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A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS

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SHRI DNYANESHWAR

A SHORT SKETCH OF HIS LIFE

(1275-1296)

HOUGH from times immemorial, the life of a householder has been held up even above that of a *sanyasin*, there are natures that feel an overwhelming attraction for the life of perfect freedom and joy, the life of penance undisturbed by the dust and heat of *samsara*, natures which, not content with the moderate liberty of the householder, crave for *sanyasa* with the same impatience with which a newly-caught parrot struggles against the bars of the cage. "What the little firefly is beside the brightness of the sun, what a grain of sand is beside the vastness of Mount Meru, so is the life of a householder when compared with that of a *sanyasin*." So said Swami Vivekananda

on one occasion. So also thought Vithalpant, the father of Saint Dnyaneshwar. A Brahmin by birth and a *Kulkarni* by profession, all the love of a devoted wife could not reconcile him to a worldly life. Before marriage he had been on a long pilgrimage, visiting every shrine in Guzerat and Maharashtra. Ever since his childhood he was a devotee of Shri Vithal (or Vithoba) of Pandharpur in the District of Sholapur. It is possible that this seed of devotion was well-watered in his travels and though, for a time, he settled down to married life, yet it was not long before he repented. He longed to go to Benares and to become a *sanyasin*. But he was childless and besides, there was that difficulty—the permission* of his wife. How was that permission to be got? Great as is our respect for the yellow robes, still the aspiring monk is allowed to pursue his ambition only if his wife allows him to leave her. What woman would cheerfully consent to bury her own happiness?

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*This is a popular belief only. In the *Smritis* no allusion is made to the necessity of getting wife's permission. The only conditions laid down are (1) Birth of a son (2) Performance of Sacrifices and (3) Study of the Vedas.

No wonder, therefore, that *Rukmini*, wife of Vithalpant, withheld her permission. Let us not blame her. She was but a woman.

But the mind of Vithalpant was unalterably fixed. He would be a *sanyasin* at all costs. Soon after his marriage he lost his parents and was, at the request of his father-in-law, living at the latter's house at *Alandi**. One day, he left his wife and all her people and went to Benares. There, he sought and found the house of the Swami Ramananda, a celebrated *sanyasin*. "Have you taken your wife's permission?" asked Ramananda. "But I have no wife, no child," boldly replied Vithalpant. Believing in his words, Ramananda gave him the yellow robes and allowed him to study under his care.

But this episode, instead of ending here, had a melancholy course to run. The unsuspecting Ramananda became very fond of Vithalpant, now Chaitanyashram, and soon made him his chief disciple. One day he asked Vithalpant (so we shall continue to call him, inspite of his temporary change of life and habit) to look after the *math* and its inmates and

* A village fourteen miles from Poona.

accompanied by a few disciples went southward on a long pilgrimage to Rameshwar. Being himself a Mahratta Brahmin, he chose the western route, visiting on his way sacred towns and rivers. It was impossible for him to avoid *Alandi*, then one of the principal centres of orthodox learning. Vithalpant must have foreseen his guru's prospective visit to *Alandi* and that is, perhaps, why he did not accompany him. But the gods were determined to act prejudicially to him. At *Alandi* Ramananda had, as usual, taken residence at the village temple, where, in the evening, he was saluted by a lady, the picture of grief and anxiety, looking older in appearance than she was in years. That woman was the disconsolate wife of Vithalpant. Ramananda blessed her with the words "mayest thou have a son." The blessing was quite customary and had nothing curious about it. But thinking of her 'runaway' husband she could not repress a rather ironical smile at the benediction, though she did not utter a single word. Surprised at her conduct Ramananda asked her what she meant. In the conversation that followed, it transpired that

her husband had, even against her permission and before she had any issue, renounced the world and had taken *sanyasa* at Benares. The mind of Ramananda became more uneasy when after full investigation he found out that the husband of the woman was no other than his favourite disciple Vithalpant. Now, further journey was at an end. He determined to set things right. So, taking the wife Rukmini and her people with him back he went to Benares. Surprised at the early and unexpected visit of his master Vithalpant asked what had happened. With voice choked with rage, the master said "I had been to *Alandi*, you see," and then asked almost ferociously "Have you any explanations to make?" Disconcerted more by the word "*Alandi*" than even by the question, the disciple fell to the ground, made a clean breast of everything and begged his guru's pardon. He would, he said, do anything to please his master. "Then," said Ramananda, "take your wife and go back to *Alandi* and live the life of a householder." No doubt, it was a critical moment and must sorely have tried the devotion of Vithalpant for his master. He

did not like what he was directed to do; but disobedience being out of the question, he quietly took the hand of his wife and sped back to his village about 1261 A.D. a householder again, there to spend the next twenty-two years of his life in poverty, distress and more terrible still, persecution.

