary observances of caste (Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra and womenfolk) remain only until my devotees become one with me. The path of devotion is deep and those who follow it realize that I completely pervade everything living and nonliving.)

The people irrespective of their castes or classes used to become hopeful and pleased on listening to such verses and would bow to the young Yogi Saint Dnyaneshwar who so correctly explained Krishna's promise!

पाठींसमाधीश्रियेचाअशेखा| आत्मानुभवराज्यसुखा|
पढाभिषेकदेखा| समरसेजाहला॥ (अ. ९ : २१८)

(After attaining the excellence of uninterrupted deep contemplation, he experiences the bliss of self-realization and is crowned on the throne of spiritual enlightenment.)

Saint Dnyaneshwar likes the word "**Samaras**" (to attain to identity of essence, spirituality). Perception of god in a vision, is in fact a proof of experiencing the bliss of self-realization and that is what he calls as "Samaras". Sanskar (purificatory rituals or actions) is actually the source of attaining that identity and evokes the godliness in a person and allows him to see the God in others. A man may or may not have existence but the God surely exists. The egotism and pride causes so much damage that the man cannot justly balance his passions and affections and hence cannot attain Samarasata (eternal harmony). Saint Dnyaneshwar and all the other emphasized for awakening of godliness in human beings. The route to social harmony passes through spiritual knowledge.

Since his childhood, Dnyaneshwar was taught to be devoted and maintain his integrity towards his own duties.

सर्वधर्मामध्येधर्म| स्वरूपीराहणेहाधर्म|

आणिहेचिमुखवर्म| साधुसंतांचे|| (साधुलक्षणाचेपर्याय)

"स्वधर्म", that is proper duty of a man is nothing but to remain true to his natural character of being and the harmonious connection to his self becomes mark of a Sadhu. Dnyaneshwar had inherited the supreme bliss from a great Guru tradition. Dnyaneshwar was a towering and eminent litterateur - as rightly described in

तियेसिद्धप्रज्ञेचेनिलाम्भे| मनचिसारस्वतेदुभे|| (अ.७ओवी४५४)

[The wisdom acquired in the pre-natal world demonstrates the Genius and the sharpness of intellect andhe attains all the knowledge.]

He could not find true glory of the Dharma in the surrounding social scene. Hence he started his mission of religious reformation. He had attained the skill of accomplishing his mission by getting undisputed support and approval from all. He depended on coordination rather than protest. His ideology was neither communal nor lacking innovation, but it was coordinating and pervasive. His coordination was very consistent with his life work. Salvation of Dalits was the major part of his work. To enable down trodden and lowest caste people to understand the essence of real Dharma and they may get support of philosophy, Dnyaneshwar created literature in Marathi. In the Bhavarthdeepika, i.e. Dnyaneshwari, he has considered the listener (devotee) to be as –

मीअत्यंतजडअसे|परीऐसाहीनिकेपरियसें| (अ: ३, ओवी१८)

(O Krishna, dull-witted that I am, give me your advice in such a way that I too can understand it.)
And, then naturally he opted for a distinct method of explanation as described in :

अर्जुनाजेणेजेणेभेदे| तुझेकांचित्तबोधे|

तैसेतैसेविनोदे| निरूपिजैल|| (अ.: ५, ओवी१७६)

(O Arjuna, by whatever means I can enlighten your mind, i.e. whatever is proper in this regard, I shall happily tell you all.)

As for the way of devotion that Saint Dnyaneshwar explained, it was very new and novel and there were no unnecessary rituals in the Varkari sect. The old fashioned and outdated codes of conduct never got any undue importance in his teachings. In fact, Saint Dnyaneshwar emphasized the Karmayoga which was necessary for social reforms.

He was very well aware of the contemporary degenerated and distorted forms of worship. He also could anticipate the risks of Islamic invasion. He had three very important tasks in front of him: reformation of the concepts of God and religion and to co-ordinate people based on Karmayoga philosophy and propulsion of Bhaktimarg; He wanted to remove the resistance between spirituality and the worldly life and achieve the establishment of ethics & morality. All members of the society may tread the path of self-enlightenment and self-realization which in turn may help in reducing the intensity of strict regulations imposed by the orthodox religion was his very goal.

And, in order to fulfill his task, he knew that Bhagwadgeeta was the only treatise he could depend upon.

वेदुसंपन्नहोयठार्ई| परिकृपणुऐसाआनुनार्ही|
जेकान्नीलागलातिर्ही| वर्णाचांचि|| (अ: १८, ओवी: १४५७)

(The Vedas are a veritable treasure of knowledge, but are ungenerous in imparting it. They whisper knowledge into the ears of the first three only (viz. the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas).)