Did Ramananda believe that the people of *Alandi* would tamely submit to his decision? If so, he was entirely in the wrong. Did he make any provision whereby the path of Vithalpant might become less thorny? Did he now and then enquire how his disciple was faring, whether he was dead or living, happy or miserable? The answer is, 'no.' To his mind the initiation of Vithalpant into the order of the *sanyasins*, based as it was on misrepresentation and fraud, was null and void *ab initio*. Such a man, he thought, might have changed his garb but his Ashram never! Even in yellow robes Vithalpant was still a householder. He was really so during the last twelve years. The view of Ramananda might or might not be correct. The real question was, "How would the people of *Alandi* receive their former friend?" And if

the prospect was that they woud not be very friendly why, in the world, should Vithalpant have chosen *Alandi* for his residence instead of some other suitable city or village? Perhaps such considerations of prudence never occur to minds, noble and pure, conscious of their own honesty of purpose and too unworldly to foresee meaner treatment at the hands of others. Another interesting question that occurs to one is, "What was the duty of Rukmini when Ramananda ordered her husband back to *Alandi*." She knew the longing of her husband for moksha. She knew, by experience, how unhappy he would be when dragged to the worldly life. Was it not proper for her to sanction her husband's conduct? If the *sanyasa* of her husband was null and void only because he had not her permission, surely was it not her duty to grant it, even at that late stage? The answer is difficult. Perhaps she was childless and the *Shastras* allow the life of *sanyasa* only after the aspirant has got children. It is very difficult to decide this delicate question when we have no positive knowledge as to how far this rule of the *Shastras* was observed in the

13th century. Perhaps nobody was in the wrong. But one would fain wish so much gentleness and so much nobility went unpersecuted.

Cruelly disappointed in his spiritual dreams, Vithalpant returned to *Alandi*—there to find another, perhaps keener disappointment awaiting him. He was boycotted. His friends avoided him; the rest persecuted him. He had no friends but hunger and destitution. He had no hope except from the Faith that in him lay. And yet this harassed, persecuted man had not one word of blame, of censure for his enemies! Gentle, meek, and uniformly forgiving, he blessed those that cursed him and went on, inspite of fatigue and privations, chanting the name of the Lord! Verily, this ostracized Vithalpant resembled that ideal sage so beautifully described by his son:—

"He treads the earth lightly for fear the ant might be crushed under his feet. As the heron which wishing to catch the fish just plunges its beak into the stream without disturbing the water, so he is particular that the equanimity of others is not disturbed. When the cat removes its litter from one place

to another she holds it by the teeth. But does the action injure the litter? Certainly not. In a similar way his actions do harm to nobody. His countenance is full of love and before he opens his lips, the hearer is assured of the kindness of the words by the love beaming in the eyes. His look is lean and appearance quite ordinary. But don't presume to estimate the sweetness of the plantain fruit from the skin of the tree. Full of thought, he is generally silent. He never raises his hand against man or animal or if at all he lifts it up, it is only to promise protection to others. Do you believe that a man of this type will ever handle the sword or even the stick or that he would be guilty of an act of violence ?" *

In 1273 A. D., however, the tedium of his life was broken. In that year his wife bore him a son, later named Nivrittinath, literally 'The Lord of Renunciation.' Two years later was born Dnyanadev, "The God of Knowledge," the subject of this short sketch. After him Vithalpant had two children,—one son and

* The Dnyaneshwari is not, though it deserves to be translated into English. All the renderings in this sketch, therefore, are specially made for it.

the other a daughter. They were named Sopanadev and Mukta Bai 'The Liberated.' The joy, which the parents felt at the birth of these children, was not unalloyed. They had that hard battle to fight, the fight with poverty. And in that trying duel, the more spiritual the soldier, the fewer chances he has of success. Starvation was not new to them. The neglect of their friends and the cruel and almost vindictive persecution of their villagers, had made them pretty familiar with it. What was worse was the consciousness that the children would have to inherit ostracism with the possibility that the happiness of their life might be blasted. That was as iron to the soul of the fond parents. To live under a cloud! and that too from childhood! To grow up in misery and destitution! How agonizing! And yet the distressing thought did not break them. It only drew together the hearts of the family, the father, the mother, the brothers and the sister. The children had no other company. They, therefore, played by the side of their parents. They heard their father talk of renunciation. They saw their mother practise self-denial. They had no regular

schooling. But the very air they breathed was charged with religion and the schooling they had at the feet of their parents, was a great preparation for their future life.

Precocious beyond comparison, of an extremely joyous disposition, and with the powers of the spirit early awakened, these children—if children they must be called—literally 'enjoyed' their poverty, laughed at persecution and drew the highest lessons of life from the most trying vexations. In all the works that they have left us—and they all wrote religious treatises, poems, etc.,—you will not find a single thought, one unguarded expression that reveals a trace of that misery which was their daily experience. The works of Dnyanadev, our hero (better known by the name Dnyaneshwar) are brimful of that ecstasy which mocks at sorrow and delights in suffering. He was not of a militant disposition. He was not the kind of man described by Saint Ramdas :—

"His piercing look strikes terror into the heart of the wicked and makes them conscious of the meanness of their souls."

On the contrary all his conquests have been

conquests of Love. It is true that a miracle (worked by him) is said to have brought the Pandits of Paithan down to their knees. But when we remember the strong strictures * he has passed against any abuse of spiritual power, we might well pause before we accept the story. The obstinacy of the Pandits must have been conquered by his love. He was too modest to argue, too forbearing to quarrel, too gentle to fight. If in moments of ecstasy, felt while discoursing upon religion, he allowed words of pride to escape him, it was no mean vulgar personal pride. He was proud of his God, of his Guru and of his *Grantha*. While extolling the Grantha, he never praised himself but attributed all inspiration to the grace of his Guru. Though poor in wealth, India is by no means so in spirit; and yet in all the religious biography of so many centuries one hardly comes across such a picture of magnificent spirituality thriving in the wilderness of crushing misery.

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* On one occasion he says :—Is it not wonderful that ordinary people should insist that a *real* sage *must* occasionally exercise supernatural powers when we remember that he is quite oblivious of his own person even ? What a stupid bigotry !

But whatever happiness the ostracised family derived from one another's company was soon to end. An event occurred which shows to what extent the perverse obstinacy of blind orthodoxy can go. The ceremony of wearing the sacred thread is of extreme importance in the life of a Brahmin boy. In fact, real Brahminhood dates from that ceremony. Every one, therefore, can understand how anxious Vithalpant and his wife must have been to get that ceremony, Upanayana of Nivrithinath and Dnyaneshwar, now ten and eight years old respectively, performed. They hoped that time and their own forbearance had appeased the anger of their villagers and that no further difficulty on the point would be raised. They, therefore, broached the subject before the leading luminaries of their neighbourhood, hard-hearted, though scarcely hard-headed Shastris, who constituted themselves as the sole repositories of religious wisdom. But they were in no mood to grant justice or even mercy. For a *sanyasin* returing to the second *Ashram*, they thought, there was but one punishment. The sin was monstrous and the

sentence death. Believing (without reason) that their own death would make the path of their children smooth and their thread-ceremony possible, Vithalpant and his wife once more saluted those Brahmins, trusted their children to the care of God, walked straight to Allahabad and there in the holy confluence of the three rivers, ended by one plunge their life and what was more bitter still, their suffering.

In the absence of detailed and authentic account, the conduct of Vithalpant appears to be improperly meek and extremely impracticable. Did he try to find out his old *guru* or failing him, some other Pandit at Benares or even in the Deccan who would point to some favourable text on the point? We do not know.*

* See the Mitakshara commentary on Yajnavalkya Smriti (Part III, verse 280) for the penance prescribed for the *sanyasin* who wants to become a householder. The offence is not classed under the Maha-pataks or Great Sins but under Upa-pataks only. Vijnaneshwar (the commentator) quotes from Parashara a passage which says "A *sanyasin* is purified when he performs three Krichchhras and three Chandrayanas and all the ceremonies that have been performed since his childhood." Now Krichchhras and Chandrayanas are well known and simple Prayaschittas. Another Prayaschitta quoted from Samvarta is equally simple. The offence, therefore, of the religious legislators of *Alandi*, becomes, to say the least, monstrous.

The very text on which the Shastris of *Alandi* depended for their memorable but scarcely commendable sentence is not available. The facts, however, are faithfully recorded by Mukta Bai, the sister of Dnyaneshwar and have to this day passed unchallenged.

So ends the sad chapter in the history of Vithalpant's life. Now begins the brilliant career of his children. As serene and cheerful as ever they discussed what the next step should be. Nivrithinath perhaps heartily sick of the dogmatism of the leading Brahmins of *Alandi*, was for no submission. "What is that thread-ceremony to me?" he cried, "I am holiness incarnate!" But the hero of our present sketch, born as he was to lead the people instead of defying them, thought conciliation to be the best course: "True, brother, true" he said "you are holiness incarnate, who could doubt your purity? But look at the people and our duty by them." He then proceeded to explain how discipline is the ruling factor in society and pointed out how it devolved especially on the wise to obey its laws and to uphold its honour. "Don't you see how like an army

without a general the society is going to rack and ruin? If we, the wise refuse to obey it, why should the ignorant do so, when they have every motive for defiance? Do let us go, brother, and bring the Shastris round;" and forthwith they repaired to the leading Brahmins. "We can't disobey the Shastras," they said "nor can we alter them. Your thread-ceremony is impossible. But if you get a permit from the Pandits of *Paithan*, then we are prepared to admit you to the privileges of a Brahmin." "That we shall try to do" said Dnyaneshwar and off they started to Paithan.*

It is said that even the *Pandits* of *Paithan* at first refused to admit this brotherhood into the fold of Brahmanism, but being amazed at the miracle which Dnyaneshwar wrought by making a buffalo recite verses from the *Rig Veda*, they, in terror and reverence, yielded and gave the necessary permit which enabled Nivrithinath and Dnyaneshwar to have their thread-ceremony performed. But the putting

* On the river Godavari in the Nizam's territory. Paithan and Deogiri are both situated in the Nizam's Dominions but in those days they formed part of Maharashtra.