येरांभवव्यथाठेलियां| स्त्री-शूद्रादिकांप्राणियां|
अनवसरूमांडूनियां| राहिलाआहे|| (अ: १८, ओवी: १४५८)

(They are sitting tight without giving elbow room (in the temple of knowledge) to the womenfolk, shudras etc. who are equally affected by worldly misery.)

तरिमजपाहतांतेंमागीलउणें| फेडावयागीतापणें|
वेदुवेठलाभलतेणें| सेव्यहोआवेया|| (अ: १८, ओवी: १४५९)

(So it seems to me, that to make up for this deficiency and to make this knowledge available to all, the Vedas have assumed the form of the Geeta.)

There are verses in the Vedas which mean that all the four divisions (Varnas) are of great and equal importance just like all the organs in a body are important. Hence the Vedas do not describe the inequality. Saint Dnyaneshwar has claimed in many places that he would ensure to bring Vedic knowledge within reach of womenfolk and the lowest classes; and his claim is of utmost importance considering the contemporary orthodox ideas of religion. There are no restrictions imposed on anyone to dive in the ocean of knowledge. He desires that womenfolk, Shudra and Patit (fallen from castes) – anybody can perform ablutions in the pilgrimage of knowledge.

Considering the experience of his predecessors, Saint Dnyaneshwar must have thought that it wouldn't be of use to create unnecessary conflicts in the caste system. He showed on the basis of

Geeta that the caste system has no recognition in the spiritual aspects of life and thus he removed the discrimination based on castes in the religious practices. He prudently assures on the basis of Geeta, that the devotee, irrespective of his caste, can attain self realization if he or she worships the God with pure heart.

आता अवधान एक वेळें दीजे | मग सर्व सुखासिपात्र होइजे |
हें प्रतिज्ञोत्तर माझें | उघड ऐका || (अ: ९, ओवी: १)

(Kindly pay attention to me then you will deserve great bliss. I promise this, please give heed.)

A new era started when Saint Dnyaneshwar established the path of devotion besides showing a new way to the medieval religious practices. Without revolting against the caste system, he slackened the rigid frame of religious ordinances. The importance of this is underlined by the fact that many great saints emerged from various communities. This itself is a miracle in the Indian society. The Bhagwat Dharma proved that any human being can attain self-realization by dodging the birth-based caste system and following the theory of Karma. It also helped venting the manifestation of personality of a common man by building confidence amongst the members of the inferior society.

घोटवीनलाळब्रह्मज्ञान्याहाती | मुक्ता आत्मस्थिती सांडवीन |
सांडवीन तपोनिधी अभिमान | यज्ञ आणि दान लाजवीन ||

(I will make Bramhadnyani to lick my feet, I will become liberated and self awakened so that great tapasvi may also lose his pride. I will make Yagya and Daan ashamed of itself.)

The confidence that appears in the above verse written by Saint Tukaram was indeed unprecedented in the history of the society. A clear picture of the spiritual power which was given to the populace by the Saint-movement is seen in this Abhanga of Tukaram.

Saint Namdev has confidently expressed his desire by saying

" नाचू कीर्तनाचेरंगी | ज्ञानदीप लावू जगी ||"

(Let us dance in the Kirtan and let us light the lamps of knowledge.)

The Bhaktimarga, the new way of devotion has shaped the personality of Saint Janabai the maid servant of Saint Namdev says with confidence that

" स्त्री जन्म म्हणूनी नव्हावे उदास | साधु संता ऐसें केले जनी |", " नामयाची जनी | दासी ते म्हणती | भावे तो श्रीपती |
वशकेला || "

(Seers and Saints have shaped Jani (Saint Janabai) in such a way that she is now not afraid of womanhood. People call her servant of Saint Namdev still she has won God Krishna/ Shreepati with her devotion.)

Saint Chokhamela, who escaped from the oppression of ritualistic way of worship imposed by the upper castes, describes his naive feelings as –

" आगमाचीआठीनिगमाचाभेद| शास्त्रांचासंवाद नकळेआम्हां||

योगयागतपअष्टांगसाधन| नकळेचिदानव्रततप||

चोखाम्हणेमाझाभोळाभावदेवा|| "

(We don't understand rules and preaching of Vedas, Smritis etc. We don't get yoga, yaga, tapa and ashtang sadhanas, Danas, Vratas, etc preached in these shastra granthas. Chokha knows only devotion to god.)