on of the sacred thread was not with them the beginning of study; rather was it the beginning of their life's work—religious revival. At the feet of their father they had drunk deep of spiritual learning. Nivrithinath when a stripling of seven had come across a great sage, Shri-Gaininath at Tryambakeshwar near Nasik, who, struck with the attainments of the lad, initiated him into the mysteries of *yoga*. Dnyaneshwar his junior by two years, became his disciple and throughout his short life referred to his elder brother as his spiritual master, at the touch of whose blessing-hand he had penetrated the 'unknown.' But he was not satisfied with his own spiritual freedom. He had love infinite for his ignorant brothers and sisters in Maharashtra, and ever since his childhood, his mind was busy thinking as to the best way he should help them. In those days, Maharashtra was ruled by the Yadav kings of Deogiri, better known by the subsequent name Daulatabad. The tide of Moslem conquest that had deluged the northern part of India, was soon (1294 A.D.) to reach Deccan and to shatter the already waning power of the Yadav kings. Twenty-one

years (1273) before the invasion of Allauddin, Ramdeo Rao, the then king of Deogiri had headed a strong movement in the Deccan to rebuild the dilapidated temple of *Vithoba* at *Pandharpur*. What the encouragement of the king and the devotion of the people did, Dnyaneshwar saw and he resolved to avail himself of the awakening religious consciousness of the people. Already a band of enthusiastic admirers had gathered round him. To train them properly in the science of Realization, he wrote in 1290 at Nevasa* (District Ahmednagar) the Bhavartha-Dipika—that celebrated commentary on the *Gita*, which is deservedly considered as the *Magnum opus* of his brilliant career.

The wisdom and foresight which Dnyaneshwar displayed in selecting the *Gita* for his commentary deserve the highest praise. Deeply versed in all the Vedic lore, he could have selected the Brahmasutras or any of the difficult *Upanishads* for his discourse. In selecting the Gita, he might have been guided by his devotion to Shri-Krishna. Perhaps he

* The district of Ahmednagar is roughly north-east of the Poona District and south-west of Paithan and Deogiri.

was following, consciously or unconsciously, the trend of the national mind which it was his mission in part to arouse. The *Gita* has a peculiar fascination for the leaders especially in times of national awakening. We know how that book has largely inspired many of the national leaders of the day: we know how in his solitary travelling throughout India, Vivekananda had only the *Gita* and a photo of Shri-Ramakrishna Paramahamsa for his companions; we know how it has influenced the national movement and has given it a specially spiritual character. So also it affected the Maharashtra of Saint Dnyaneshwar's time. Apart from its singular beauty of expression, clarity of vision, and breadth of outlook, the *Gita* is a book the word-meaning of which even an ordinary man very little advanced in Sanskrit can understand. The writer of this sketch has seen persons who scarcely able to distinguish the *set* from the *Anit* roots and quite ignorant of the ten conjugations and six tenses in Sanskrit are yet able to give in an off-hand manner the sense of any verse from the *Gita*. This sort of Sanskrit literature found great favour with Maratha people of the time of this

religious revival. The Ramayan, the Mahabharat, the Bhagvat,—though the last is occasionally more difficult than the first two—and a few other Puranas were the scriptures from which both the saints and their followers drew inspiration. No wonder, therefore, that our hero should have selected therefrom a piece which has engaged the attention of the greatest intellects of the country during centuries and through all vicissitudes of the national life; and he has delivered the message of Lord Krishna in a work that will last as long as the Marathi language.

It is impossible to describe the supreme beauty of this book except in language which, to those who have not read it, may appear hyperbolical. Never have the dry bones of the Vedanta been clothed in a richer manner. The provinces of poetry and of philosophy generally so unfriendly, here meet in such harmonious perfection that the reader is unable to determine whether the palm belongs to the former or to the latter. The similies are exquisite. Never far-fetched, uniformly elegant and often sublime, they dazzle the mind of the reader by their number and

variety. He piles illustrations upon illustrations and by a succession of images brings home the sense of the text with a force and power that are truly admirable. Saint Dnyaneshwar himself was not conscious of the brilliance of his powers. In the opening chapter he says :

"I have presumed to attempt to explain the *Gita* without sufficiently taking into account the difficulty of the task; I can hope to succeed only if the impossible becomes possible, if the glow-worm can give light to the sun, or a tiny bird take out all the water of the sea. To appreciate the vastness of the sky, we ourselves must have vastness of imagination; so to explain the meaning of the *Gita*, the commentator must be at least equal to the author in intelligence and learning. I am, however, supported in my venture only by the consciousness that I am but the figure-head and really my *Guru*, the great *Nivrittideo* is speaking. When wooden dolls move like animate beings, is that because they have life or power of movement? Is it not on the contrary the power of the man who holds the strings? So I need have no misgiving. The desire-yielding

cow is my mother. I might be as contemptible as iron but is not the Philosopher's stone there to convert me into gold ?"

A little later, however, all this diffidence drops off and he says :—

"Does the sun appear bigger than a man's hand ? And yet does it not fill the earth with light ? So short are these words but the meaning is deeper than the sea and as infinite as the sky. It will remove all doubt and like a *kalpa*-tree, satisfy your desires.

"The sweetness of nectar, the charm of music and the cool fragrance of the southern wind—all combined will not stand comparison with the supreme excellence of this story. It will bring joy to all the senses at one and the same time. If sugared milk can cure you of diseases, why spoil the palate with bitter doses of medicines ? So if you want *moksha*, you need not torture the senses and try to conquer the mind. Just hear this 'story,' and you will get it (moksha)." His pride of the Marathi language is manifested in the following words :—

"Do I hear you say that these are only Marathi words and hence inevitably lacking in

beauty ? Marathi words no doubt ! but words that will put the best Sanskrit composition into shade. They are sweeter than nectar and more refreshing than the southern wind. Mark this, my friends. If you dispassionately read the Sanskrit Gita and my Marathi commentary, you cannot say which is superior to which !"

Though almost the first Marathi writer of distinction, he never apologizes for the use of the Vernacular ; and this is the more remarkable because even to the end of the 18th century, Marathi writers had always the dread of the Pandits in their minds when they commenced writing. They either apologized for the use of Marathi, explained that the use of the Vernacular was necessary while educating the masses or at least reviled the Pandits for their scornful behaviour towards the language of the people. Dnyaneshwar did none of these things. He neither quarrelled with the Pandits nor justified his behaviour but wrote (or rather spoke) in the glad certainty that his book was bound to make a mark. His words of pride must never be mistaken for that vulgar pride which is at once odious and contemptible. On the contrary, it is the warmth of ecstasy

that has tinged his words with occasional boldness; otherwise he was the same modest, unassuming Dnyaneshwar as ever.

This is no place to describe the beauties of the work or to trace the delightful picture of the eager, candid and doubting Arjuna, so consistently developed throughout the book. One or two extracts, however, will not be entirely out of place. While commenting on the 10th and 11th verses of the VIth chapter this is how Dnyaneshwar describes the fit place for practising *yoga*:—

"Let it be a quiet place, with a beautiful cluster of trees protecting it from the hottest rays of the sun. Bits of sunshine, peeping through the trees must, however, illumine it, and the wind, gentle, cool and fragrant be there to accompany it. No noise there except the sweet prattle of the parrot or the humming of the bee. A few ducks and swans with three or four *chakravaka* birds would not be entirely unwelcome; and if occasionally the cuckoo cooes or a solitary pea-cock dances—well, we shall not drive them away. In short, the place must amuse us and at the same time awaken all the latent powers of the soul. It must

purify the worldly, stimulate the *Sadhaka* and must even tempt a king if he visits it, to lay aside his crown and practise *tapasya*."

Arjuna, eager to see the *Virat* form of the Lord and yet uncertain whether He would deign to confer the favour on him says :—

"But another desire has taken possession of my heart. Shall I unfold it? And why should I not? If the fish does not wish to trouble water with its presence, where is it to go? If the babe hesitates to suck milk from the breast of its mother, who else will feed it? And if we do not approach You, who will help us? I do not know whether I deserve to have the wish granted to me. Like the patient, my duty is to tell the symptoms to the physician. Whether I am fit or not is not my look-out. Does not a hungry person feel that he would devour the whole of this world? It is natural that I crave to see Thee, Oh Lord! But the decision rests with you and no other! I know that you will fulfil this desire, not because I am fit by virtue of spirituality, but because your munificence knows no bounds. Did you not grant *moksha* to your enemies, the demons? If your enemies can claim the

privilege, why should your friends, servants, children be diffident? Again if *Dhruva* was fit for your favour why not Arjuna also?"

In the best translation, nine-tenths of the beauty of the original is lost. The subtle suggestiveness of words or the wonderful magic of expression can never be translated. The book in the original will charm the reader, as it charmed the audience that enthusiastically gathered from day to day in 1290 at the temple of Nevasa where chapter after chapter was delivered extempore and taken down by the devoted disciple Satchidananda. When the work was finished, his master and brother Nivrittidev said to Dnyaneshwar "we have had a good treat. But now let us have something original"; at which Dnyaneshwar composed the Amritanubhav 'The taste of Nectar' at ten successive sittings. The book reveals the same grasp of the subject but being more difficult and less rhetorical is not as popular as the first.

The message of Dnyaneshwar, as contained in these two books, derives peculiar significance when we remember how different it was from his own character and predilections.

Generally it so happens that the father of a revolution is himself, in part at least, the child of those forces which under his guidance are ultimately responsible for the changes brought about in thought and life. When, for instance, Mr. Tilak discards the authority of accepted commentators and gives us a new and convincing interpretation of the 'Lord's song' we know that he is preaching a doctrine, which even independently of the Gita he might have preached, a doctrine which is in consonance with his own opinions, in consonance also with the spirit of the times. But it is very difficult to lay aside your opinions and preach a gospel that is required by the condition of the country. That is what Saint Dnyaneshwar has done. Sister Nivedita gives us a beautiful description* of the lifelong struggle raging in the heart of her master, of how though "trying to remain faithful to the banner of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa," he delivered a message "the utterance of which often used to strike him as a lapse"; she has told us how "he would struggle against thoughts of country and religion and make of

* "The Master as I saw Him" by Sister Nivedita.

himself the poor homeless wanderer to whom every country and every religion should be alike" and yet how "before he even knew it," he would be spreading broadcast those words of faith and hope which sent a thrill through the hearts of his countrymen, making them conscious of their own destiny. Similar praise must also be given to Dnyaneshwar. He was a great *Yogin* and *Dyanin*; and yet he has preached the doctrine of Bhakti because he was aware of the needs of society. Like many philosophers he did not condemn *karman*; for he knew that however necessary a strictly monastic life may be to an advanced *sadhaka*, that was neither helpful nor desirable for the ordinary man. He must also be praised for having reconciled the various contending factions by preaching equal devotion to all the deities. The Puranas, in spite of their real service to the cause of religion, have by establishing the superiority of particular deities over others brought a spirit of intolerance in a religion full of toleration. But the religious revival of which Dnyaneshwar was the pioneer, would have nothing to do with such contemptible differences. His writings

contain passages where Shiva and Vishnu receive equal share of devotion. This is the more remarkable as perhaps he preferred for himself the Nirguna form of worship. The truth is that he and other leading saints tried to unite all elements of Hinduism and thus present a solid front to the disintegrating influences that came in the wake of the Mahomedan conqueror : It was a deliberate step in that process of assimilation about which we shall have to speak something later on.