As Saint Dnyaneshwar opened the treasure of spiritual knowledge to common people, the representatives of the oppressed classes started to open up confidently. The contemporary society must have been awed by such unusual upliftment of the downtrodden people.

Late Mr. G. B. Sardar, great scholar of Saint Literature, said: "Although there was a feeling of religious reform and social awareness in Saints' movement, there was no uprising of social revolution. Varkari sect eliminated the inertia amongst the womenfolk and oppressed people and invoked implicit fidelity to promote activeness in their lives. In order to dispel the inferiority complex borne due to social inequality and bring forth and spread the new values which will be beneficial for their development, the Saint fraternity made great efforts. Saints' movement was in fact reformist and fought and struggled for their rights; however it was not regressive in nature and did not discourage people from the social struggles."

Saint Dnyaneshwar's passion for uniting people has been reflected in his literature, his concern and affection about social life and insistence on morality as well as his compassion for the downtrodden was rooted in his Bhaktiyog and Shaiwadwait philosophy.

The life that Saint Dnyaneshwar lived was full of denial, discrimination and inequality driven by the caste system. Society during Yadava rule was facing consequences of the religious system of pre-Yadava period. Saint Dnyaneshwar must have experienced intensely and deeply that if Jeeva (individual) and Shiva (God) are same then why is there so much difference? Hence he enunciated his own Chidvilasvad according to which the perceptible world and the individual soul that perceives it, are also real and are manifestations of Brahma. His own spiritual experience, in seeking which he was guided by his Guru, was manifested as the base of his philosophy. God is

shapeless and formless and hence doesn't have mind. He further went on to state that the entire world is nothing but the manifestation of consciousness and created a solid bond of unity between all creature, components and sections of the society, which clearly shows his pervasive standpoint. He tried to connect the two ends of tradition-acceptance and renunciation and formed a medium route. Although he recognized the caste system in the social contexts to prevent society from breakage, but rejected in the spiritual context. By accepting 'Chidvilasvad' and 'Kevaladvait' philosophy, castes did not come in the picture of Bhakti and in the spiritual context. With the help of this, Saint Dnyaneshwar could join the divisions in the Yadava period society. This had far-reaching consequence on the further progress of Varkari sect. The gathering of Saints in the Dnyaneshwar era as well as saints gathering under the flag of Bhagwat sect in post-Dnyaneshwar era testifies this. His stance of coordination shows his clairvoyance which led to form a new social order based on spiritual and social equality.

The Yadava period and pre Yadava period society was divided as Shaivas and Vaishnavas which must have hurt Saint Dnyaneshwar. He dared to show that there is actually no difference between the two gods Har (Shiva) and Hari (Vishnu). This stance saved contemporary society from becoming bitter on this issue. Saint Dnyaneshwar coordinated Shiva devoting Nath Sampraday and Vishnu worshipping Varkari Sampraday. Caste and class differences, social inequality, orthodox preaching of religion and sects, social as well as intellectual divide were the main problems and bleeding wounds of the society. Duly aware of all these issues, Saint Dnyaneshwar coordinated the society by preaching his doctrines. His efforts bore good fruits in form of social harmony in his own period as well as in forthcoming century also. The marks his efforts are embedded in the cultural history of Maharashtra. India in general and Maharashtra region in particular will always remain indebted to Saint Dnyaneshwar for his unprecedented efforts of societal betterment.

During the Saint Dnyaneshwar's period various schools of religious thought existed. Consequently, aggressive dogmas were on the rise and the differences between followers of such sects or philosophies were also growing simultaneously. The society was marching towards disintegration. Saint Dnyaneshwar had firm belief that if the broken hearts could be joined, the society would converge and ably cope with temporal and eternal matters. His vision manifested into his trust and belief. By proposing the unity of Hari and Hara (Vishnu and Shiva) he sowed the seeds of equality and social harmony in society. He coordinated major paths viz. Dnyanmarga, Bhaktimarga and Karmamargato spiritual liberation, and conveyed the message of equality and harmony. This was the first sign of his social reforms.

The Yadava period society was disintegrating due to casteism. Feelings of inequality were growing. Amidst it, Saint Dnyaneshwar proclaimed equality on spiritual path. Women and Shudras did not have right to Moksha or spiritual liberation. Saint Dnyaneshwar defied this dogma and showed the path of liberation to every member of the society. Due to these milestone contributions, Saint Dnyaneshwar was honored and accepted by various factions of the society. The disintegrated society started uniting as Varkari Sampraday. The saints hailing from different

castes gathered around Saint Dnyaneshwar is a manifestation of his preaching of spiritual and social equality.

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