The appearance of these two books considerably enhanced the high reputation Dnyaneshwar had attained. Unlike the politician, the Hindu Saint requires no newspapers, no organization for the propagation of his ideas. He need not even leave his place and still thousands of people would come from the most distant corner, sit at his feet and learn. Dnyaneshwar had the same experience. And yet, not content with the success his mission had achieved he started ostensibly for a long prilgrimage no doubt, but really to carry the truths of the Vedanta to the remotest parts of his country. He was accompanied by his brothers and sister, by numerous friends and

many disciples. The very fact that the party included such men as the goldsmith Narhari, the potter Gora and the gardener Samvta—names respected to this day by even orthodox Brahmins—shows the extent of the awakening. The cry of free primary education of these days is only a revised edition, so to say, of the universal religious education prevalent in India since the days of Buddha. India never lacked education. When arts and crafts were not dependent upon literacy, the necessity of imparting secular education, in addition to the religious one, was justly not felt. The career of wealth, of glory, of ambition and heroism was open to the man who could not even spell his name and who was as ignorant of the six systems of philosophy as of Homer or Virgil.

At Pandharpur, the party was joined by Namdev, the son of a tailor, than whom the God Vithal had no more fervent devotee. To him, Vithoba was not the stable, stone image that He is to the ordinary *Bhakta*. Namdev played and talked with Him, was free to love and in moments of petulance and anger, to chide the God, whose banner is even now

carried by more than a million people in Maharashtra. It is unnecessary to follow the saintly group, visiting shrine after shrine, bathing in sacred rivers, blessing the weak, convincing the doubting, themselves alternately lost in mute ecstacy and eloquent song. The task of preaching *Bhakti* and knowledge to the vast concourse of people who greeted them wherever they wended their way, was generally entrusted to *Namdev*, whose power of waking up the latent fire of Bhakti in the hearts of his hearers was unrivalled. Sometimes it was Dnyaneshwar who addressed them or Gora the potter and *Visobakhechar*. It was a triumphal tour and can favourably compare with the journey of the Swami Vivekananda, from Colombo to Almora, when in 1896 he returned to India from his successful mission to the West.

A few words are necessary to enable the reader to have a general idea of the religious revival of which Dnyaneshwar was the pioneer. It has been sometimes stated that the revival was a revolt against caste and Brahmanical oligarchy, that it was a crusade against social abuses and inequalities and that

all the saints and prophets from Dnyaneshwar and Namdev down to Tukaram and Ramdas carried on in their own way the work of social uplift, which, interrupted owing to the wars and revolutions of the eighteenth century, has again been, under more favourable auspices, taken up by the great social reformers of the 19th century. There is more imagination than truth in this statement. It is true that they were social reformers in the sense they reformed the society of their times by holding up the ideals of charity, piety, benevolence and God-surrender. The mind of man is generally too fond of the form and is often forgetful of the spirit; and by laying special emphasis on the essentials of religion, they did succeed in making the people think more of the spirit than of the forms. But it can never be truly said that they were social reformers in the accepted sense of the phrase. And the reason is evident; in the first place, it must be noted that from the 11th or 12th century to the end of the 17th, the influence of the Brahmin was purely intellectual. It is true that he was the repository of religious knowledge and was indispensable on occasions

when religious ceremonies were to be performed. But in the body politic he occupied only a very subordinate place. Almost all the political leaders of those times—big Inamdars and Jagirdars with administrative powers and military equipment—were non-Brahmins: their wealth, their social status, their political influence might have excited the envy of any ambitious Brahmin. The Shirkes, the Mohites, the Jadhavs, the Bhonsles—to name only a few—all these had nothing to envy in the social status of the Brahmin. Strangely enough the Brahmin also was quite content with his lot. There was no rivalry, no jealousy, no competition between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin. These evils did not creep till at least Balaji Viswanath became the Peshwa in 1714. Till that time the so-called lion and the so-called lamb drank of the same stream. These religious preachers did not break the barriers of caste, simply because there were no serious barriers awaiting the advent of the social reformer. On the contrary they tried to strengthen all those bonds which were calculated to keep alive the Varnashram system which it was their ideal to

reinstate. Their writings do not reek of that Brahminophobia which has characterised the utterances of many non-Brahmins especially during the last few months. They have, no doubt scathing criticism on hypocrites and impostors. But these "blessed souls" are found in all classes alike, and the Brahmin had no special monopoly of them. They used their lash not on the Brahmin but on vice; their criticism was abstract and not concrete. They were *for* caste-distinctions, though *against* caste-jealousies. They were against intermarriages. They did not favour such violation of caste discipline as a Brahmin's taking his food from the hands of a Sudra (*vide* Dnyaneshwari chapter 13 verse 674). Their mission was love and that love no artificial fencing of caste or colour could keep in bounds. On rare occasions they did, indeed, break these rules of caste which again and again they have emphasized in their writings. To cite an example, Ekanath (1528-1599) on one occasion took his meals in the house of a *Mahar*; but any reader who will care to read a hundred lines from his works will find that he is deadly against all breaking of caste-

discipline. Tukaram, himself a Sudra, has never for once even reviled the Brahmin because he is a Brahmin; and even he is in favour of all those caste-distinctions which owing to the blast of western civilisation are rapidly disappearing in the clouds. We might break caste or maintain it, just as we please, but it is really unjust to drag the names of these saints in controversies, the issues of which can be decided on independent lines of thought and argument.

What then, was the mission of these saints and prophets? What is their place in the history of their times? What service did they render to the country? It was their glorious privilege to rouse the hearts of their countrymen to the Faith which was their birth-right. Even in countries noted for their organising power, there is the danger of the masses remaining comparatively ignorant of their religion. The story is told of a great Bishop * visiting one of the mining districts in England and asking one of the miners whether he knew Christ. "What is his number?" asked the man

* The authority for this story is the late Swami Vivekananda.

thinking that Christ was his fellow-labourer. That is the sort of ignorance which the leaders of the national thought ought to guard against especially in times of wars and revolutions when the fate of the nation is in the melting-pot. If Rama and Krishna had been to the Indian peasant no more than Christ was to this typical labourer, then the Moslem proselytiser would have succeeded in his mission quite easily and within no time. While estimating the services of the Maratha saints and prophets the fact must never be overlooked that the period of the religious revival brought about by them synchronised with the occupation of the Maratha territory by the Moslem invader. Till the times of Dnyaneshwar, the shock of the Moslem conquest was not felt in the Deccan. The North Indian plains were already red with the blood of thousands of soldiers, bravely but hopelessly fighting for the cause of their country and religion. The tide at last swept over the whole of Maharashtra and when the Muslim came he brought not only his sword but Koran also. This two-fold mission of the Muslim adventurer it was the duty of the nation to resist. The political

leaders were weak and therefore helpless; consequently the invader established himself in the country almost without opposition. It was exactly at this time that the great wave of religious revival started. That is why, instead of being a controversial movement, it was entirely assimilative and synthetical. It was no time to quarrel whether Shiva was greater than Vishnu or whether the Adwaiti was right and the Dwaiti or qualified Dualist wrong. All those controversies whose echoes and re-echoes from some other parts of the country were still heard, were all hushed up. It did not matter which Deity you worshipped, so long as you remained a Hindu. The political unity which Shivaji only partially succeeded in making was preceded by social and religious solidarity. The Reformation movement in Europe with which this movement is incorrectly compared, started long after the last crusade with the Turk was fought; but here in Maharashtra the movement as it synchronized with the rule of the Moslem was essentially national though inevitably disguised as religious; and as time passed on, as the political awakening became more

and more pronounced, the religious leaders also became more and more national until at last in Ramdas we see the Patriot-Saint whose political fervour was equalled only by his religious faith. It is true that Tukaram never plunged into the flood but only contented himself with standing on the bank of the national awakening. But even he, so indifferent to worldly matters, blessed the movement and when Shivaji approached him in the spirit of a disciple asked him to seek the aid of Saint Ramdas as the fittest man to guide. When these points are remembered, the reader will see why the movement assumed this synthetical form, why the Brahmin still continued to monopolise his "priest-craft," why even those forms, ceremonies and rituals which had outlived their usefulness were so jealously kept intact and observed with all the intense devotion of a fanatic. The one work, therefore, which the great saints of Maharashtra set themselves to do was awakening the hearts of the people and unifying them by the bond of love for God and religion, and this they did with a persistence and success that is truly marvellous. If even after the lapse of more

than two centuries, "it is hard to convince people who have Tukaram in their mouth, of the intrinsic moral superiority of the Bible," how much more difficult his task must have appeared to the Moslem missionary, in dealing with the contemporaries of Namdev and Tukaram, Ekanath and Ramdas!

Space forbids us from describing at great length the service of these saints and prophets to their language and literature; and yet it is impossible to pass over it in silence. It can safely be said that if there is any force, rhythm or power of expression in the Marathi language, that is entirely due to these saints and prophets who, when Marathi was neglected everywhere, took this famished orphan and nursed it with all the love at their command. The language really stood in need of protectors. It did not find favour with the Pandit who was too full of Sanskrit; and from the 14th century onward it ceased to be the official language. Discarded by Prince and Pandit, by Court and Camp, it sought shelter at the feet of these saints. It is their writings which gave Marathi a dignity which hitherto it lacked. Their success was sufficient to induce literary

aspirants to imitate their example; and the result was a mass of literary matter of which perhaps a hundredth part only has hitherto been brought to light by Marathi antiquarians. They were prolific writers, all of them. To compose verses by the thousand was quite an easy thing with them. Their ambition was to write crores of verses. Namdev is credited with being the author of 96 crores of *Abhangas* (verses); and though this is a physical impossibility that shows the ambition of the writers or expectations of their readers. It is true that much of this literature is marred by a want of the sense of proportion, by artistic inelegance and by tiresome repetitions. But this is because the authors did not get any regular literary training; and inspite of their literary faults, even the most prejudiced reader will have to admit that the works they have bequeathed us are full of the aroma of spiritual faith and insight. This is not the place to describe the growth of the Marathi literature or to describe how from being the handmaid of religion, poetry grew to have an independent throne for herself. One or two points, however, deserve special mention. The

literature of these times deals almost exclusively—directly or indirectly—with Religious ideas and religious personages. It can roughly be divided into four parts (1) The exposition of the *Vedanta*. This is found in Dnyaneshwari Amritanubhava, Ekanathi Bhagvat and works of this type, all written in verse ; (2) Songs of religious ecstasy, mostly composed in the *Abhang* metre, which is an adaptation of the *Anushtubh* metre ; (3) Didactic poetry, also in the same metre containing maxims of good conduct, strictures on the vices of hypocrites and (4) Stories from the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. This forms the narrative Poetry which, written in various metres, has reached high-water mark in the writings of Shridhar, Mukteshwar and Moropant.

After his return from the pilgrimage,* Dnyaneshwar and his brothers with their youngest sister, led an even course of life at *Alandi*. They never married ; they never worked for their livelihood. They had only one occupation in life—Service of God. If they saved society that was solely because they wanted to

* The time which the party took for completing this pilgrimage, is not known. Perhaps it was three or even four years.

serve God through society. To elevate the depressed and to console the miserable were the basic elements of their religion. As Mr. Tilak has truly said in his recent book on the *Gita* "To make the individual soul universal whereby the meanest creature in this world becomes only a manifestation of the Almighty and therefore a meet object of worship is the highest form of devotion compared to which the offering of incense and flowers to Him in the privacy of your room or the solitude of the temple, though helpful, is far less elevating." It is a kind of *yajna*. This service of society and the man who never draws a breath for himself is the greatest saint; such was Dnyaneshwar. But the success of his mission awakened the jealousy of many, some of whom had their own axe to grind. One of them was *Changa-Deva*, a great yogin claiming to have lived for fourteen centuries. Anxious to test Dnyaneshwar, he once started for Alandi. Riding on a fierce tiger, tamed only by the superior powers of *yoga* with a serpent for his whip, he marched followed by a regiment of disciples. He had intended to vanquish Dnyaneshwar but was himself half-vanquished when he saw Dnya-

neshwar coming forward to receive him by moving a wall. The conversation that followed convinced Changa-Deva that he had caught a Tartar. Ultimately he disbanded his disciples and himself became one at the feet of our hero.

"Whom the gods love die young" says the proverb and in this case the gods were but too anxious for the return of one of their own company. So on 25th October, 1296, two years after Allaudin's invasion of the Deccan, Dnyaneshwar closed his brilliant career by enterning into eternal *Samadhi* amidst the subdued sobs of his own loving sister, brothers, disciples and friends. He was barely twenty-two. Before the first anniversary of his death, his sister and brothers followed him, too unwilling to live in the void caused by their brother's death.

So ends the story of Dnyaneshwar's life. The history of his inner struggles,—if there were any—of his mental and spiritual development is hopelessly lost to us. What remains is a series of bare facts, happily well authenticated, and a succession of miracles whose account, proceeding though it does

from contemporary writers, is, in these days of rationalism, often rejected. To my mind the greatest miracle which this boy-saint wrought was the immortal book which he composed when barely fifteen. There he stands, before the mind's eye of his reader, in the temple at *Nevasa*, the light of knowledge radiating from his countenance, holding the audience bound by the spell of his eloquent words. To me, however, the picture is far less appealing than the other, in which, the saint, as yet undiscovered, begged from door to door returning not railing for railing but love for hatred, compassion for cruelty and nobility for mean conduct. The children of the ostracised *Vithalpant* became the religious leaders of their time. The beardless begging boy is the spiritual light of six centuries. He conquered Maharashtra and made it prostrate before the throne of *Vithoba*. From his time *Pandharpur* became the Benares of the Marathas. At a time when religion was in the hands of Pandits and a sealed book to the people, he spread broadcast the truths of the *Vedas*. And what a love for his people! Himself a great yogin and a follower of the great Shankaracharya, for them

he discarded, like Vivekananda, the bliss of *Samadhi* and the stimulating silence of the cave and worked for and amongst them. Personally partial to jnana only, he preached *Bhakti* and sanctioned *karman*. He opened their heart and kindled their spirit; and though the political complications of the next two centuries put a temporary check on the religious revival, yet with the coming of *Ekanath* it rose with a rebound, extended to the remotest corners of Maharashtra and made religion first a rallying sound and then the war-cry of the people. The religious revival made the subsequent movement against the Muslim conquerors possible; and though the credit of building *Swaraj* must be given to Shivaji and his followers, yet the contribution of the leading saints and prophets towards the development of the idea of nationality must never be overlooked. For the patriotism of those times was based not on economics but on religion.

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